

The
Sound
of
Attention

JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI
AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF LISTENING
IN MUSIC



The Sound of Attention: *Jiddu Krishnamurti and the Philosophy of Listening in Music*

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First Edition

Listening as a Musicological Problem

When Guido Adler published *Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft* (*The Scope, Method, and Aim of Musicology*) in 1885, he offered what remains one of the foundational statements of modern musicology. His famous distinction between historical and systematic musicology provided scholars with an intellectual map that shaped the discipline for more than a century. Historical musicology would concern itself with the chronological development of musical life—composers, repertoires, manuscripts, institutions, and styles—while systematic musicology would investigate theory, acoustics, aesthetics, psychology, and related fields.¹ Although Adler's categories have been revised repeatedly, their influence is still visible in the organization of music departments, scholarly journals, and research agendas today.

One feature of Adler's program deserves renewed attention. Music occupies the center of nearly every category he describes. Musical works, theoretical systems, historical development, notation, instruments, biography, and criticism all appear as legitimate objects of investigation. Listening does not. This absence is understandable. Listening leaves remarkably little documentary evidence. Scores survive in libraries, instruments enter museum collections, correspondence remains in archives, recordings preserve performances, and concert programs document musical life with considerable detail. Listening disappears almost at the moment it occurs.

That disappearance has consequences. Musicologists routinely reconstruct performance traditions from early recordings, editorial revisions from manuscript variants, and institutional histories from correspondence and administrative records. Comparable evidence for listening is rarely available. Historians know what musicians performed far more readily than they know what audiences actually heard. Reviews offer partial evidence. Diaries preserve isolated impressions. Pedagogical treatises reveal what teachers hoped students would hear. Ethnographic accounts occasionally describe the gradual acquisition of listening practices. None of these sources captures listening directly. Instead, they document the traces left behind when listening enters language.

For much of the discipline's history, this limitation encouraged a practical assumption. Musical perception could simply be taken for granted. Analysts described harmonic syntax without asking how listeners learned to hear harmonic function. Historians reconstructed stylistic change while assuming relatively stable listeners capable of recognizing those changes. Even discussions of performance practice often concentrated upon what musicians did rather than how those actions reorganized auditory experience. The listener remained present throughout musicological scholarship but seldom became its explicit subject.

The emergence of ethnomusicology during the twentieth century complicated this picture in important ways. Researchers working outside European musical traditions quickly discovered that listening could not be understood as a culturally neutral faculty. Musical knowledge depended upon participation. Children did not merely learn songs. They learned where to direct attention, how musical time was organized, which timbres carried ceremonial significance, when

participation became appropriate, and what counted as expressive performance within their communities.² Listening itself possessed a cultural history.

Performance history revealed another dimension of the same problem. Musicians born during the nineteenth century frequently performed repertoires in ways that later generations regarded as stylistically unusual. Early recordings preserve extensive tempo flexibility, expressive portamento, highly individualized rhythmic coordination, and approaches to phrase shaping rarely encountered in modern conservatory performance.³ These differences cannot be dismissed simply as changing taste. They indicate that performers expected audiences to hear differently than audiences hear today. Listening, no less than performance, changes historically.

Technology introduced still another transformation. Before the arrival of commercial recording, music was overwhelmingly experienced as an event that vanished once performance ended. Repetition depended upon memory or renewed performance. During the twentieth century that relationship changed fundamentally. Music became repeatable, comparable, interruptible, collectible, and increasingly detached from the circumstances of its original performance. Listeners acquired the ability to compare interpretations separated by decades, continents, and aesthetic traditions with unprecedented precision. Such developments altered not only musical access but musical expectation itself.

Taken together, these historical developments suggest that listening deserves closer attention than it has generally received within musicology. Musical works possess histories. Instruments possess histories. Performance practices possess histories. Listening does as well. The difficulty lies in determining how that history might be reconstructed from evidence that survives only indirectly.

The present study approaches that question from an unusual direction. Jiddu Krishnamurti wrote almost nothing about music. His lectures contain no sustained discussion of musical form, performance, or aesthetics. He developed neither a philosophy of composition nor a theory of listening comparable to those found in phenomenology or sound studies. Yet throughout more than six decades of public talks and published writings, he returned persistently to one problem: the nature of attention. What does it mean to observe before memory, comparison, and recognition have fully organized experience?⁴

Read in isolation, that question belongs to philosophy rather than musicology. Read against the historical development of musical listening, however, it acquires unexpected relevance. If listeners are formed by pedagogy, institutions, technologies, and culture, then musical perception is never simply given. It is cultivated. The issue is no longer whether listening changes—that proposition is well established across ethnomusicology, performance history, and the history of musical pedagogy—but how those acquired habits participate in every act of musical understanding.

This essay argues that listening should be treated as an historical practice rather than merely the precondition of musical knowledge. It does not propose a philosophy of listening derived from Krishnamurti, nor does it suggest replacing established musicological methods with philosophical

speculation. Instead, it examines the historical formation of listening through ethnomusicology, performance practice, pedagogy, recording technology, and musical analysis before asking how Krishnamurti's reflections on attention illuminate questions already emerging from those sources. The center of the discussion remains musicological. Krishnamurti enters that discussion only where the historical evidence has already prepared the ground.

The Listener Enters History

The idea that listening might itself possess a history did not emerge suddenly. It developed gradually as musicologists began questioning assumptions that earlier generations had rarely considered problematic. During the nineteenth century, many scholars treated musical perception as sufficiently stable that analytical and historical work could proceed without examining the listener in detail. Differences in education or taste certainly existed, but the basic act of hearing music was generally understood as constant enough to support broader theoretical claims. That confidence became increasingly difficult to sustain during the twentieth century.

One reason was geographical. Comparative musicology—and later ethnomusicology—placed European scholars in sustained contact with musical systems that challenged familiar habits of listening. Concepts regarded as fundamental within Western art music often proved inadequate elsewhere. Functional harmony could not explain the organization of many modal traditions. Regular metric hierarchy failed to account for rhythmic systems structured through additive processes or cyclical organization. Even the distinction between composer and performer, so central to much European musical thought, carried very different meanings in cultures where improvisation or collective participation occupied a more prominent place.⁵

John Blacking's work among the Venda marked an important turning point because it shifted attention away from music as an autonomous object toward the social processes through which musical understanding develops. Musical ability, he argued, could not be separated from the cultural environments in which people learned to perform, remember, evaluate, and respond to sound.⁶ This argument reached beyond ethnography. It implied that listening itself should be understood historically. Children did not inherit complete musical competence at birth. They acquired it through years of participation within particular communities.

Bruno Nettl later expanded this observation through decades of ethnomusicological research across multiple musical traditions. Reflecting upon the experiences of fieldworkers, Nettl repeatedly noted how often researchers believed they understood unfamiliar music only to discover, months later, that essential structural relationships had escaped them entirely.⁷ Rhythms first heard as irregular gradually revealed consistent organization. Melodic formulas that initially seemed repetitive became increasingly differentiated. Formal boundaries unnoticed during early encounters emerged only after extended participation. Such experiences were common enough to suggest that listening itself develops through immersion rather than instant comprehension.

The implications extend well beyond ethnomusicology. Western conservatory education produces similar transformations, although they are often less visible because students and teachers share many of the same assumptions. A first-year music student encountering Renaissance

polyphony frequently hears vertical sonorities before contrapuntal process. With continued study, the same music begins to unfold differently. Individual melodic lines acquire greater independence, imitation becomes structurally prominent, and modal relationships replace harmonic progression as the principal source of coherence. The notation has remained unchanged throughout. The listener has not.

Performance traditions preserve comparable evidence. Robert Philip's examination of early recordings demonstrates that expressive conventions once regarded as entirely ordinary now strike many listeners as historically distinctive. Sliding between notes, flexible ensemble coordination, highly individualized tempo modification, and liberal use of portamento characterized performances by musicians trained during the nineteenth century.⁸ These practices gradually diminished during the twentieth century as recording technology, institutional training, and changing aesthetic ideals encouraged increasingly standardized forms of execution. The historical significance of these recordings lies not only in what performers did but in what audiences expected to hear.

Concert etiquette underwent similar changes. James H. Johnson's study of musical life in Paris traces the gradual emergence of concentrated listening as a defining characteristic of nineteenth-century concert culture. Earlier audiences moved more freely between conversation and performance than later generations often imagine. Silence, sustained attention, and the expectation that audiences should suppress visible responses gradually became marks of cultivated musical behavior rather than timeless features of concert life.⁹ Listening itself became disciplined.

These examples point toward an important conclusion. Musical history cannot be reconstructed solely through changes in repertory, compositional technique, or institutional development. It must also account for changing listeners. Every generation inherits habits of attention that shape what seems immediately audible, emotionally persuasive, or analytically significant. Those habits are transmitted through education, reinforced through institutions, and modified through changing technologies and performance practices. They belong to history no less than the musical works with which they are associated.

Recognizing this historical dimension prepares the way for a different kind of question. If listening is acquired through experience, can listeners ever become aware of the assumptions that experience has produced? Historians document the formation of musical habits with increasing sophistication. Philosophers ask a different question: what occurs when those habits become objects of attention themselves? It is at this point—not before—that Krishnamurti's writings enter the discussion.

Attention, Recognition, and the Work of Listening

By the middle of the twentieth century, scholars working in different disciplines had arrived at a similar conclusion from remarkably different directions. Ethnomusicologists demonstrated that listening develops through enculturation. Historians of performance showed that audiences from different periods heard familiar repertoires differently. Psychologists explored expectation and memory as fundamental components of musical cognition. None of these fields depended upon

the others, yet each challenged the older assumption that listening could be treated as a transparent act preceding musical understanding.¹⁰

What remained unclear was the status of attention itself. Historians could describe changing listening practices, and theorists could explain how musical expectations developed, but neither approach fully addressed what happens during the moment of perception. By the time listeners identify a cadence, recognize a familiar motive, or anticipate a formal return, experience has already been organized through habits acquired over many years. Recognition arrives with remarkable speed.

Leonard B. Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* approached this problem through expectation. Musical meaning, Meyer argued, emerges because listeners carry remembered patterns into the unfolding present. Expectations are confirmed, delayed, frustrated, or redirected, and those changing relationships generate much of music's expressive force.¹¹ His theory remains one of the most influential attempts to explain why music communicates through time rather than through isolated sounds.

Meyer's work, however, also reveals the limits of purely structural explanation. Expectations do not arise spontaneously from musical materials alone. They depend upon listeners who have learned particular musical languages. A deceptive cadence surprises only someone who has internalized conventional harmonic movement. Metric displacement becomes expressive only after regular pulse has been established. The emotional effect of a delayed resolution depends as much upon the listener's previous experience as upon the notes themselves.

This point becomes especially clear when musical traditions are viewed comparatively. A musician raised within Hindustani classical performance anticipates characteristic melodic movements that help define a rāga long before a newcomer recognizes its identity. Experienced jazz performers hear possible harmonic substitutions while an improvisation is still unfolding. Gamelan musicians orient themselves through recurring colotomic cycles that many first-time listeners scarcely perceive. Each tradition cultivates expectations that eventually become almost automatic.¹²

The automatic quality of recognition deserves attention because it conceals its own history. Musicians rarely remember learning to hear dominant preparation or phrase structure. Those relationships eventually seem self-evident, as though they had always existed within perception itself. The success of musical education lies partly in producing this illusion. Years of rehearsal, analysis, and performance gradually compress conscious learning into immediate recognition.

Krishnamurti repeatedly returned to this compression of experience. In *Freedom from the Known*, he argues that perception ordinarily becomes inseparable from recognition. Objects are named almost as soon as they appear. New experiences are absorbed into existing categories before they are fully observed.¹³ His concern was neither music nor cognition in the scientific sense. He was interested in the psychological movement through which memory continually shapes awareness.

It would be easy to overstate the connection between this philosophical position and musicology. Krishnamurti offered no theory of musical expectation comparable to Meyer's, nor did

he engage the historical evidence upon which ethnomusicology depends. His vocabulary differs substantially from that of contemporary music scholarship. Yet one aspect of his thought deserves careful consideration. He asks whether recognition, useful as it undoubtedly is, sometimes becomes so immediate that it obscures the act of perception itself.

Musicians occasionally describe experiences that seem to approach this question. A conductor returning to a familiar symphony after many years notices an inner voice that had previously escaped attention. A pianist discovers unexpected phrase relationships in a sonata performed hundreds of times. A listener hears an early recording after studying nineteenth-century performance practice and suddenly recognizes expressive decisions that once sounded merely eccentric. None of these experiences requires mystical explanation. They simply reveal that familiarity does not exhaust musical perception. Listening continues to change, even when the music remains the same.

This observation suggests a useful distinction. Memory makes musical understanding possible. Without it there could be no style, no analysis, no performance tradition, and no historical continuity. At the same time, memory also directs attention toward some relationships more readily than others. Listening therefore involves more than accumulating musical knowledge. It also involves becoming aware that every act of hearing carries the weight of previous hearings. That awareness, rather than the impossible goal of hearing without history, marks the point at which philosophy and musicology begin to speak to one another.¹⁴

Listening Without Comparison

Most philosophical discussions of listening begin by asking what music means. Krishnamurti begins somewhere else. He asks what happens before meaning has settled into place. Throughout his writings, he returns to a deceptively simple observation: experience is almost never encountered without interpretation. Memory identifies, language classifies, and comparison places each new event within a framework assembled from previous experience.¹⁵ His concern is not that these processes exist—they are indispensable for ordinary life—but that they occur so quickly they are seldom noticed.

Music provides unusually fertile ground for examining this claim because listeners constantly move between perception and recognition. The opening interval of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* immediately invokes an immense historical tradition for those familiar with the work. The first entrance of the *Dies irae* melody carries centuries of liturgical and musical association. Even a simple twelve-bar blues progression evokes stylistic expectations before a melody has fully emerged. Musical understanding depends upon this accumulated knowledge. Listeners hear present sounds through remembered histories.

The difficulty is that recognition often creates the impression of completeness. Once a passage has been identified as "a cadence," "a fugue subject," "a ii–V–I progression," or "a colotomic cycle," attention easily shifts from the sounding event itself to the category that explains it. Classification becomes so efficient that listeners may overlook qualities that resist analytical naming: slight fluctuations of tempo, differences in attack, the changing weight of repeated notes,

or the subtle redistribution of balance within an ensemble. These details frequently determine the character of a performance even though they rarely appear in analytical summaries.

Performance scholarship repeatedly demonstrates this problem. Comparing early recordings of the same repertory often reveals interpretive features that disappear when performances are described only through notation. Robert Philip's analyses of Joachim, Ysaÿe, Sarasate, and other nineteenth-century performers show that rhythmic flexibility and portamento were neither ornamental additions nor occasional expressive devices. They formed part of a broader language of performance largely unfamiliar to many contemporary listeners.¹⁶ Modern audiences frequently notice these recordings first as stylistic curiosities because later listening habits have altered expectations of precision and continuity.

Something similar occurs whenever musicians encounter historically distant sound worlds. Early European descriptions of Japanese court music often emphasized slowness and apparent stasis while overlooking the gradual transformation of timbre, breath, and melodic inflection that performers regarded as essential to expressive continuity. Comparable misunderstandings appear throughout colonial accounts of African and Southeast Asian musical traditions. The sounds were faithfully heard in one sense, yet significant relationships remained effectively inaudible because listeners lacked the cultural frameworks through which those relationships acquired meaning.¹⁷

Musicologists generally explain these situations through enculturation, and rightly so. Listening develops within communities. What deserves further attention, however, is the experience of recognizing one's own listening as historically conditioned. That realization often arrives unexpectedly. A performer studying historical recordings suddenly hears familiar repertory differently. A field researcher returns from extended ethnographic work to discover that music once considered opaque has become intelligible. An analyst revisits a composition years after first studying it and notices structural relationships that had remained hidden despite careful earlier work. Such moments reveal not merely new knowledge but altered attention.

Krishnamurti's language becomes useful here because it avoids treating perception as passive reception. He consistently describes observation as an activity requiring unusual sensitivity to the movement of thought itself.¹⁸ Whether or not one accepts his broader philosophical conclusions, the formulation invites a productive question for musicology. How often do listeners mistake rapid recognition for complete understanding? The issue is particularly relevant within advanced musical training, where analytical fluency sometimes creates the impression that hearing has reached its final form.

Historical evidence suggests otherwise. Listening has never remained fixed. New repertoires repeatedly require audiences to cultivate unfamiliar expectations. New technologies alter habits of comparison. New analytical methods teach musicians to recognize relationships that earlier generations scarcely discussed. Every expansion of musical knowledge also reshapes musical attention. The listener who emerges from those changes is not simply better informed. That listener hears a different musical world than before.

The history of music, therefore, cannot be separated from the history of recognition. Every generation inherits ways of identifying musical events that appear self-evident until another historical moment exposes their contingency. To study listening historically is not to recover some original, unconditioned form of perception. It is to recognize that hearing itself participates in history, changing quietly alongside the music it seeks to understand.¹⁹

Silence, Presence, and the Boundaries of Musical Experience

Among the many subjects musicologists have investigated—melody, harmony, rhythm, form, timbre, notation, performance, and technology—silence occupies an unusual position. It cannot be transcribed with the same precision as pitch, nor does it exist independently of the musical events surrounding it. A rest printed in a score is easily measured, yet the silence experienced by performers and listeners is shaped by acoustics, expectation, memory, and social convention. The same notated rest may produce entirely different experiences in different historical settings.

This distinction becomes apparent when comparing notation with performance. Leopold Mozart devoted considerable attention to articulation and phrasing, emphasizing that musical expression depends as much upon the spaces separating gestures as upon the gestures themselves.²⁰ Later pedagogical writers echoed the same concern. A pause before an important cadence, a slight delay preceding an entrance, or the lingering decay of a final chord could alter the rhetorical force of a passage without changing a single written note. Silence functioned as performance rather than absence.

Concert culture gradually expanded this expressive role. During the eighteenth century audiences often treated performances as social occasions in which conversation, applause, and movement formed part of the event itself. By the late nineteenth century expectations had changed dramatically. Increasingly, audiences remained silent throughout performances, postponing applause until complete works had concluded.²¹ The modern concert hall cultivated a particular discipline of listening. Silence became a visible sign of attentive participation rather than merely the absence of sound.

The transformation was not simply behavioral. It altered the way music unfolded in time. A Beethoven symphony performed before a quiet audience acquires a different temporal character than the same work interrupted by conversation or spontaneous applause. Musical continuity extends beyond notation into shared patterns of expectation. Audience behavior becomes part of performance, even though it rarely appears in analytical discussions.

Recording technologies introduced another layer of complexity. Studio production often removes sounds that earlier audiences accepted without comment: pages turning, distant conversation, shifting chairs, ventilation systems, or environmental noise. Modern listeners therefore encounter many canonical works under acoustic conditions unlike those experienced by the musicians who first performed them. Jonathan Sterne has argued that recording technologies do not simply reproduce sound; they cultivate new standards of auditory perception by teaching listeners what recorded music ought to sound like.²² Silence, in this context, becomes technologically produced rather than naturally occurring.

John Cage's *4'33"* occupies a central place in these discussions precisely because it exposed assumptions listeners rarely examined. Cage did not compose silence in any literal sense. Instead, he redirected attention toward sounds that ordinarily remained outside musical consciousness: breathing, architecture, distant traffic, mechanical systems, audience movement, and the countless acoustic events surrounding every performance.²³ The work demonstrated that silence is less an acoustic condition than a listening practice.

It would be tempting to describe Krishnamurti as arriving at the same conclusion, but such a comparison would oversimplify both figures. Cage explored the boundaries of musical experience through composition and performance. Krishnamurti approached attention through philosophical inquiry. Their projects developed independently and addressed different problems. The historical connection between them is slight.

A more productive comparison begins elsewhere. Both invite sustained attention to experiences that ordinarily disappear beneath habit. Cage reveals sounds listeners routinely disregard because they fall outside conventional musical categories. Krishnamurti asks why perception becomes dominated so quickly by recognition and interpretation. Neither proposes that listeners abandon knowledge. Both, however, challenge the assumption that familiar experience has been exhausted simply because it has been named.

Musicians regularly encounter moments that illustrate this point without invoking philosophy at all. The final resonance of a string quartet lingers after the instruments have ceased vibrating. A choir remains motionless for several seconds before lowering folders. An audience delays applause because something within the musical experience appears unfinished despite the absence of further sound. These moments resist straightforward analytical description because they belong simultaneously to performance, expectation, acoustics, and collective attention.

Musicology has generally treated silence as a compositional device, a notational symbol, or an aspect of performance practice. Each perspective remains valuable. Yet silence also documents changing habits of listening. The expectations surrounding silence in eighteenth-century opera differ markedly from those surrounding silence in a contemporary concert hall. Recording technology reshapes those expectations further. Cultural traditions assign silence different ceremonial, aesthetic, and social meanings. The history of silence is therefore inseparable from the history of listening itself.

Approached in this way, silence ceases to be merely the opposite of sound. It becomes evidence. Like notation, performance, or pedagogy, it reveals how musical communities organize attention. What listeners do when nothing appears to be happening may tell historians as much about musical culture as the notes performed immediately before it.²⁴

Hearing Through Performance

Performance occupies an uneasy position within musicology. It is indispensable to musical life yet remarkably difficult to preserve. A score survives centuries with comparatively little alteration. A performance disappears almost immediately, leaving behind reviews, memories, annotations, and, in the modern era, recordings that capture only part of the original event. Historians have therefore

devoted enormous effort to reconstructing performance traditions from fragmentary evidence, recognizing that notation alone rarely explains how music once sounded.²⁵

This realization transformed musicology during the late twentieth century. Earlier scholarship frequently treated the score as the principal repository of musical meaning, while performance functioned primarily as its realization. Richard Taruskin challenged that hierarchy by arguing that performance possesses its own history, shaped by aesthetic ideals, institutional practices, technologies, and changing conceptions of musical authority.²⁶ A Beethoven symphony performed in 1825, 1925, and 2025 is not simply the same musical object repeated across time. Each performance belongs to a different culture of listening.

Robert Philip's work on early recordings illustrates this point with unusual clarity. Performers born during the nineteenth century employed tempo modification, portamento, flexible ensemble coordination, and expressive timing with a freedom that later generations often regarded as stylistically excessive.²⁷ These characteristics were not idiosyncratic habits of isolated musicians. They reflected conventions shared by performers and understood by audiences. What later listeners sometimes hear as inconsistency originally functioned as expressive coherence.

The gradual disappearance of these practices cannot be explained by improvements in technique alone. Recording technology encouraged repeated comparison between performances, exposing interpretive differences with unprecedented precision. Conservatory training became increasingly standardized. International competitions rewarded consistency across large repertoires. Conductors exercised greater authority over orchestral interpretation, while editorial traditions increasingly emphasized textual fidelity. Each development altered performance, but each also reshaped listening. Audiences learned to value different musical qualities because performers gradually presented different interpretive ideals.

This process can be observed beyond the Western concert hall. Oral traditions continually negotiate the relationship between continuity and variation. Ethnomusicologists have long noted that performances within the same tradition rarely reproduce identical musical events. Differences emerge through ornamentation, tempo, instrumentation, local style, and interaction with participants. Such variation is not necessarily perceived as deviation. Within many musical cultures it represents the expected behavior of living performance.²⁸ The listener learns to hear continuity through change rather than despite it.

Improvisation makes this principle especially visible. A jazz standard performed by successive generations remains recognizable without requiring literal repetition. Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, and Wayne Shorter may improvise over comparable harmonic frameworks while producing performances that differ profoundly in phrase structure, rhythm, articulation, and motivic development. Listeners experienced within the tradition do not hear these differences as departures from the work. They hear them as the work's continuing realization through performance. Musical identity resides partly within change itself.

Such examples complicate older distinctions between composition and interpretation. They also reveal that listening is inseparable from historically acquired expectations. Audiences

unfamiliar with improvisational traditions often search for stable musical texts where performers instead cultivate continual transformation. Conversely, listeners raised within improvisational practices may hear excessive rigidity where others perceive structural precision. Musical judgment reflects the listening traditions through which it has developed.

Krishnamurti's reflections acquire a different significance in this context. He repeatedly warned against allowing accumulated knowledge to substitute for direct observation.²⁹ Applied to performance, the issue is not whether historical understanding should guide interpretation—it undoubtedly should—but whether performers and listeners sometimes become prisoners of inherited expectations without recognizing their influence. A musician approaching Bach through nineteenth-century pianistic traditions, or Debussy through mid-century recording conventions, may unconsciously inherit assumptions that feel timeless precisely because they have become familiar.

Performance history repeatedly reminds scholars that no interpretation exists outside history. Every articulation, tempo, balance, and expressive gesture emerges from traditions that musicians inherit, revise, and occasionally reject. Listening develops within those same traditions. The history of performance is therefore inseparable from the history of listeners who learned to hear performances according to changing cultural ideals.

This observation points toward a broader conclusion. Performance does not simply communicate music to audiences. It continually educates them. Every rehearsal, every concert, every recording, and every lesson contributes—often imperceptibly—to the formation of future listening habits. Musicology has become increasingly attentive to the historical lives of performances. The next step is recognizing those performances as sites where listening itself is continually being remade.³⁰

Listening and Musical Memory

Music unfolds in time, but it is never experienced only in the present. Every note carries traces of what has already been heard and shapes expectations about what will follow. Without memory, melody would dissolve into disconnected sounds, rhythm into isolated pulses, and form into unrelated events. Musical continuity depends upon remembrance. The listener continually reconstructs the present through what has already passed.

This observation is hardly new. Throughout the twentieth century, music theorists, psychologists, and philosophers repeatedly returned to the relationship between memory and musical understanding. Leonard B. Meyer argued that expectation derives from remembered musical patterns, making emotional response inseparable from the listener's accumulated experience.³¹ More recent cognitive research has refined his conclusions without overturning the central insight. Musical perception is not passive reception. It is an active process through which previous experience continually shapes present awareness.

Historical evidence suggests that memory itself has changed alongside musical culture. Before the widespread availability of printed music, much musical knowledge survived through oral transmission. Singers, instrumentalists, and ritual specialists maintained extensive repertoires

without relying upon written notation, developing sophisticated mnemonic techniques that differed substantially from those cultivated in literate musical traditions. Medieval chant, West African praise singing, South Indian classical music, and countless other traditions demonstrate that musical memory has never depended upon a single method of preservation.³²

The introduction of printing altered these practices, though not always in predictable ways. Written notation preserved repertoires with increasing stability while simultaneously changing how musicians remembered them. A score gradually became something that could be consulted rather than entirely retained. This did not diminish memory. Instead, it redistributed the relationship between internal recollection and external documentation. Composers began writing with the expectation that performers could return repeatedly to the written page. Musical memory increasingly developed in conversation with notation rather than independently of it.

Recording technology introduced an even more profound transformation. A recording remembers differently than a performer. Human recollection is selective. It emphasizes structural relationships, expressive gestures, and interpretive impressions while allowing countless details to disappear. Recordings preserve those details indiscriminately. Tempo fluctuations, breathing, mechanical noises, minute changes in balance, accidental sounds, and fleeting moments of hesitation all remain available for repeated examination decades after the original performance has ended.³³

This permanence has subtly altered musical judgment. Contemporary musicians frequently compare their performances against recorded interpretations that can be replayed indefinitely. Earlier generations rarely possessed such opportunities. A violinist hearing Joseph Joachim in concert carried that experience primarily through memory. A violinist studying Joachim today encounters a recorded document capable of repeated scrutiny. The difference extends beyond technology. It changes the relationship between memory and listening itself.

Mark Katz has observed that recording encourages listeners to treat performances as stable objects rather than transient events.³⁴ The ability to replay a passage immediately after hearing it reshapes expectations concerning precision, consistency, and interpretive authority. Listeners gradually become accustomed to forms of comparison unavailable before the recording era. Musical memory increasingly relies upon technological repetition as much as personal recollection.

Krishnamurti's reflections on memory occupy a different intellectual territory. He consistently distinguished practical memory from what he called psychological memory. Practical memory includes language, technical skill, and the accumulated knowledge necessary for everyday life. Without it, musicians could neither perform nor learn. Psychological memory refers to the continual movement through which previous experience interprets the present before observation has fully occurred.³⁵ Whether one accepts this distinction in philosophical terms, it offers an intriguing lens through which to reconsider musical listening.

Experienced performers often describe returning to familiar works only to discover details they had somehow overlooked despite years of study. Conductors notice previously unnoticed instrumental balances. Pianists rethink phrase structure after decades of performance.

Ethnomusicologists revisiting field recordings hear relationships that escaped attention during the original research. Such experiences reveal that memory is never merely reproductive. It reorganizes listening continuously, preserving some aspects of experience while allowing others to emerge only much later.

For historians, this presents both an opportunity and a limitation. Musical memory leaves traces in memoirs, letters, criticism, pedagogy, and oral testimony, yet it remains impossible to recover completely. Scholars can document how listeners described musical experiences, how performers remembered repertoires, or how institutions cultivated recollection through education. They cannot recreate the act of remembering itself. Memory belongs to history while remaining partly inaccessible to historical reconstruction.

That limitation should not discourage inquiry. Quite the opposite. It reminds us that musical understanding has always depended upon more than surviving documents. Listening carries with it layers of remembered experience that shape every encounter with sound. To write a history of listening is therefore also to write a history of musical memory—not because the two are identical, but because neither can exist without the other.³⁶

Pedagogy and the Education of the Ear

Every musical culture teaches people what deserves attention. The methods differ, but the objective remains remarkably consistent: listeners gradually learn to distinguish relationships that once passed unnoticed. This process begins long before formal instruction. Children absorb patterns of rhythm, vocal inflection, timbre, and musical expectation through participation in families, religious ceremonies, festivals, schools, and community performance. By the time musicians enter conservatories or apprenticeship systems, many of their most fundamental listening habits have already been established.

Formal musical education builds upon these foundations rather than replacing them. Conservatory curricula, for example, often appear to emphasize technical proficiency—scales, harmony, counterpoint, ear training, score reading, and historical analysis. Yet beneath each of these subjects lies a common purpose. Students are being taught to hear differently.

Ear-training provides perhaps the clearest illustration. A beginning student struggles to distinguish intervals, recognize chord qualities, or transcribe rhythmic patterns with consistency. After several years, these same tasks become almost automatic. Experienced musicians often identify harmonic progressions or melodic intervals almost as quickly as they hear them. The transformation is so complete that many no longer remember the lengthy process through which those abilities were acquired. Musical perception comes to feel immediate, although it is the product of prolonged education.³⁷

The history of pedagogy demonstrates that these listening habits are neither universal nor permanent. Johann Joseph Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* trained composers to think primarily through species counterpoint, encouraging students to hear the independence of melodic lines before considering vertical sonority.³⁸ By the nineteenth century, harmony textbooks increasingly organized musical understanding around functional tonality. Students learned to identify tonic,

dominant, and subdominant relationships as the principal framework of musical coherence. Twentieth-century pedagogy introduced still other modes of listening through Schenkerian analysis, set theory, jazz harmony, electroacoustic music, and the systematic study of non-Western musical traditions. Each pedagogical shift cultivated different forms of musical attention.

These educational traditions rarely replace one another completely. They accumulate. A contemporary musicologist may hear a Bach fugue contrapuntally, a Beethoven sonata harmonically, a Debussy prelude through timbral transformation, and a Balinese gamelan performance through interlocking rhythmic cycles. Such flexibility reflects not innate perceptual ability but the gradual expansion of listening through sustained education. Musical expertise consists partly in learning when different listening strategies become appropriate.

Ethnomusicological research has repeatedly challenged the assumption that formal institutions possess a monopoly on this educational process. Mantle Hood's concept of *bi-musicality* argued that scholars should acquire practical competence within the musical traditions they study rather than relying exclusively upon analytical description.³⁹ His proposal rested upon a simple observation. Certain forms of musical understanding emerge only through participation. Rhythmic organization, ensemble interaction, bodily movement, and culturally specific concepts of timing often resist purely textual explanation. Performance educates the ear in ways that transcription alone cannot.

Timothy Rice later expanded this insight by emphasizing that musical knowledge develops historically through the interaction of individuals, communities, and cultural institutions.⁴⁰ Learning to hear is never merely a technical achievement. It also involves acquiring shared understandings of value, expression, memory, and identity. The education of the ear therefore belongs as much to social history as to pedagogy.

Krishnamurti devoted much of his life to education, though his concerns differed substantially from those of professional music teachers. He repeatedly questioned educational systems that emphasized accumulation without corresponding attention to awareness. Knowledge, he argued, remains indispensable, yet education becomes incomplete when students learn *what* to think without examining *how* they observe.⁴¹ Although his schools were not musical institutions, this distinction has intriguing implications for musical pedagogy.

Musicians often experience a curious paradox. The more technically accomplished they become, the more easily perception risks giving way to habit. Analytical categories appear immediately. Harmonic functions announce themselves almost automatically. Formal expectations develop before phrases have fully unfolded. Such fluency is essential for professional musicianship, but it also raises a subtle question. Does increasing expertise always produce more attentive listening, or can expertise sometimes encourage premature certainty?

Experienced teachers frequently recognize this dilemma. They ask advanced students to "listen again," not because the students lack knowledge, but because accumulated knowledge sometimes narrows attention as effectively as it expands it. A conductor may ask an orchestra to ignore bar lines temporarily in order to recover a broader phrase. A composition teacher may

encourage students to hear texture before harmony. A chamber ensemble may rehearse without vibrato to expose balance otherwise concealed by familiar expressive habits. None of these exercises abandons technique. Instead, each attempts to interrupt routine patterns of listening long enough for different musical relationships to emerge.

Pedagogy therefore occupies a central place in the history of listening. It does more than transmit repertoires or analytical methods. It continually reshapes the ears through which future generations will encounter music. Every lesson, rehearsal, masterclass, and informal musical exchange contributes to that history. Listening is not simply an outcome of education. It is one of education's most enduring creations.⁴²

Listening Beyond the Concert Hall

One consequence of treating listening as a historical practice is that it becomes difficult to confine it to the concert hall. Much of twentieth-century musicology developed around repertoires preserved through notation and institutional performance, encouraging scholars to regard concentrated concert listening as the discipline's implicit model. Ethnomusicology repeatedly challenged that assumption by documenting musical traditions in which listening formed only one part of broader social participation. Music accompanied work, ritual, procession, healing, dance, mourning, celebration, and political life. Under such circumstances, separating listening from the activities surrounding it became nearly impossible.⁴³

Christopher Small captured this shift with the term *musicking*, arguing that music should be understood less as an object than as a network of relationships created whenever people participate in musical performance.⁴⁴ The concept deliberately broadened the field of inquiry. Performers, audience members, instrument builders, ticket collectors, recording engineers, and even those preparing performance spaces became participants in the musical event. Listening, within this framework, ceased to be passive reception. It became one form of participation among many.

Small's proposal altered the kinds of questions musicologists could ask. Rather than beginning with the autonomous musical work, scholars increasingly examined the circumstances under which music acquired social meaning. A hymn sung during worship, a protest song performed in the street, a lullaby whispered to an infant, or a funeral lament each invited different modes of listening because each belonged to a different social world. Musical understanding emerged through participation in those worlds rather than through sound alone.⁴⁵

Steven Feld's work among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea extended this insight by demonstrating that listening often encompasses far more than deliberately organized musical sound. Birds, waterfalls, speech, ritual, and environmental acoustics formed part of an integrated sonic landscape whose cultural significance could not be separated into modern disciplinary categories.⁴⁶ What outsiders described as "music" represented only one element within a broader acoustic ecology. To understand Kaluli listening required understanding the relationships between sound, place, memory, and social life.

Such research has important implications for historical musicology as well. European musical life has rarely been confined to concert repertoire alone. Church bells structured daily rhythms for centuries. Military music organized public ceremony. Street vendors developed recognizable melodic calls. Domestic music making filled parlors, kitchens, and courtyards long before commercial recording transformed private listening. These sonic practices shaped auditory expectations every bit as surely as opera houses or conservatories, yet they often remain peripheral within traditional histories of music.

The rise of urban industrial life further complicated these experiences. Expanding cities introduced new mechanical sounds—railways, factories, automobiles, electrical systems—that altered the acoustic environments within which music was heard. Composers responded in different ways. Some attempted to preserve imagined spaces of musical contemplation removed from industrial noise. Others embraced modern sonic environments directly. The history of listening cannot ignore these broader transformations because musical attention always develops within larger acoustic worlds.⁴⁷

R. Murray Schafer's influential concept of the "soundscape" drew attention to precisely this relationship between environment and listening. Although some aspects of Schafer's historical narrative have been debated, his work encouraged scholars to consider how changing acoustic environments influence auditory habits beyond the boundaries of musical performance.⁴⁸ Music is never encountered in isolation. It exists within landscapes already filled with competing sounds, technologies, and cultural expectations.

Krishnamurti's writings intersect with these concerns indirectly. His discussions of attention rarely distinguish sharply between listening to music, observing nature, or attending to ordinary conversation.⁴⁹ The underlying question remains consistent: can observation occur without becoming immediately subordinated to habit? Applied within musicology, the point is not that music should dissolve into general experience. Rather, it reminds scholars that musical listening has always developed within broader patterns of everyday attention. The ears brought into a concert hall have already been educated elsewhere.

This broader perspective also clarifies why listening resists simple definition. A listener attending a string quartet, participating in communal singing, hearing the distant call to prayer, or navigating the dense sonic environment of a contemporary city is not performing the same activity in each case. Different cultural settings cultivate different forms of auditory attention. No single model adequately describes them all.

The history of listening therefore extends well beyond the history of musical works. It includes the institutions that educate listeners, the technologies that reshape auditory habits, the environments within which sound is encountered, and the communities that teach successive generations what deserves attention. Musicology has increasingly embraced these wider contexts over the past several decades. Doing so has not weakened the discipline's engagement with music. It has made clearer that music has never existed apart from the changing listeners who bring it into experience.⁵⁰

The Discipline Learns to Listen

Musicology has never remained methodologically static. Each generation has reconsidered what constitutes legitimate evidence, which questions deserve priority, and how musical experience ought to be interpreted. The discipline that Guido Adler outlined in 1885 bears only a partial resemblance to the field that exists today. Historical criticism, archival research, ethnography, critical theory, cultural history, performance studies, digital humanities, and sound studies now coexist within a discipline far broader than its founders could have anticipated.⁵¹ What unites these approaches is not a single method but a shared commitment to understanding music through evidence.

Listening occupies an unusual position within this intellectual landscape because it resists disciplinary boundaries. Historians encounter it through concert reviews, correspondence, diaries, and pedagogical literature. Ethnomusicologists observe it through participation and long-term fieldwork. Performance scholars reconstruct it from recordings and historical treatises. Cognitive scientists investigate it experimentally, while philosophers examine the conditions under which perception becomes meaningful. Each discipline approaches listening differently because each asks different questions.

These approaches need not be reconciled into a unified theory. Their diversity reflects the complexity of the subject itself. The listener encountered in a medieval monastery, a nineteenth-century opera house, a Yoruba ceremonial gathering, a jazz club, or a digital streaming platform cannot be reduced to a single historical model. Listening changes because musical worlds change. Methods appropriate to one context may prove inadequate in another.

This methodological diversity has become increasingly visible within recent musicological scholarship. Nicholas Cook has argued that music should be understood less as an autonomous object than as a practice emerging through performance, reception, and cultural interaction.⁵² Gary Tomlinson has likewise encouraged historians to situate musical thought within broader intellectual and anthropological histories rather than isolating repertoires from the cultures that produced them.⁵³ Such work has expanded the discipline's scope without abandoning its commitment to historical evidence.

One consequence has been a gradual rethinking of musical authority. Earlier scholarship often privileged the written score as the primary source of musical meaning. Contemporary research assigns greater significance to performers, listeners, technologies, institutions, and social contexts. None of these developments diminishes the importance of composition. Instead, they acknowledge that musical works acquire historical significance only through the communities that perform, hear, interpret, preserve, and transmit them.

Listening therefore emerges not as an isolated psychological event but as a historically situated practice. A conservatory student analyzing a Beethoven quartet, an ethnomusicologist learning Ewe drumming, a church congregation singing a familiar hymn, and a teenager discovering Indonesian gamelan through online recordings all participate in different traditions of

listening. Each inherits expectations that shape musical understanding before conscious interpretation begins. These expectations are neither arbitrary nor universal. They are historical.

Krishnamurti's contribution becomes easier to understand against this broader disciplinary background. His writings do not provide musicology with new analytical tools, archival discoveries, or ethnographic methods. What they offer is a sustained meditation on the relationship between attention and habit.⁵⁴ Historians routinely document how listening changes across cultures and historical periods. Krishnamurti asks a complementary question: what is the experience of recognizing those changes within oneself? His answer may not satisfy every philosopher, but the question remains valuable because it directs attention toward the listener rather than exclusively toward the musical work.

That shift of emphasis has practical implications for scholarship. Consider the experience of returning to a familiar composition after years spent studying another musical tradition. Many musicians describe hearing previously unnoticed relationships within works they believed they knew intimately. The score has not changed. Neither has the historical evidence. What has changed is the listener's capacity to organize musical attention. Cross-cultural study, historical performance practice, analytical training, or prolonged practical experience has quietly altered the conditions under which listening occurs. Such experiences are common enough that they deserve more than anecdotal explanation.

Musicological research increasingly acknowledges these transformations, though often under different names. Studies of reception investigate changing audiences. Performance history examines evolving interpretive traditions. Ethnomusicology documents the acquisition of culturally specific musical competence. Sound studies analyze the influence of media and technology upon auditory life. Each field illuminates one aspect of listening's history. Together they suggest that the listener has always occupied the center of musical culture, even when scholarship left that figure largely implicit.

The challenge moving forward is therefore not to invent a new discipline devoted exclusively to listening. Musicology already possesses the tools necessary to investigate the subject. The task is to bring those tools into closer conversation. Listening should be understood as a meeting point where history, performance, pedagogy, technology, philosophy, and culture intersect. To study music without asking how people learned to hear it is to leave one of the discipline's most fundamental historical questions only partially answered.⁵⁵

Listening as Historical Evidence

Historians are accustomed to treating manuscripts, letters, instruments, concert programs, and recordings as evidence. Listening presents a more difficult case because it rarely survives in a direct form. No archive preserves the experience of hearing a Bach cantata in Leipzig during the 1730s or attending the première of *Le Sacre du printemps* in Paris. What remains are traces: descriptions written afterward, annotations in scores, pedagogical exercises, memoirs, newspaper criticism, institutional records, and the musical practices that later generations inherited. The history of

listening must therefore be assembled indirectly, much as archaeologists reconstruct vanished buildings from surviving foundations.

This indirectness has sometimes encouraged skepticism. Because listening cannot be observed retrospectively, some historians have treated it as too subjective to sustain serious historical inquiry. Yet many of the discipline's central subjects share similar limitations. Intention, reception, aesthetic judgment, and emotional response are likewise inaccessible except through documentary evidence. Historians do not abandon these topics because they resist complete recovery. They develop methods capable of approaching them critically. Listening deserves the same treatment.

Reception history offers one useful example. Reviews written by nineteenth-century critics reveal considerably more than personal opinion. They document the vocabulary through which listeners organized musical experience, the qualities audiences admired, and the expectations performers were expected to satisfy. Eduard Hanslick's criticism, for instance, cannot simply be read as an individual aesthetic position. It reflects a broader intellectual culture in which questions of musical form, expression, and autonomy had become matters of public debate.⁵⁶ Critics were describing what they believed attentive listeners ought to hear.

Pedagogical literature provides another source of evidence. Ear-training manuals, harmony textbooks, instrumental methods, and conservatory examinations reveal what musical institutions considered essential forms of listening. When nineteenth-century students practiced harmonic dictation or species counterpoint, they were not merely acquiring technical knowledge. They were learning to privilege particular musical relationships over others. The curriculum itself becomes evidence for historically specific listening practices.

Performance instructions likewise preserve assumptions about auditory experience. Leopold Mozart's observations concerning articulation, Quantz's detailed discussion of flute performance, Berlioz's writings on orchestration, and later conducting treatises all presume listeners capable of perceiving distinctions that required deliberate cultivation.⁵⁷ Such documents reveal how performers expected musical gestures to be heard, even when they tell us comparatively little about how individual audiences actually responded.

Ethnomusicology expanded these forms of evidence by emphasizing long-term participation rather than detached observation. Field researchers gradually recognized that interviews and transcriptions alone rarely disclosed how musical understanding developed within communities. Learning repertoires, performing alongside musicians, attending ceremonies, and participating in everyday musical life often altered the researcher's own listening more profoundly than any written explanation could accomplish. Mantle Hood's call for *bi-musicality* emerged directly from this realization.⁵⁸ Participation itself generated historical knowledge.

These methodological developments suggest that listening can indeed function as historical evidence, provided historians remain attentive to the character of the sources. A concert review documents public discourse rather than private experience. A pedagogical treatise describes educational ideals that may or may not have been realized in practice. A field recording preserves

one performance rather than an entire musical culture. No document speaks for listening as a whole. Meaning emerges through comparison across many different kinds of evidence.

Krishnamurti's writings contribute to this discussion in an unexpected way. Unlike the sources just described, they are not historical documents about musical practice. They are philosophical reflections upon attention.⁵⁹ Their value therefore lies elsewhere. They remind historians that listening is never exhausted by the documents through which it is reconstructed. Archives preserve evidence about listening, but they cannot reproduce the experience of listening itself. Every historical account remains, in part, an interpretation of traces left by acts of attention that have already passed.

This recognition does not weaken historical scholarship. It encourages methodological humility. Historians reconstruct musical cultures from incomplete evidence because no other evidence exists. The listener appears only indirectly, yet those indirect appearances are remarkably rich when approached collectively. Reviews, pedagogical texts, rehearsal methods, recordings, correspondence, ethnography, architectural design, and institutional history each preserve different aspects of listening's past. Taken together, they suggest that the history of music has always been, in part, a history of changing ears.

The task of future scholarship is therefore not simply to locate more sources. It is to ask new questions of familiar ones. A conservatory syllabus may reveal changing assumptions about musical attention. A recording may document evolving expectations of tempo and articulation. A missionary account may preserve evidence of cross-cultural listening as much as cross-cultural encounter. Once listening becomes visible as a historical subject, documents long regarded as peripheral begin to acquire unexpected significance.⁶⁰

Toward a History of Attention

Every discipline reaches moments when its familiar questions no longer seem sufficient. New sources appear, established assumptions are reconsidered, and methods once regarded as peripheral gradually become indispensable. Musicology has undergone several such transformations during the past century. The emergence of ethnomusicology challenged narrowly European definitions of musical practice. Performance studies redirected attention from musical texts to musical events. Sound studies expanded inquiry beyond composition to include recording, technology, environment, and everyday listening. None of these developments replaced earlier scholarship. Each enlarged the field by revealing dimensions of musical life that had previously remained underexamined.⁶¹

Listening belongs within this broader expansion. It is not a new subject in the sense that scholars have ignored audiences, perception, or reception. On the contrary, those topics have generated substantial bodies of research. What has been less common is treating listening itself as an historical object whose development can be traced across institutions, pedagogies, technologies, and musical cultures. Historians routinely describe changing styles of composition and performance. They less frequently ask how the ears encountering those styles have changed over time.

This shift in perspective encourages different kinds of historical questions. How did the spread of conservatory education alter the listening habits of professional musicians? In what ways did nineteenth-century concert etiquette reshape expectations of silence and concentration? How did commercial recording influence judgments about precision, tempo, or expressive freedom? What forms of attention emerged as listeners moved from domestic music making to radio, from radio to long-playing records, and from physical recordings to digital streaming? These developments involve more than changing technologies. They document changing relationships between people and musical sound.

The question also extends beyond institutions. Listening develops within families, religious communities, neighborhoods, workplaces, festivals, and informal musical gatherings no less than within conservatories or universities. Much of what listeners regard as natural has been acquired long before formal instruction begins. Children learn when music demands silence, when participation is expected, what emotional responses are appropriate, and how musical value is expressed through the ordinary practices of everyday life. By adulthood these habits have become so deeply integrated into experience that they often escape conscious notice altogether.

Ethnomusicology has repeatedly shown that these assumptions vary enormously across cultures. The point is not simply that different societies possess different musical traditions. They cultivate different listeners. What one community hears as rhythmic complexity another hears as ordinary pulse. What one audience experiences as expressive freedom another regards as disorder. Such differences are not obstacles to scholarship. They constitute evidence that listening itself develops historically through participation in particular cultural worlds.⁶²

Krishnamurti's writings return the discussion to the level of individual experience. Throughout his lectures he questioned whether people can observe the operation of habit while it is occurring rather than only afterward.⁶³ That question does not belong exclusively to philosophy. Historians confront analogous problems whenever they attempt to identify assumptions that earlier generations regarded as self-evident. The most historically significant listening practices are often those least likely to be described because participants rarely notice them.

For this reason, the history of listening will probably remain incomplete. Unlike manuscripts or instruments, listening cannot be excavated directly from archives. It survives only through the records created around it. Yet incompleteness is hardly unique to this subject. Historians regularly reconstruct social relationships, religious experience, political belief, and aesthetic judgment from fragmentary evidence. Listening deserves the same careful treatment—not because it can be recovered perfectly, but because enough evidence survives to demonstrate that it has always possessed a history.

Recognizing that history ultimately changes the position of the listener within musicological thought. The listener is no longer simply the recipient of musical meaning or the consumer of performance. Listening becomes an historical achievement, shaped by education, memory, technology, institutions, and culture. Every act of hearing reflects a lifetime of accumulated musical experience while remaining open to further transformation.

Perhaps this explains why familiar music never entirely exhausts itself. Musicians return to works they have known for decades and continue to hear new relationships. Historians revisit archives and discover overlooked evidence. Ethnomusicologists return to communities they have studied for years and recognize dimensions of musical life that earlier fieldwork had only partially revealed. These experiences remind us that listening does not end when knowledge increases. Knowledge changes listening, and listening, in turn, reshapes knowledge.

The history of music is therefore inseparable from the history of those who have learned to hear it. That history remains unfinished because every generation acquires new ears.

Listening as a Historical Practice

When Guido Adler outlined the scope of musicology in 1885, he could not have anticipated the extraordinary breadth the discipline would eventually assume. Historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, performance studies, sound studies, and cognitive research now investigate questions that scarcely existed when Adler first proposed his influential classification of musical scholarship.⁶⁴ Yet one feature has remained remarkably consistent. Musicologists continue to study music through evidence—through manuscripts, instruments, performances, recordings, archives, oral traditions, and the countless documents through which musical life becomes historically visible.

This essay has argued that listening deserves a place within that evidentiary landscape. Not because listening replaces musical works as the proper object of scholarship, nor because philosophy offers answers unavailable to historical research, but because every form of musical knowledge presupposes listeners whose ways of hearing have themselves been shaped by history. Musical understanding is never detached from the institutions, technologies, pedagogies, and communities that cultivate it.

The historical record supports this conclusion from several directions. Ethnomusicologists have demonstrated that musical competence develops through participation rather than biological inheritance. Historians of performance have shown that expressive conventions once regarded as entirely ordinary now appear historically distinctive because audiences learned to hear differently across successive generations. Pedagogical traditions reveal changing priorities in the education of musical attention, while recording technology transformed listening by making performances repeatable, comparable, and permanently available for study. Each development altered more than music itself. Each altered the conditions under which music could be heard.

Krishnamurti's writings occupy a deliberately limited place within this argument. He neither founded a theory of musical listening nor anticipated the methodological concerns of contemporary musicology. His lectures contain little direct discussion of music, and they should not be interpreted as hidden contributions to music theory or ethnomusicology. Their value lies elsewhere. They remind readers that attention is never entirely separate from memory, comparison, and habit. That observation does not explain the history of listening. It encourages historians to ask how those historical habits become so familiar that they disappear from conscious awareness.

Approached in this way, listening emerges not as an abstract philosophical concept but as a legitimate historical subject. It can be investigated through conservatory curricula, rehearsal methods, ethnographic participation, concert etiquette, recording practices, architectural acoustics, criticism, correspondence, and educational institutions. No single source captures listening completely. Taken together, however, these materials reveal that every musical culture teaches people how to hear, often so successfully that the process itself becomes invisible.

This perspective also invites a reconsideration of musical expertise. Historians, performers, teachers, composers, and ethnomusicologists all spend years cultivating increasingly refined forms of listening. Expertise does not merely increase knowledge; it reorganizes perception. A performer hears balances that escape casual audiences. A field researcher gradually recognizes rhythmic relationships that were initially inaudible. A historian studying early recordings begins to hear expressive practices once dismissed as stylistic anomalies. These transformations are not incidental to musical scholarship. They are among its most significant achievements.

The implications extend beyond this particular study. A history of listening remains only partially written. Questions surrounding digital media, algorithmic recommendation systems, immersive audio technologies, disability studies, environmental acoustics, and community-based musical practices continue to reshape how scholars understand auditory experience. Future research will undoubtedly revise many of the arguments presented here, just as earlier generations revised assumptions inherited from their predecessors. Such revision should be welcomed. The history of listening remains unfinished because listening itself continues to change.

Musicology has devoted more than a century to understanding musical works, musical cultures, and musical histories. Those efforts have transformed the discipline into one of the richest fields within the humanities. Yet throughout that history another subject has remained quietly present in every archive, rehearsal room, classroom, field site, and concert hall: the listener. Bringing that figure into clearer historical focus does not redefine musicology. It clarifies one of its oldest assumptions. Before music can be analyzed, interpreted, performed, remembered, or preserved, someone must first learn how to hear.

Notes

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