

Learning to Listen

By John Leonard

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It is well-known that lack of use of muscles will eventually lead to atrophy. It is arguable that lack of use of the senses will lead to the same thing. No, this is not another article on hearing damage, at least not an accepted sense. It started life as an article on new technology with regard to theatre sound, but after a while, I began to question exactly what we were doing with the existing technology, and whether we were in danger, like the Americans, of passing from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilisation.

In order to illustrate my theme, it will be necessary to cite some examples. These are not specific items, more an amalgam of situations that have occurred, perhaps to many of those involved with sound, over the past few years.

Garbage in - garbage out

Item one. A complaint from the producer of an amateur revue that the sound system was inadequate for his needs. When asked to be specific, he replied that, at the climax of the show, two hundred people came onstage and sang, and the words were inaudible. There was a twelve piece unamplified band in the pit, and he thought that we ought to be able to boost the singers over this. A few minutes spent listening to two hundred people all 'singing' the same song without any regard to diction or clarity showed exactly what the problem was, but my solution, that perhaps they were all in need of a singing lesson, was not accepted. "You've got all this technology, why can't you make them sound good?" was the response. I fell back on the computer adage: garbage in, garbage out. We did not part the best of friends.

Item two. On a recent trip to New York, to transfer-in a straight play, I was denied the use of one of the mixing desk outputs. "That's for the reinforcement, and the infra-red system." The reinforcement I could just about agree to, after all, it was a big theatre, and it had once been a car park, but the infra-red? "Oh yes, we use an infra-red transmitting system and people in the audience hire headsets." I enquired if this was not putting an unfair burden on deaf theatre-goers? "Deaf people don't use it, everyone else does." came the reply. And sure enough, come opening night, there was a sign in the lobby. "DON'T MISS A WORD! HEAR IT ALL ON YOUR OWN PERSONAL HEADSET ONLY \$5" and, I regret to say, a large number of people did just that. I had checked the audibility in all parts of the house, and even without the reinforcement system, every word was crystal clear. A member of the production staff, curious as to the use of these headsets, tried on a pair and became almost instantly inseparable from them. "Its terrific, just like watching television!" More and more people followed suit, much to the amusement of our American sound operator. He was getting his kicks from being able to hear the words without the use of headsets.

Item three. In an attempt to recreate a Big Band sound for a show, section micing was used: one microphone per section, rather than one microphone per instrument. All was well until a solo was reached, and the instrument could not be heard quite clearly enough. No problem, perhaps the player could simply lean in towards the microphone for those few bars? Back came the reply; why couldn't the microphone be dropped towards the instrument? Surely we could rebalance the section with the mic in the new position, and then just do a little boost on that channel at the appropriate moment? After all, that's what the sound engineer is for, isn't it? Well, isn't it?

Must be the f*ing sound man**

Item four. A small jazz/rock ensemble is playing in a small hall after a number of major venues. There is hardly room to move on stage as it is, and the band's sound engineers set up the mics, and the wedge monitors and the PA, and the headphone feed headphone to the drummer. The soundcheck starts, and almost immediately stops again. The singer can't hear the sax player, and the drummer can't hear anyone because his headphones don't work. The bass player can't hear enough of himself in the foldback mix, and the lead guitarist would like to hear more of the keyboards. The soundcheck turns into a monitor check, and all communications are carried out at high level via microphones and speakers. The band, if they wanted to, could touch one another without stretching very far, and out in the auditorium, the main PA is cranked up to deafening level to overcome the appalling noise that is now emanating from the monitors. Finally, the band is happy. Its members wander off to be introspective or whatever, and when they reappear and start to play, they are not at all pleased to lose the majority of the audience to the safety of the bar after the first number. "Wossamatter? Sounds fine up here! Must be the f***ing sound man." By this time, the sound man doesn't care. He is, whether he knows it or not, temporarily deaf, and totally incapable of making any sort of judgement. He knows that he has the highest quality equipment at his disposal, and that the band like it turned up L-O-U-D. Presumably the audience likes it that way, otherwise they wouldn't put up with it, would they? On this occasion, they don't, but that's put down to bad vibes, and the fact that the bar stayed open all the way through their session, oh and to the incompetence of the f***ing sound man. Still, there's always the next date, and then we'll really make their ears bleed!

All these examples have one factor in common. They are the result of conditioning brought about by our exposure to new technology in one form or another. The majority of audiences in our theatres do not know how to listen. They are used to hearing speech and music as a constant background noise. The only way to make them take notice is to make the material louder. We are becoming so used to packaged sound, sound from transistor radios and portable stereos, sound from headphones, our own and other peoples', sound from tiny, tinny speakers in TV sets, sound that has been squashed and robbed of any dynamic range in order to cut through the background noise of modern living, that we run the risk of forgetting how to listen altogether.

We now have compact discs and digital recording, but these will be ignored by the majority of us until the replay system has a remote volume control, so you can turn up the quiet bits and turned down the loud bits, without leaving your seat and generally compress the hell out of a recording that has been specially designed to give you, the listener, maximum fidelity, including a reasonable bash at a realistic dynamic.

We are in danger of developing a breed of singer who cannot project further than a microphone, a breed of audience who are incapable of listening except through headphones, a breed of musician who so little relates to his fellow players that they might just as well be in separate rooms, or even better, on tape; and worst of all, a breed of sound engineers, sound designers, and balance engineers, call them what you will, who shrug their shoulders and say "But that's what today's audience/musician/composer/director expects. Why should we not give it to them?"

We have the technology to almost anything in theatre sound, to give artistic freedom to the modern musical composer, to send effects rushing around an auditorium, to allow every word of a Shakespeare play to be delivered with perfect clarity directly to the ear, but I feel that we may have forgotten the essence of what we are all involved in. These days, internal balance is more likely to apply to the scenery than to the band, and dynamic control is something that a lighting board may have as an optional extra. New technology is fine when we are able to use it to our advantage, but when we allow it to dictate our attitudes, and, in some cases, to replace creativity and skill, then is the time to be wary. We should seriously examine our attitudes to new technology, both as performers, and as members of audience. We should learn, once again, to listen.

Photograph: Roland Kemp

"We run the risk of forgetting how to listen altogether." John Leonard