



EVELYN GLENNIE | DEAF, SOUND AND MUSIC QUESTIONS

APRIL 2019

Evelyn Glennie

Another question? Email it in to pr@evelyn.co.uk

Evelyn Glennie | Deaf, Sound and Music Questions

Evelyn Glennie | Deaf, Sound and Music Questions2

When did you start going deaf?4

Do you wear hearing aids?4

How can you be a musician if you are deaf?4

Without music, how are you able to perform so well?5

How do you know what music sounds like?5

Can anyone listen like this?6

How do the vibrations feel as you pick up sound? Is it something you can explain? 6

What does it feel like when you are teaching someone to feel music? Can you sense the same vibrations they are experiencing?7

What kind of emotions or feeling do you get when you play different instruments?7

How does your hearing-impairment affect the way that you speak/vocalise with others?8

How would you describe the way that you hear music? And with this in mind, how did you come to learn this alternative way?.....8

How did you get into music? And at any point did you feel you would give up this passion due to the difficulty of not hearing?8

When playing percussion instruments you feel vibrations in a particular way, of your knowledge, is this similar to a pianist?9

Do you think you’d have had the same career as a musician if you’d not lost your hearing?9

Did hearing loss give you an added impetus and determination to be a musician? Might you have ended up with a “proper” job if things had been different?10

When playing in a group, how heavily do you rely on written score to play along with other musicians – and are you aware if someone else makes a mistake?11

How do you manage to improvise along with other musicians – and how do you cope with duets?12

When you’re learning a piece, how do you know you’ve got it “right”?13

How do you approach writing pieces in collaboration with an ensemble?13

When did you start going deaf?

I started going deaf at the age of 8 due to nerve deterioration. I began to complain about my ears being sore when I was riding on my bike in strong winds. I went to the doctor and was given some ear drops to help. However, it gradually grew to the point where I avoided going outside to avoid the wind. At the age of 11 my hearing became so poor that I needed to be fitted with hearing aids immediately. I was told that I would have to attend the Aberdeen School of Deaf. I refused to go there as I wanted to remain at a mainstream school.

Do you wear hearing aids?

From the age of 11 and during my school days I wore hearing aids and a phonic ear in the classrooms. However, I discovered that turning up the volume on hearing aids made the quality of hearing not always better but often more confusing. At first, I thought the only way to hear better was for everything to be louder, and of course, that was not the case at all. When things become louder, they actually became distorted and confusing. Everything was much more painful to decipher and my balance was affected. I learnt that by taking off my hearing aids I heard less through the ears but much more through my body. My body acted like a resonating chamber.

How can you be a musician if you are deaf?

It is worth pointing out at this stage that I am not totally deaf, I am profoundly deaf. Profound deafness covers a wide range of symptoms, although it is commonly taken to mean that the quality of the sound heard is not sufficient to be able to understand the

spoken word from sound alone. With no other sound interfering, I can usually hear someone speaking although I cannot understand them without the additional input of lip-reading. Deafness is poorly understood in general. For instance, there is a common misconception that deaf people live in a world of silence. To understand the nature of deafness, first one has to understand the nature of hearing. Deafness does not mean that you can't hear, only that there is something wrong with the ears. Even someone who is totally deaf can still hear/feel sounds. Read Evelyn's [hearing essay](#) if you wish to explore this question further.

Without music, how are you able to perform so well?

I perform barefoot. This allows me to feel the vibrations through my feet. In fact my whole body is like a huge ear in that I can use it to register rhythms, textures, dynamics and so on. Pitches can be registered by feeling them if they are played in isolation.

How do you know what music sounds like?

I know how music sounds by what I feel and see. I can sense musical sound throughout my whole body. I can identify different pitches in isolation according to which part of my body feels the vibrations and for how long.

My Percussion teacher at school, Mr Forbes, taught me how to develop my senses. He used to tell me to put my hands on the wall of the music room and he would play two notes on two timpani and ask me, 'Which is the higher note?' I'd tell him which I thought it was, and he'd ask me, 'How do you know?' I would tell him I could feel it perhaps in the upper part of my hand, whilst I felt the lower note all the way down to my wrist. Or we'd discuss what was happening in my feet and legs as I played the

drums, or listened to a piece of music. Similarly, I always knew when a door banged or the phone rang, and my ability to sense sound developed as I became more and more dependent upon it. Eventually I managed to distinguish the rough pitch of notes by associating where on my body I felt the sound and with the sense of perfect pitch I had before losing my hearing. The low sounds I feel mainly in my legs and feet and high sounds might be particular places on my face, neck and chest.

Can anyone listen like this?

Anyone can experience these effects, of course; if you put your hands on both sides of a piece of paper or hold a balloon when a radio or TV is on, you can feel the vibrations coming through the paper or balloon. Most young people have experienced the vibrations that pour through the lower limbs of the strong bass and drum beats of a 'high-powered' disco

How do the vibrations feel as you pick up sound? Is it something you can explain?

One cannot explain the feelings easily as it depends where you stand/sit in relation to the instrument, which instrument is played and its frequencies, the acoustics of the room, the quality of the instruments, the dynamics used, what one is wearing and so on. There are too many variables to describe the actual feeling. Please read my hearing essay from my website which may assist you with more information.

What does it feel like when you are teaching someone to feel music? Can you sense the same vibrations they are experiencing?

It feels very rewarding to open the door to someone and have them realize that they can experience sound through their whole body rather than only through the ears. I cannot honestly say whether we each feel exactly the same vibrations/sensations but at least the mechanism we use is similar. Do you hear sounds exactly as your friends do? It's important to know that there would always be a difference in what is felt as a participator of creating sound to that of the passive listener. Even someone sitting in the front row would experience different physical sensations to someone sitting in the 3rd row or in the balcony and so on.

What kind of emotions or feeling do you get when you play different instruments?

I play so many instruments within the percussion family that it is impossible to describe every single feeling. Low sounds from the likes of timpani, bass drums are felt mainly in the lower part of my body whereas high sounds from glockenspiels, triangles, cymbals are felt in the upper part such as cheekbones or scalp. Instruments such as Tam Tams can be felt all over the body. Please bear in mind that these feelings happen when one participates in the actual playing of these instruments. One may have a different sensation by being a passive listener.

How does your hearing-impairment affect the way that you speak/vocalise with others?

I use my voice. Because I was born hearing I understand about accents, inflection, dynamics, placement of sound, acoustic awareness, formation of words, structure of sentences and so on. If I haven't heard or used a word in a long time I forget how to say it in that it's not natural for me to form the word easily. Being a musician gives me so much information as regards to sounds around me which is the same for when I'm in conversation with people. Visual awareness is crucial in how I hear.

How would you describe the way that you hear music? And with this in mind, how did you come to learn this alternative way?

I hear music through my body, as we all do unless there is paralysis – vibrations are fed throughout my body which I then make sense into how I play as a musician. I listen (feel) the beginning, middle and end of sounds rather than only the initial impact. My percussion teacher at school asked me to take off my hearing aids so that less could be heard through the ears but more through the body. Overload can happen when too much sound comes through the ear but more can be tolerated and made sense of when fed throughout the body.

How did you get into music? And at any point did you feel you would give up this passion due to the difficulty of not hearing?

I started piano from the age of 8 which was through Scottish traditional music at home and school. I started percussion from the age of 12 after seeing the school orchestra

play during one assembly for all new pupils. I never had the feeling of giving up because my teacher was completely dedicated to my situation.

When playing percussion instruments you feel vibrations in a particular way, of your knowledge, is this similar to a pianist?

I play piano and percussion. All instruments are different and therefore the feeling from each is different. There are no 'particular ways' in feeling vibration as it depends on too many variables such as what you're wearing, quality of instruments, type of instruments, standing, sitting, type of stage, materials of the room such as wood, curtains, brick etc. The list goes on. Vibration is a moving, fluid entity – never static so there is not set way to digest sound as vibration. It is unique to each person.

Do you think you'd have had the same career as a musician if you'd not lost your hearing?

I cannot really answer this because I simply don't know. I do know that I have acquired a sense of curiosity (and necessity) towards digesting sound using the body, providing sound how I understand it and then letting it go. By that I mean I don't try to replicate it or remember it physically or otherwise because I know the circumstances when next playing will be different. The body has to always see a sound as though it's the first time it's been experienced. That's why I'm not bound by systems or methods of playing. This has all aided me in exploring things in ways that are pertinent to my situation. Basically, I have to listen to myself before listening to others which in turn

helps me to at least try to listen to others better. I can't listen to others if I can't listen let alone hear myself first. We cannot get confused between hearing and listening – hearing is a medical condition whereas listening is an act of choice which is not only about hearing a sound. Anyone can engage in the act of listening should they make that choice. Anyway, I don't think this is a question that I can answer easily!

Did hearing loss give you an added impetus and determination to be a musician? Might you have ended up with a “proper” job if things had been different?

I'm a fairly stubborn person so at the age of 15 once the decision had been made to try music as a profession that was that. My determination was to carve the career of a solo percussionist on a full-time basis which had not existed before. That was actually my main challenge. The media focused on my deafness whilst the concert promoters focused on putting on percussion recital and concertos often for the first time, so in a way it was the creation of the solo career that made me determined and focused. There was nothing I could do about my deafness as it's a physical condition but I could steer people's attention to the need of creating repertoire to sustain a solo career not only for myself but for generations to come.

When playing in a group, how heavily do you rely on the written score to play along with other musicians – and are you aware if someone else makes a mistake?

If it's a totally improvised situation (such as my collaborations with Fred Frith) it is important for me to see the musicians otherwise I cannot rely on the sound alone. That's the case with playing written music too whether with my pianist in a recital or playing a concerto with an orchestra. In the latter case I nearly always try to position my instruments to a 90° angle to the audience so that the majority of the orchestral players can see me and I can see the majority of them. The conductor has to be as close to the edge of the stage as possible so that we can see each other. I learn the music from the full score so that I know what the other musicians are doing. As regards to others making a boo boo I sometimes know especially if I know the piece inside out and if the mistake has come from the brass, winds or percussion. I get the impact of their sound much better than strings and also their sustain is more direct than strings which gives me more time to digest the sound. I usually place my mallet percussion on the cello side so as not to cancel the register of the strings and it gives me better contrast to separate the brass/wind sound from the type of sounds the mallet percussion produces. The drums are placed on the violin side in order to allow the strings to be more on top of the beat and for me to separate the drums from the brass a little more.

How do you manage to improvise along with other musicians – and how do you cope with duets? For example in the piece Extra Sensory Perception you play a duet with some fairly quiet piano.

With ESP I'm relying on the click throughout. I obviously have an understanding of the structure and mood of the piece which allows musicality to come through. However, I need to develop improvising more with melody. Pitch is the hardest thing to digest because I get the impact of the sound (not if too soft) but I miss the actual pitch itself so to interact or follow chordal progressions with others can be a real challenge and certainly an area I need to work on. Improvising soundscapes, moods, rhythms are much easier because I'm less reliant on actual melodies or complex harmonic structures and often I'm playing non pitched percussion. As long as I can see the musicians when playing free improvisation then I'm usually fine. With some collaborations I am initially reliant on the written score and I have only recently felt more confident to understand the often complex harmonic progressions let alone rhythmic complexities in order to open the door a little wider in my playing. Feeling more comfortable is also down to having played with different musicians and knowing them socially and professionally. A collaboration takes time and getting to know people away from the concert platform really helps in understanding their approach to performances or why things are performed in such a way and so on. Getting to know musicians away from the platform has been as important as what happens on stage.

**When you're learning a piece, how do you know you've got it "right"?
Especially on the Marimba – do you know you're hitting the right
combination by sight or is your body perception good enough to know if
the correct combination of notes are being hit?**

It's by sight. I'm often playing on many different models whereby the height, width of bars, spacing between bars etc. varies that I have to rely on sight. I'm often playing too quickly or too many notes whereby the body is constantly moving that I cannot personally determine which pitches are being played. If I play timpani in isolation (with no other instruments) I can more often than not determine the actual pitches because the sound is isolated, timpani resonates much more than a marimba, I'm physically closer to each drum, I'm moving less, the sound reaches a greater part of the body and the sound is generally louder than a marimba.

How do you approach writing pieces in collaboration with an ensemble?

I like to work closely with the musicians I'm working with so that they in a way become part of the writing process. I like for them to contribute and stretch the boundaries of my ideas. This is very much what happened when I co-wrote the score for *Troilus and Cressida* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2018. All of the musicians brought their own musical voices to the score which often meant notating things became a tad challenging!

For more general information about different ways to explore music, take a look at our blog posts:

- **Music Therapy** | [Lachlan's Story](#)
- **iMuse Suite** | [Fiona's Story](#)
- **Laurentia Tan** | [Guest Blog](#)

For more information on this topic, read Evelyn's hearing essay [here](#)
If you have any more questions, take a look at the range of student booklets we have
available divided into topic sections. Still can't find what you're looking for? Email
pr@evelyn.co.uk with your questions.

Where to find Evelyn?



Photo © Philipp Rathmer