

In my artistic research on sound and various sound art practices I have become more and more interested in a quite fundamental, basic question: what do we hear and why? The question has led me to two basic conditionings: physical and mental. The hearing organ and the mind. Sound enters our body as energy, and its vibration undergoes a complex, precise, and poetic journey, constantly moving, adapting, and transforming, eventually becoming a neural signal. We perceive, experience, and interpret this signal depending on our education and cultural environment, as well as various other conditionings. While thoroughly examining the structure of the ear, I became entangled in each component for various reasons. I am deeply infatuated with the idea that the instruments, amplification systems, acoustic phenomena, and even sound production itself are already embedded inside the human hearing organ.

Perhaps everything that we create is already there in our own nature, unrecognised, and can be potentially revealed through external embodiments. In a similar manner, sound is shaped by our hearing abilities and the mind, but hearing does not necessarily need to be defined by particular physical abilities or finite mental capacities..

#### CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY AND MY PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH DEAF CULTURE

A new exhibition space in Kaunas City Hall has invited me to create an exhibition about the city. While thinking about various perspectives from which the city can be seen/heard, I decided to work with Kaunas city communities. Very quickly, I ended up recording specifically communities that work with sound and, through sound, experience togetherness.<sup>1</sup> Usually recordings were made during the rehearsals, mixed with chatter, laughter, and other vocal sharing. Because of

<sup>1</sup> For example, I was recording Kaunas city professional music makers as well as children, amateurs, etc.

my realization that sound does not end where my perception does, and because of my interest in learning to perceive sound beyond my abilities, I felt it was necessary to include the experience of sound sharing with Deaf individuals.

I started to search for ways to get in touch with the Kaunas Deaf Community. I was introduced by one of the exhibition curators to the master's thesis *Contact of the Deaf with Sound through the Expression of Sculpture and Installation* by the Lithuanian Deaf artist (sculptor and sound artist) Paulius Jurjonas, which made a huge impact on my research. Paulius also became a consulting artist in the final realization process of the exhibition in Kaunas City Hall, where he made key remarks about what was necessary for the piece so that the Deaf Community could experience it (sign language video translation, correct bench vibration, etc.). Paulius Jurjonas is working with the Kaunas Deaf Community as a consultant for cultural events, consulting and helping to solve accessibility problems, as well as making sure that there are no miscommunications and misconceptions. Unfortunately, this is quite often the case because there is a strong lack of easily accessible information about what is the correct way to approach the Deaf Community and how to find means to be in a sonic discussion with Deaf individuals in a non-hierarchical way.

I approached the Deaf Community by suggesting that we work and develop together potentially “a method to-be”<sup>2</sup> based on breathing, body tensions, and imagination, while at the same time asking to help me perceive sound by different means and being willing to learn. The experience, I think, is much more informative for hearing individuals who are willing to expand their perceptions of what sound is and how it could be perceived. Yet it can also benefit anyone who is open to discover inevitable hierarchical structures and engage in a process of trying to find the “right” way to be in a society that is rich in the spectrum of differences.

I would never call this encounter a workshop now, as what I was offering could only ever be a suggestion and sharing. For me, being in the position of a hearing musician,

<sup>2</sup> Here I propose a workshop in making as a tool, an act of creating a method together as a way to connect, engage in a discussion and get to know each other's perspectives. Without a goal to establish something that could be used or repeated later.

interested in philosophical ideas about sound, perception, and sonic experiments, it was of huge importance to start hearing the perspective, needs, and voice of Hearing-impaired individuals and, perhaps, to put aside my snobbish, intellectual, and ambitious projections. I am well aware of my privileged position, to the point where I started doubting if I could talk on the theme at all, as I will always be in hierarchical dominance. Still, I decided to share the transcription of the workshop/sharing, hoping that perhaps my failure can be of use for further developments in engagement to converse and learn between differences.

Within the transcription below, I have inserted some passages that later became songs, used as part of the exhibition / sound installation *A Drift Without A River* at Kaunas City Museum City Hall in July-September 2024.<sup>3</sup>

[...]

G: I don't have any specific ideas yet, you can do whatever you want, but you can't draw anything just yet. For now I would suggest concentrating on imagination and physical sensations.

I also wanted to tell you a little bit about myself, that last year I started learning Indian classical singing. The style is called Dhrupad. And it was a very, very big discovery for me, because my teacher was very attentive to the physical sensations that I feel in my body. First of all, it's the breath. Breathing in through the nose, breathing out through the mouth. Breathing when you breathe only into the upper part of your body, or breathing when you breathe into as much of your body as possible. He also told me to concentrate on

<sup>3</sup> Together with my artistic duo Eye Gymnastics, we created songs from the discussions that I had with the Kaunas Deaf Community, particularly from sharing and experiences of sounds or the absence of sounds by the Hearing-impaired individuals. As the melody for songs came out of the natural tone of the speaking voice, through repetition and slight prolongation of the vowels, I am calling them songs within this essay as well.

the channel through which I inhale air and visualise that three fingers below the navel is a huge, huge bowl full of water. And the air that I inhale has to fall like a drop into that bowl, and the sound that I make, whatever it is, comes out of the ripples and vibrates my body. My whole body is like a vibrating instrument. I found it very interesting that he told me to imagine a bowl and water. And I thought it was like a tale, a kind of fiction, but at the same time I realised that this imagination plays a very important role. In the end it's not even important for me how the sounds I make sound, but how I feel them, how they vibrate my whole body, what relationship I have with my body. It seemed to me that this is a very important element that maybe we could all feel together.

But let's start with nature. My suggestion would be that maybe, well, at least it is easier for me, when I close my eyes, because then I feel that I am less concerned whether someone is observing me, and more focused on myself. But you can close your eyes or not, as you wish. And then try to imagine, to visualise the sound of the sea. Slowly deepen your breathing, breathe deeply, deeply. If you don't want to close your eyes, don't. In fact, if you don't want to, you don't have to do anything at all. Because the most important thing is that you feel good, that there is no compulsion.

When you close your eyes and visualize, I would suggest to deepen the breath, to feel how it goes from the head to the chest, from the chest to the abdomen, and it reaches that big pool of water and resonates the whole body. And then you can experiment with different sounds, how they feel in your mouth and perhaps somehow that might be similar to the sea. Squeezing your teeth, squeezing your lips. Saying different vowels and consonants, it doesn't really matter and I won't even say what sounds you have to make, but through that physical sensation of the air in your body, of your body as a vibrating instrument, of the sound as a vibration, try to imitate together the sound of the sea. Can we try?

Y: The sound of the sea in winter.

X: I don't need to... can I draw it by strokes, dense or less dense? Or do I have to use letters?

G: I suggest not to write anything just yet, just to try with the body for now, and then we'll write it down. Unless you really want to.

X: No no no no no no, I was just asking whether to use letters or dashes.

G: I think we'll try to do the sea, then the wind, then the trees. Then you'll represent everything visually in whatever order you want and then we'll perform your piece, it'll be like a graphic score.

X: Got it.

G: OK?

X: Okay.

Z: And I don't hear anything, for example: the sound of the sea, the rustling of the trees, the crunching of the needles, I don't hear anything, but I feel the wind. Can I draw some kind of wind?

G: Yeah, but I think at the beginning maybe don't draw it, but try to get that vibration in your body through the breath and through the sensations in your chest, in your belly, in your lower abdomen, through the tension in your tongue, in your throat, in your teeth, and through your breath.

Z: When you don't hear anything, you don't feel anything. When you feel something, then you can imagine what you can draw, and when you don't feel anything you can't draw anything.

G: But let's not draw it yet, let's just DO it for now.

X: No, no, you understand: she was born deaf, she doesn't feel any crunching, any sounds, she has no idea how to express herself. How to feel what and how, you know? We, for example, I can at least hear a little bit of rustling, it's louder here, but she just sees the image. And she has no idea from the image how to feel that you are feeling something.

G: I see, I'm very curious actually because...

X: Because absolutely absolutely...

Z: I can't hear it...

G: But that's very good, it means that whatever you do will be, in a way, something that nobody has ever imagined in their life. It means that your imagination is unconstrained by the limitations of how it should be. What is right. And I understand what you are saying, that you hear nothing and therefore feel nothing. But you feel the air? How does the air get into your nose?

Z: Smell, yes.

I do not feel a thing,  
rustling leaves,  
or the sound of the sea.  
While I can sense the wind.

I do not sense,  
murmuring of trees,  
or rustling of the sea.  
but I can feel the wind.

I can not hear a thing,  
no crunching of the needles,  
or rustling of trees.  
But I can feel the wind.

G: Perhaps then you could concentrate on the air current. Breathe in as deeply as you can and out as deeply as you can. Then breathe in through your mouth and

squeeze your teeth hard, hard, and breathe out through your mouth, just concentrating on the air and the tension in your body. Forget the wind, forget the sound, forget everything. Focus on the imagination, the air and your body. Nothing else. And ignore that the sound might not be similar to mine. It's nice that it's different, it means this is your world, your imagination. We see that perspective of yours, that is the greatest gift. Well, I just think that maybe it's important not to focus too much on the result, because I've never done a workshop like this with Deaf people. And I think it would be very unfair to expect that something will happen here somehow. It's just that we can try together and nothing is a failure. It's all good just because we got together and we do something together.

Q: They say you have to concentrate when you're alone at home, then everything is possible, but here, when you hear someone else talking, well, you can't concentrate like you can when you're alone.

G: Aha.

Y: Or it has to be twilight, a little bit of a smell, and then you sit on the ground, and you feel some vibrations, or some music, and of course they don't hear it, but they feel the vibrations anyway. So then maybe something like that...

T: You know, a person born not hearing and the sea, the sound of the sea, he doesn't know this sound.

G: But it's very good that he doesn't know. Because his sea will then be fantastic, a kind that does not exist in our hearing world.

Y: Anyway, their hearing is their sight. They can see, but if you can't hear it...

G: But it seems to me that this desire to make it as

close as possible to the way it really is should not dominate here. Because it's more interesting not to be like it really is, I can go to the seaside and listen.

Y: Well, yes, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the fact that a person is born Deaf, I don't know, well I don't know how...

X: I can tell you how. Before I had the deaf-aid I couldn't hear the sea at all, I could see the calm sea, they would ask me: "Can you hear the waves?", I would say, "How can I hear if I can't hear," and if there was a storm, we would go to the storm, the storm is the waves, and you can't hear them either, but you see them. And they tell me: "What is the wave like?", I say: "Angry." Angry wave, how can you tell? Or what waves? You can't hear. And when I was with the deaf-aid, I could already feel the sound of the waves. A bit softer, a bit louder, the breaking. You know, when you haven't heard and you don't hear it's impossible to describe, really impossible. You can paint by sight what you have seen, but what you feel like before the deaf-aid? I wouldn't describe it in any way.

P: I wanted to agree with what the person just said, right, because if, say, in the Soviet times, in school they didn't teach any senses or anything, there was a music lesson, you'd go and sing and that was it. Oral teaching and that's it. You know how to sing that's all, you hit the note or you don't hit it, doesn't matter. This kind of teaching—to know sound—is different. It's like, they see more with their eyes, they can tell if the sea is calm or wavy. That's it, because it's very difficult for them to feel the sound, because, for example, the sound of the music in the speaker, well, when there are big speakers, they can feel the vibration very much, it doesn't matter what kind of music it is: rock and roll or lyrical music, simple, they might not understand.

Because sometimes there is a translation in the columns, the translation in the subtitles, there it says

"lyrical music", they feel that there is a vibration, but what kind of music they won't say. It's just a matter of understanding. For example, there is one Deaf person who absolutely loves music and he can tell who is singing, he listens to music all the time, it's like therapy for him, it's good. And for others, for example, it would be very difficult. Because people are used to seeing sound with their eyes.

*When you sense,  
then you can imagine something,  
you can feel what and how.*

*I do not hear anything,  
rustling trees  
or sound of sea.  
But I sense the wind.*

*When you feel,  
then you can imagine something,  
Then you can sense what and how.*

Or on stage, for example, well, there are concerts all the time and the speakers go towards the people. I keep saying this is very bad. Deaf people need both back and front. Because the music has to go to our side too, not just the audience's side. Because if they don't feel then they can't dance. Beginning, to start, is difficult. So we have a leader XXX who tells us when to start with the music: "we START!" Then they count.

Z: We count from when to when to start. We all calculate that on the sixteenth, because there is a rhythm of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, on the ninth we start dancing. We go out dancing according to the calculations. And we don't go out dancing by heart.

G: But I want to share somehow my experience. When I was taught in school I was always told very much that you have to go out then, you have to calculate like this, this is beautiful, this is ugly, do this, don't do this. And I'm always like that, I'm always afraid I won't get it right,

I'm always stressed, I'm always calculating. And this way that I propose is to forget how it should be, forget the numbers, forget the rhythm, forget the melodies, forget the sound. Allow yourself to feel okay, to focus on the body tensions, to focus on the breath, possibility to breathe into different parts of the body. I can breathe in through my nose, I can breathe in through my mouth. Sound doesn't matter, notes don't matter, speakers don't matter. Let me be, just to be well.

Y: Sorry, we're talking here about the programme numbers that women who are deaf do, such as folk dances and sport dances. If they forget everything while doing the number to be well, it's a little bit...

G: No no no, I'm not suggesting always to do so, I'm only talking about what we are doing here. Obviously, in sport or folk dancing, one needs to do exactly what is asked. When I play classical piano, I also do exactly as I was taught. But this meeting is not about that. That's all I wanted.

Y: I understand what you want, but...

I: And I'll put it this way, that I also understand, I'm very understanding and, but you see, the world of the Deaf is completely different from the hearing world.

G: Yes.

I: And you know, breathing, sensing, you know, they seem such simple things to us here, but they don't understand. The Deaf world, well, it's different. It's more specific, it's more concentrated on something. And, with time, something, you know, just the sound of the sea, you know, when you can't hear (stands up, raises her arms and produces sounds while swinging them)...

G: I don't like it that way...

I: But you know what I mean?

G: And are you hearing or deaf?

I: What do you think?

G: I think hearing.<sup>4</sup>

*That the stream when it comes in it's cold, and when it goes out it's warm.*

*+*

*We can breathe very, very softly and we can breathe very, very strongly.*

*And then we try to breathe in through our mouth and to feel that when we breathe in the air, it is so rough, cold and when we breathe out it's warm. Our whole body, all the organs have warmed it up.*

*You can be very gentle, you can be very, very strong.*

Gailė Griciūtė with contribution of Kaunas Deaf Community, 2024.

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<sup>4</sup> There were 16 participants in the workshop/sharing and two sign language translators. Each Deaf individual had a different hearing disability. There were also two hearing tutors of the Deaf: one working with dance and the other with theater, who introduced themselves as the workshop/sharing was evolving.