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LISTENING WITHOUT EARS

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PRODUCER: STEVE URQUHART

(Radio 4 Announcer:)

Apart from Beethoven, and Evelyn Glennie, most of us would probably struggle to name another Deaf musician. We might assume that people with hearing loss don't generally engage with music – or if they do, it's only through vibrations. Well, now on BBC Radio 4, the musician Eloise Garland is going to challenge some of our assumptions... in LISTENING WITHOUT EARS.

0'00"

FX SOUND MASSAGE – begins

ELOISE: Have you ever had a “sound massage”?

FX SOUND MASSAGE – continues – sawing noises

ELOISE: I hadn't, until recently – when I was invited to take out my hearing aids, put on a blindfold, lie on a table... and to just feel these sounds pulsating through my whole body.

FX SOUND MASSAGE – scraping, ends with a TWANG

0'47"

ELOISE: My massage was performed by Celine.

ELOISE: That was... interesting! Yeah!

CELINE: Did you feel something?

ELOISE: Yep...

ELOISE: Once she'd finished, Celine revealed how these sounds had been made.

ELOISE: ...some of the things sounded like balls rattling around the table, like marbles being dropped, and there was a spring or something – oh! Wow! OK, so there's a collection of springs underneath the table...

CELINE: Voila.

ELOISE: Wow.

ELOISE: The whole thing felt... odd. It tickled, I wanted to giggle! And sometimes the vibrations were almost overwhelming. I'm not sure I liked it.

CELINE: The purpose is to have, of course, a good sensation, a good experience...

ELOISE: But it did get me thinking about the difference between "hearing" and "listening".

CELINE: ...it's not only with the ears, it's with the body.

ELOISE: So, listening is different to hearing?

CELINE: Yes.

ELOISE: So hearing is using the ears, and listening is using the brain and the body?

CELINE: That's it – yes.

ELOISE: OK.

1'58"

ELOISE: My hearing loss began when I was around 7 or 8. I started to notice this quiet, constant "buzzing" in my ears – and then a random drum-beat whenever someone with a low voice spoke, or a car zoomed past, or certain music was played.

MUSIC – cello plays open strings

In my left ear it'd go “bu-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum, bu-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum...”, but then if it's like a car or a lorry outside, for instance, my ear will just be going “BLURURURURURGH!”

As the months and years went on, the buzzing got louder as my hearing loss got worse. There was this awful screeching noise in my head – and the drum-beat was really stressing me out.

I'd wake up in the night if a car went by. Male voices would exacerbate it. So did cellos in the orchestra.

MUSIC – cellos play Brahms Piano Concerto No 2, 3rd mvt opening (Andante)

Thankfully – and very fortunately – over the years, I have received NHS treatment for my tinnitus and hearing loss. I got hearing aids that generated “white noise”, to mask all the unwanted sounds.

FX – white noise... fades out

As time went on, this helped to distract my brain.

Fifteen years later, I've learned to live with tinnitus – even though it's still there.

3'20”

MUSIC – Eloise sings “Danny Boy”

But it doesn't stop me from working as a musician.

MUSIC – Eloise sings “Danny Boy”... fades out

I'm a professional singer and violinist. And I also teach.

3'51”

MUSIC – violin lesson – piece fades in, comes to an end

ELOISE: Hey, fantastic! You saved it there! When you were picking up the bow and you missed that first beat, you saved it and got on the second beat...

HARRY: Yes.

ELOISE: Last time, you said that that was too hard for you, and you've just done that like a professional. That's really cool. (laughs)

HARRY: My name's Harry, and I'm eight, and I play the violin.

MUSIC – Harry plays pizzicato piece

ELOISE: Harry has hearing loss, in his right ear it's really really profound – almost totally deaf. And in his left ear he's got moderate hearing loss. And he uses hearing aids – sound comes in through the right, but it doesn't amplify in that ear, it crosses over to the left. So, all of the sound around him crosses into his left ear, which is the better one.

MUSIC – Harry continues playing pizzicato piece (left channel only)

ELOISE: You're gonna be on the radio Harry, are you excited?

HARRY: Yes. (giggles)

ELOISE: Are you going to listen to your own voice on the radio?

HARRY: Erm, if it's recorded before I go home!

ELOISE: I think you'll get to hear it, I think!

ELOISE: I just really enjoy watching Harry play, because he's so passionate and gets very enthusiastic. His timing and his rhythm are just really really good. And also his tuning is fantastic. He has that internal feel for music – he understands it, he gets it.

MUSIC – pizzicato piece ends

5'38"

ELOISE: Harry comes from a musical family. His mum – who's also profoundly deaf – and his granddad are both professional musicians. But for lots of people with hearing loss, music just isn't part of their lives. So... can it be? Should it be?

5'55"

FX Eurostar announcement

ELOISE: I'm on the train at the moment, hurtling towards Brussels. It's a beautiful day, and it's lovely and sunny, I can see all of the French countryside at the moment. And I'm going to a special installation at a music and arts festival, featuring some instruments that have been made for Deaf people to make music more accessible to Deaf people. Now, I'm intrigued about this, because as a Deaf musician I'm wondering where the idea and concept for this sort of project has come about, and who's been involved with it. I'm really excited, slightly nervous..... I'm a little bit sceptical because I've had some experience before of people trying to make music accessible to Deaf people. Erm, it runs the risk of becoming a little bit clichéd, perhaps a little bit patronising... trying to bring that to the Deaf community, it can be a little bit risky. And I think, a large part of that comes from the politics of the Deaf community and the hearing community, and how they work together. I want it to work. But then, what works? Perhaps it'll work for some people – and I suppose I'm gonna find out whether it works for me, whether it would maybe work for some of my friends, and take it from there.

FX Eurostar fades out

7'35"

FX – quiet ambience of musical instruments in background

ELOISE: So I've just walked in to the installation. The room has quite a number of instruments in here – they've all got signs on them saying "please do not touch" which make me even more curious to actually go up and touch them! Some of them have pieces of paper that look like they've got electrodes attached to them, we've got a wooden plate with lots of different patterns on there, so there's some spirals and lines. Then we've got an instrument that's made up of springs and coils... The instruments themselves aren't that much to look at – until you get closer to them, and see some of the differences between them. They're pretty much all made out of wood, or metal, or both... and they're all obviously purposely made for this.

8'30"

ELOISE: These instruments have either been designed or commissioned by Tarek Atoui, who's a musician and sound artist. This whole project – called "WITHIN" – is one of his biggest. He's been working on it for years.

FX – ambience of musical instruments, bass frequencies in background

TAREK: The idea of it came, because I originally studied electroacoustic and electronic music. And I had the idea of a performance that mainly used bass frequencies, so frequencies under 160Hz, where the sound for me was more like a physical material, to actually reach the audience. Not to their ears, but more to their body and other senses.

ELOISE: Tarek wanted to take his ideas further. So he started working with a group of Deaf students, to explore their relationships with sound.

TAREK: If I want to discard the ears from the equation of sensing a work of this nature, a Deaf audience would be ideal to present this to. But a project like this one was a bit tough to initiate. Because to call upon people who never played sound, or who thought that sound didn't concern them – especially music – then, that actually they have a say about it, and there are instruments they can play, and they can be on stage, and part of a concert, it's a challenging matter. So, that proposition was tough. And it was very much about meeting often, not letting feeling down, and inviting people again and again, and after a while it worked.

ELOISE: So in a way, there was an element of resistance from the Deaf community, but it was eventually accepted?

TAREK: Yes. There is some resistance in the beginning, yes. But the further this ensemble of instruments was completed, each time whenever people come and see the instruments and try them, then the relationship changes, and the collaboration starts.

10'25"

FX – METAL SHEET – noise and feedback

ELOISE: So I've just tried one of the instruments, and it was absolutely fascinating! It was a metal sheet, almost like a rusty metal sheet, that had a coil – I assume with some sort of electromagnetic interference running through it. And I thought that the sound it was producing was coming through a speaker somewhere, which I couldn't pinpoint. And when I actually had a go, and put my hand on it, I realised it was the metal sheet, which is suspended from a frame, actually vibrating and making that raw noise itself. And it was an incredible experience!

11'28"

ELOISE: Who have you created this project for?

TAREK: (laughs) Errrr... well, it's, it's a tough question to be honest. I still don't know where the limits of this end. But one thing I'm sure of: I did not create it only for Deaf people. That's for sure. It is for both hearing and Deaf people to work together and create these new things, you see. It is not about creating just music education for the Deaf, or allowing the Deaf to perform, it's about joining these two worlds, and using music to create this dialogue, and then this dialogue goes back to music and pushes it further. So, it is both for Deaf and hearing people, and for the sake of music. (laughs)

12'20"

FX – TAREK talking to the musicians in French, pre-rehearsal...

ELOISE: A rehearsal for tomorrow's performance is just about to start. We've got three Deaf musicians, and three hearing musicians.

FX – more pre-rehearsal chatter...

ELOISE: Some signing going on, we've got some speaking in at least probably three or four different languages.

FX – REHEARSAL NOISES – varying sound frequencies, scraping, rattling, tapping etc

ELOISE: During the rehearsal, I meet Yves – he's a volunteer guide with the project.

YVES: The Deaf people, when they come here, the musician starts practice at 5 and finish at 8. But, still 9 they are here, they don't want to leave! They get excited, since they can feel vibration... they find it a bit a small paradise. It is kind of unbelievable but true! Because they co-operate through vibration. Yeah.

13'23"

FX – REHEARSAL NOISES – bassy notes – marbles on drum

ELOISE: This instrument has a drum skin, stretched across a table. And on the drum skin, maybe ten marbles, and one larger ball... and then, what's this? ... I've just been given a balloon! I'm not sure what for yet – I presume it's gonna be for feeling some vibrations from something...

FX – REHEARSAL NOISES – resonant drone

ELOISE: You can actually feel vibrations through it! You can even feel vibration from my voice. ... Helloo! Hi, how are you? Can you feel the vibrations?!

FX – REHEARSAL – PING PONG BALLS

ELOISE: (laughs) I don't know what it is, but a lot of composers seem to think that Deaf people and ping pong balls go together! (laughs) Maybe it's the noise it makes? I don't know! But this is the second performance I've attended where ping pong balls have been involved, and the concert has been geared towards Deaf people and vibration and experiences of music. (laughs) It's so random! It's so random.

FX – REHEARSAL FADES OUT

15'03"

ELOISE: Twenty-four hours later, we're in a different venue on the other side of Brussels.

TAREK: Now we are in the Wiels art centre... we're in their lobby, their main space, it used to be a beer brewery, where tonight's performance is taking place. So we are in the middle of installing all of WITHIN's instruments, and now having a brief with the musicians about tonight's score and structure.

ELOISE: Just before the rehearsal, I meet Nicholas. He's one of the Deaf performers – he doesn't use speech, so we communicate with Sign Language. He tells me how this is all completely new to him.

ELOISE: He grew up without any music at all, so this is first ever experience of anything musical. I'm not sure how enthused Nicholas is about this project – but he seems definitely interested in it. He seems interested in how sound works, and has more of an understanding than perhaps he ever has about how sound works.

ELOISE: On the other side of the lobby, I meet Julia.

ELOISE: Is this the first time that you've worked with Deaf musicians?

JULIA: Yeah, it's the first time. So that's why it's really interesting for me, because I... it's also the first time I have, let's say, Deaf friends! As I always played with classical musicians, I never had this experience.

ELOISE: Do you find the interaction between the hearing and the Deaf musicians different to the interaction between hearing and hearing musicians?

JULIA: Hmm, not so much. I'm actually trying not to use my ears! But it's difficult, because I'm used to. So, I'm trying to, to feel everything with the whole body, and my whole feelings. It's a test! It's a test for me too.

16'50"

FX – AUDIENCE ARRIVING

ELOISE: This is the culmination of four weeks' worth of work on this project, with many musicians. And I'm wondering how people will react, whether hearing people will get something out of it, whether Deaf people will get something out of it. It's a high profile venue, and people are paying money to come and see this.

17'19"

FX – PERFORMANCE begins with quiet, scraping sounds... resonant bass notes...

ELOISE: Throughout the concert, many of the usual audience rules don't apply. People are standing, sitting, lying down... touching objects so that they can feel the vibrations. It's very relaxed. They just need to make sure they don't block the lines of sight between the performers.

FX – PERFORMANCE continues – bleeping, mechanical noises become louder

Tarek's conducting – his direction – is very physical. Very visual.

FX – PERFORMANCE continues – builds

The performance lasts about half an hour – with the intensity building towards the end.

FX – PERFORMANCE ends... APPLAUSE

18'59"

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: How did you find it?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Really really great. Yep! Cos, a lot of performances in experimental music are really serious. This one was very unpretentious, so it definitely made me smile. It was a lot of fun, especially with the balls and the balloons.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: That's the thing of it. It's not art, it's not music, or performance – it's all of it – and it's social, political...

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: ...I think it's kind of, the essence of a really good piece, is it's its own genre, you know? It's really its own thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: The fact that Deaf people can play together with different people – it's always positive, I think.

FX – audience chatter fades out

ELOISE (alone): I think one of my reservations about this is the fact that I enjoyed it as an experience, but I'm not sure how it relates to music as such. I feel like you can have a collection of sounds which are interpreted as vibration, but that's not necessarily music. So how do you make music more accessible to Deaf people without, erm, just exposing them to a limited, new, experimental music, rather than all music?

20'15"

FX – audience chatter returns + MARY who is signing, very animatedly

ELOISE: I meet Mary – who signs her response to the performance.

ELOISE: Mary thinks that this is not music. She thinks that violin is music, but this is not. Which is interesting, cos Mary is very profoundly deaf and cannot hear anything. She enjoys the vibrations from drums and things, and music, the dance, the beat – like, with ballet she likes the beat and dance to ballet. But with this, it sounded like an aeroplane taking off!

MARY: Thank you! (laughs)

FX – audience atoms fades

20'58"

ELOISE: My reaction to this has been mixed, in a way. I enjoy experimental music a lot, but it's almost more intensified, in terms of the vibrations. So I could tell you've put a lot of thought into the vibration element. For you, how important is vibration in making music accessible for Deaf people?

TAREK: It's the entry point, I think. It's the starting point. But then there are lots of other ways of listening that these instruments call upon. So, there are things with low end, and bass, but there are things with a very wide spectrum that is rather heard through the fingers, and relies on the sense of touch. There are things that come from a visual signal, like the marbles and the drum, and elements like these that are visual in their way of being understood. There was one that was coming from Sign Language actually, like gestures, like systems of sensors that capture finger movements, inspired by things from Sign Language. So, gesture, tactility, vibration, vision – all these are at play.

FX – concert performance

TAREK: The musicians I work with, especially if they're Deaf and performing for the first time, I'm very careful to what they would like to do, what they don't feel comfortable with,

what motivates them. But, if it reaches five or six people in terms of, ok, starting a relationship with sound and music – not everybody’s gonna become a musician overnight, but at least everybody has done an experience like this, and broken a psychological and physiological barrier towards sound.

FX – concert performance ends

22’39”

ELOISE: After the instruments have been packed away, I meet up with two of the Deaf musicians from the project – Nicholas, who I mentioned earlier, and Alice.

Alice tells me she really did get into it. It took her a while – in the first rehearsal she’d felt disconnected from everyone – but eventually it all came together, and she loved the social interaction. Probably more so than the music!

As for Nicholas... he was like – “oh, this is cool, I’m just going along with it”. He enjoyed himself, but he didn’t seem to understand the project, or connect with it. And I don’t think that bothered him, because music just isn’t part of his life. It never has been.

23’23”

FX – clapping and drumming fades in

ELOISE: Back home in the UK, I meet up with Bryony Parkes – she’s from the National Deaf Children’s Society. A big part of her job is all about raising expectations of what Deaf children and young people can achieve in music.

BRYONY: You hear a lot about vibrations in music, helping and supporting young Deaf people. But it’s not just about the vibrations. I have come across people who are surprised that a Deaf person can sing – and people that think that only drumming is a way for a Deaf child to get involved in music.

FX – drumming continues, and fades out

BRYONY: The drummers are amazing – it’s not just about feeling vibrations but they have that rhythm – they have the rhythm spot on. I don’t think you can say that there’s a particular style of music that suits or appeals to Deaf children, more than you can say the same about hearing children. Every Deaf child is different, they all experience music in different ways, the same as you and I do! Depending on their background, whether they became deaf later on in life, depending on their family background as well. So there’s lots of different ways that they can achieve the same things as their hearing peers can in music.

24’58”

MUSIC – Eloise performing Carl Bohm's Sarabande in G Minor

ELOISE: I'm very lucky that I already had music in my life, before I began to lose my hearing. I was already learning about music – the theory, dynamics, how to hold the violin, how to use the bow.

MUSIC continues, and fades out

Quite often, when a Deaf child is being taught from scratch, there's so much focus on what they can hear. "How can they hear it?!" Well, that's not the only concern.

Teach a Deaf student as any other person would be taught. Work out ways of communicating. Show them the different notes. They might not be able to hear the pitch, but you can say – "look, this string is smaller than that one, it's a higher pitch".

Just give some basic knowledge about the science of sound, some knowledge about how the strings work... and they're more likely to get it. And, to enjoy it!

25'58"

ELOISE: How long have you been playing the violin, Harry?

HARRY: Erm, about half a year.

ELOISE: Half a year? Is it a bit longer than that?

HARRY: I had my first one when I was only five.

MUSIC – Harry practising slow violin piece

ROGER: I'm Roger – I'm Harry's granddad.

ELOISE: Do you feel like Harry needs more support than the average child without hearing loss, or just the same amount?

ROGER: I think at this stage, I don't think it's much different to a child with ordinary hearing, normal hearing. Sometimes he doesn't hear the accompaniment, so he may lose time with the accompaniment, so we try to help him more visually, you know? Sometimes I try and conduct so that he can see the beat as well as hear it. Once he gets into a piece he'll play it with panache. So yeah, I think he's really enjoying it.

ELOISE: I think so many people get put off by the idea of somebody having hearing loss, or being Deaf, and music. And actually, Deaf children should have exactly the same, if not more access to music, as hearing children.

ROGER: It's true. Deaf children definitely need at least as much access to music. More music is good for everybody, whether Deaf or not – music is good for you.

MUSIC – Harry practising slow violin piece – ends

ELOISE: Hey, that was really nice! Lovely ending.

27'30"

(Radio 4 Announcer:)

LISTENING WITHOUT EARS was presented by Eloise Garland, and produced by Steve Urquhart. It was a **Reduced Listening** production for BBC Radio 4 – and a full transcript is available on the programme page, through the Radio 4 website.