The Art of Listening

Once while jamming with a friend, we heard a deep, rumbling hum coming from an amp we were using. We were playing a blues in A and strangely, this rumble only seemed to occur whenever we were on an A chord. We played around with the knobs on the amp, we grunted and banged on it like angry apes, we tried different cables, a different guitar but nothing seemed to solve the problem. We were baffled. Finally, we realized what was happening as his neighbor made another pass while mowing the lawn. The lawnmower was harmonizing with our A chord! Amidst our laughter of surprise, we began testing our hypothesis and there was no doubt: somewhere in the range of frequencies emitted by this lawnmower there was a strong frequency of the note A-110Hz. A-110Hz is the note produced by the open A string of the guitar, meaning it vibrates at the rate of 110 Hertz or 110 oscillations per second. It was my first time jamming with a lawnmower.

All around us, objects are vibrating and producing sounds. The fridge in your kitchen, the fan you use to cool off on a hot day, the engine of your vehicle and much more. Test it out. Depending on the design of your fridge, next time you hear it running, try clipping your electronic tuner to it and discover how your fridge is tuned. Like the lawnmower, it will likely produce a number of frequencies but one may be more dominant and the tuner will likely pick that one up (my fridge is a B ♭). Better yet, use your instrument to determine what note your appliances are playing. Maybe together they are harmonizing to create the beautiful sound of a major 7th chord and you can know your home is producing a consonant harmony. Or maybe they are producing a diminished chord and you'll be inspired to unplug items you're not using to reduce the dissonance (and lower your electric bill).

On my walk through the woods this morning, I heard all sorts of sounds both natural and mechanical: the drone of traffic on highway 95 a couple miles away, various birdsong, the rumble of trains passing in the distance and sounding their horns, my feet shuffling along the path, displacing pebbles and small stones. A symphony of soundwaves coming in from all directions and distances.

The idea of silence is worth contemplating. Nowadays, we often hear what a noisy world we live in and how we should all strive to spend more time in silence. I agree but that description of silence usually implies more about spending time away from busy environments and our devices. It is easy to fill almost every moment of our day by watching screen media, listening to music and podcasts or just by being in highly stimulating places. Sitting quietly at home or going for a walk in the woods are much closer to silence than most of our lives. However, even in those situations, we are still awash in sound. There is a lot to listen to and be curious about. One of the great things about learning to play an instrument is it can help us become more skillful listeners, to experience the difference between hearing and listening and to begin to practice this deeper listening in all aspects of our lives. We might be able to listen with greater precision to ourselves, to others and to the environments that we move through in our day to day life.

Non-musical listening is an essential part of my musical life. It is a form of rest that helps fill me with inspiration when the time for music making returns. It adds an excitement to the moment of breaking the non-musical silence, enhancing my appreciation for the sound of my instrument and stimulating new ideas from an ever-shifting relationship to sound.

My challenge to you is to experiment with non-musical listening, the sounds you might take for granted or drown out and to explore the question of silence. See how this practice might influence your musical journey and please, let me know what you discover!