

Sound Expertise – Season 2, Episode 5

Expert Listening and d/Deaf Culture with Jessica A. Holmes

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Will Robin, Jessica A. Holmes

Jessica A. Holmes 00:00

There is no question that regardless of one's sort of linguistic or cultural preferences, or allegiances, most Deaf and hard of hearing people have developed an expert conception of sound, because the hearing world has so often failed to accommodate their differences. And this expert conception of sound is multisensory, beyond hearing.

00:27

[Intro music]

Will Robin 00:49

One thing that I think musicologists tend to struggle with, and I include myself in this, is making sure that we're not trying to force everyone to have the same ears as us. We train for a really long time in how to listen to music and understand its cultural significance. And when we write and when we teach, we're often trying to show other people how to experience music differently, to hear what we hear. But we also have to be careful at the same time not to discount or dismiss other approaches, because everyone forms their own way of listening to music, and hones meaningful and personal methods of engaging with sound. And that also includes very unconventional musical listeners, such as those who have experienced significant hearing loss. This is Sound Expertise, and I'm your host, Will Robin, and this is a podcast where I talk with my fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters. My guest today, Jessica A. Holmes, is a lecturer of musicology at UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music. Professor Holmes studies the relationship between music and disability, and examines how Deaf people, despite assumptions that they might not be able to experience music, are instead expert listeners, having developed their own multi sensory relationship to music. When we talk about music and deafness, we often focus on narratives of overcoming, the classic example being Beethoven, the composer who transcends hearing loss to write great music. But members of the Deaf community, which itself is a charged term, as there is no one way to be deaf and no one unified Deaf culture, flip the script by talking not about hearing loss, but instead about Deaf Gain. And we can learn a lot, we can gain a lot, by better understanding the expertise involved in Deaf listening, as we'll do so now, in my conversation with Professor Jessica Holmes.

02:42

[Music]

Will Robin 02:54

I'd love to start by talking a little bit about your work in music in Deaf communities. And in reading it, it raises, I think, an important issue that gets to the stake of some of the questions you ask about music and deafness, which is that when you write out the word deaf, you have a lowercase d and an uppercase D. So d/Deaf, which I guess gets to some of the interesting and important political divisions within the Deaf community. Can you talk a little bit about what those divisions are and what it means for your examination of issues of music and deafness?

Jessica A. Holmes 03:27

Yeah, absolutely. Wonderful question. Thank you. So for starters, there is no singular experience of deafness. And the Deaf community isn't monolith or homogenous. No two people experience deafness in the same way in either physically or socioculturally. So for starters, hearing loss — if we're thinking in medical terms, we're thinking about it as an audiological condition. It exists along an audiological spectrum ranging from mild to profound. The cause and type of a person's hearing loss, its configuration between left and right ears, the different frequency thresholds across upper and lower registers, and also the age of onset varies from one person to the next. People can be born deaf, they could perhaps lose their hearing later in life, whether through an illness or suddenly through an injury, or simply through the natural process of aging, or through prolonged exposure to loud sound. So suffice it to say that there are no two experiences of hearing loss as an audiological condition are exactly alike; moreover, and this is where it gets interesting, especially in my work, the sociocultural experience of deafness is equally diverse and highly variable. Deaf people use language — Deaf and hard of hearing people use language and auditory assistive technologies in vastly different ways. And often their sense of identity is tied to their linguistic preferences. So for instance, self identifying members of Deaf culture conceive of deafness as an empowering, cultural linguistic minority identity. And they communicate primarily in sign language, and refrain from using their spoken voices. Often they opt not to use hearing aids or cochlear implants, though that's increasingly being challenged within Deaf culture. And by comparison, there are other deaf and hard of hearing people who really seek to conform to the norms of the hearing world, preferring to use hearing aids and cochlear implants, communicating through spoken language, supplementing auditory information through lip reading. And then there are people who fall somewhere in between these two camps. So it's really impossible to generalize. But what's so interesting for me from the standpoint of my work on music and deafness is that all of these many highly varied and enriching experiences of deafness result in an equally diverse set of musical experiences. Where I to generalize, though, there is no question that regardless of one's sort of linguistic or cultural preferences, or allegiances, most Deaf and hard of hearing people have developed an expert conception of sound because the hearing world has so often failed to accommodate their differences. And this this expert conception of sound is multisensory, beyond hearing.

Will Robin 06:55

I want to maybe as a way to get into that, let's talk a little bit about the percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who's been the subject of some of your work, and who has hearing loss, maybe or maybe does not identify as Deaf, but has this kind of mythos around her because she is this virtuosic musician, you know, very active performer who does not hear like the able folks might hear. So can you talk a little bit about her work and how this relates to some of those issues?

Jessica A. Holmes 07:23

Yes, absolutely wonderful that you bring her up because she is, next to Beethoven, one of the most widely recognized examples of a deaf musician. And often when I'm first telling people about my research, they always say have you ... ask, Have you heard about the deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. So Evelyn Glennie is profoundly deaf. And again, from an ideological standpoint, that means generally she cannot hear below 90 decibels. So over time, she's developed this highly nuanced, highly differentiated way of listening to sounds through the body, what she calls touching the sound. So she's trained herself, essentially, to feel the different pitches and timbres resonating in different parts of her body. Evelyn Glennie is by no means the rule — she's very much an exception, that she was born hearing, and became “deafened” as she says, at age 12. And her hearing loss... hearing loss when it initially sets in can be very disorienting and destabilizing, as the hearing loss starts to stabilize. And it really started to stabilize into her teens. So during this period of loss, the initial period of loss, she — along with the help of her percussion instructor — developed this set of practices around touching the sounds. And again, Glennie, because she was born hearing, more readily identifies with the hearing world, the majority of her audiences are hearing, she communicates through spoken language, she's an expert lip reader... now Evelyn Glennie, and this is something that you've hinted at, Will, certainly is a contentious figure within the deaf community. So members of Deaf culture have a very fraught relationship to Evelyn Glennie, because she does inadvertently set up certain expectations about this sort of musicality among Deaf people, and what it looks like. So this idea that all deaf people are equipped with a superhuman ability to perceive music through touch, in the same way that Glennie does.

Will Robin 09:50

This — is that part of this supercrip trope that you talk a little bit about?

Jessica A. Holmes 09:55

Absolutely. And this is perpetuated through the proliferation of popular science reporting on empirical neuroscience research, right? Neuroscience occupies a special place, I think, in the popular imaginary. We're fascinated — endlessly fascinated with the brain and the senses. And so a lot of recent studies into what's called cross modal plasticity, which is actually only present in certain prelingual instances of deafness, whereby the brain recruits the neurons that would be ... that are unused in the auditory cortex and redistributes them across the neural network such that it results in certain heightened sensory faculties elsewhere. So, in pop culture, through a lot of the sensationalist reporting that gets spun into — Wow, all deaf people have this superhuman ability to sense music through vibrations, or have a heightened visual acuity.

Will Robin 10:59

This is kind of like Daredevil, he's blind, but he has superpowers everywhere else.

Jessica A. Holmes 11:04

Exactly, exactly. So that that that phenomenon really intensifies. Glenys reception, and helps kind of solidify that mythos. But it's one that she has actively challenged, right, she makes very clear that — this is *my* experience. And in fact, this listening to music through the sense of touch, or this sort of multisensory awareness of sound, is something that hearing people can achieve. But she makes very clear that this is *her* experience of sound, that it is by no means a sort of general rule.

Will Robin 11:43

Right. And so what drew you to focus on Glennie as an interesting figure to understand issues of deafness in music?

Jessica A. Holmes 11:53

If I may I could speak in more general terms and then answer your question about Glennie specifically. I first got interested in music and deafness through a familial connection actually, so my uncle on my father's side has been profoundly deaf since birth, and communicates using speech and lip reading. And it was sort of through witnessing what I think of as his expert listening, the sort of invisible intricate labors that he undertakes in his social interactions and in his musical engagements to compensate for the shortcomings of his hearing aids, or a lack of accommodations, that I became attuned to the sort of multisensory richness of his conception of sound, and curious about Deaf musical experiences more generally. So for instance, the way he maintains clear sight lines with the speaker or the musician, in order to supplement auditory information with visual cues, the way he perceives the meaning through subtle bodily gestures, often intuiting meaning before words are spoken or before music is played, you know, the sophistication of his vibrational acuity around rhythm. So it was really this sort of expert listening, this listening expertise that I witnessed on the part of my uncle, that got me interested in this. And then his near complete exclusion from musical spaces, actually.

Will Robin 13:25

Do you mean that he was not interested in attending performances. I mean, what was his relationship to music?

Jessica A. Holmes 13:30

Yeah, great question. So it wasn't for lack of interest on his part. But it was due to the sort of misconceptions surrounding deafness. This misconception that deafness precludes the possibility of musical engagement, that Deaf people have no conception of sound and by extension music, that hearing is the bare minimum requirement for musical engagement, that the piano teachers were reluctant to take him on as a student, there was this notion that — well, like, why bother inviting or including him, if he can't even begin to understand and appreciate the music. So — but that wasn't reflective of his experiences, he very much enjoys music as much as you and I enjoy music, but just in perhaps different terms. So I suppose in my work, I'm really trying to shed light, or position a historically marginalized class of musicians and listeners at the center of musical accounts on the senses, challenging the primacy of hearing in Western music discourse. So that's how I got interested in music and deafness. And then Glennie just sort of came naturally through the process of my research, was one of the most talked about Deaf musicians out there, so...

Will Robin 14:57

So there's, I guess, a spectrum here in terms of these myths, one is the — Deaf people wouldn't be interested in music because they can't hear. And then on the other hand, there's the Glennie of, like, Deaf people have some kind of superhuman engagement with music that we ... through touch. And so you're trying to basically show that there's actually a huge spectrum in between those reflective of Deaf experience.

Jessica A. Holmes 15:21

Yeah, absolutely — that deafness has been constructed as antithetical to musical experience. And also in sort of ... so as a form of deficit, but as also as a form of extraordinary superhuman power. But yes, there is this kind of middle ground, and it's incredibly vast and diverse. And so that's precisely the work of the book project, is to challenge these myths, these misconceptions, the stereotypes, the stigma, and to bring attention to some of the more mundane, even unexpected, Deaf experiences of music.

Will Robin 16:03

And one of the main arguments that that you're advancing, that we've been talking a little bit about, is this idea of sound as multisensory. Can you talk a little bit more about this idea of like, sound is not just about hearing?

Jessica A. Holmes 16:15

Yeah, where to begin? So I've been so fortunate in my time at UCLA to work very closely with Nina Eidsheim, one of my colleagues in the department of musicology here at UCLA, and her first book, *Sensing Sound, Listening and Singing as Vibrational Practice*, had a profound influence on me, and my work on Deafness, because she essentially argues, that sound as we conceive of it, as being transmitted through the air directly to the ears, this is a very limited understanding, when in fact it is this vibration that we can sense in the body through touch. But there is a tendency, I will say, again, and this goes back to myths about deafness, to think about Deaf musicality along the lines of vibration alone, when in fact, vision, especially within Deaf culture, is also an important part of this equation. And movement. So in Deaf culture, again, in the Deaf community, there is this saying, especially in American Deaf culture, because this is a quote that originates in American Deaf history, that “we are first, last, and for all the time people of the eye.” So this visual conception of the world, this visual acuity very much informs Deaf engagements with music. So in my theorizing about the multisensory contours of sound and listening and music, I think not only about vibration, but also about vision. I should also say, just to qualify this statement, but ... dividing the sensorium into these discrete parts is sort of a Western, it's a Western paradigm or framework. It makes sense for me to talk about them, vision, vibration, hearing. But for many Deaf people, it's very difficult to distinguish between them. And it's almost — it's almost irrelevant. It doesn't ... it's not necessarily reflective of their experiences, some of these things are really hard to quantify (laughs), right? And I think the same is true with Glennie, she's said this before that it's just — it's so difficult to explain. So that's certainly one of the challenges that I've come up against in the book.

Will Robin 19:05

Right. Yeah. I mean, it was interesting, I read this fantastic article you wrote for the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* where there are these different examples of hearing as a visual experience, I guess, one of them being ASL that accompanies musical performances. Can you talk a little bit about that? Like I don't know, maybe it was like six months or a year... I feel like it was probably pre-Corona. But I remember there was a video of someone doing, I guess, signing for a rapper, and it went viral because people were impressed by the virtuosity of that performance, but it also wasn't really

a performance, right. Like, it's not for us to consume as a kind of spectacle. It's for people who can't hear to understand the actual music, that's — yeah.

Jessica A. Holmes 19:54

I'm really glad you asked about this. My colleague Annabel Maler has written at length about what you're describing which is song signing, the practice of signing a sign language interpretation alongside a pre-existing song or a live performance. Song signing has become increasingly visible in recent years through these different signed performances at the live shows of different musical acts, or through different televised song... singing competitions, like Eurovision

Will Robin 20:32

Oh, right.

Jessica A. Holmes 20:33

And so there's two different types of song signing, you could say. There's song signing performed by certified interpreters whose job it is to kind of augment or supplement the musical performance in question for hard of hearing — Deaf and Hard of Hearing listeners. And then there's genres of song signing online performed by both hearing and native Deaf signers. And there has been a tendency to fetishize these signed performances that we see at some of these live shows, that circulate — they have, they become, they circulate online, and they have an almost viral traction, people will share these YouTube videos on Twitter and all these retweets, and there's this tendency to think about sign language as a form of like beautiful choreography, watch as this, witness this signer embody the music through gesture. But members of Deaf culture really resent that kind of attention and fetishization, because this is a language, and it's a service that the signer is providing, first and foremost, so the tendency to think about it in these sort of sensationalized terms, it sort of undermines the linguistic integrity of the performance from the standpoint of Deaf culture. I will say, though, that for those listeners interested in learning more about song signing, I would definitely recommend reading some of Annabel Maler's work — she actually talks about the difference between hearing and culturally Deaf song signers: whereas hearing song signers might strive to provide a direct translation of the music, communicating things like registers through hand height, rhythm through body pulsing, perhaps not signing between instrumental breaks so as to delineate between verse and chorus ... So there's this, among hearing signers, the intention to provide a sort of direct translation of the music to Deaf listeners. Among native Deaf signers, the song signing becomes its own form of musical expression at the hands of an expert signer. Yeah, things like the formal parameters of the music — it's less about providing a direct translation of these different formal parameters of the music, than it is about providing a supplemental form of visual, spatial poetic expression.

Will Robin 23:25

One of the... it's clear that there are all of these significant divisions within a Deaf community or Deaf communities that relate to music. And you talked a little bit about this idea of the visual as primal in Deaf culture. There's also a kind of skepticism that can emerge or kind of complicated relationship towards music. Can you talk a little bit about the ambivalence towards music in Deaf culture?

Jessica A. Holmes 23:55

Yeah, that's important, because in Deaf culture, this sort of contemporary maxim, we are first last and for all the time of people of the eye. There's this sort of defining oneself in opposition to the hearing world, into different hearing norms. And this goes back to the history of the American Deaf community and the enforced assimilation actually, that, that that that went on, there was the sense in which sign language use was for in among the world lists, forbidden and violently suppressed. So this sort of sort of subaltern Deaf community of signers emerged. I'm simplifying the history here, and really resisted this kind of assimilation into the hearing world and among members of contemporary Deaf culture. This idea that they are primarily visual community is significant. In that it is they construct this identity in opposition to the hearing world into the ears. So we are a people of the eye means that music being that music is sort of the pinnacle of hearing experience, or has been thought of that way, right? That there's this resistance on the part of certain members of contemporary Deaf culture to music on account of that, because it is seen as belonging to the hearing world. And this is actually something that one of my interlocutors, Christine Sun Kim, has contended with in her work. She is acutely aware of the fact that members of contemporary Deaf culture may be apprehensive about engaging with music for these reasons. So she presents in her work a primarily visual conception of music.

Will Robin 26:00

She's a composer -- an experimental composer.

Jessica A. Holmes 26:03

Yeah, she is an experimental composer. And she has this sort of expanding repertoire of visual music. So these handwritten epigrams accompanied by a repetition of a singular musical cue, whether that be piano, forte, rests, bar lines, and other symbols drawn from Western musical notation. And her approach centers on what she calls on learning sound etiquette. So this set of naturalized behavioral codes that dictate when and when not to make sound, this kind of invisible social contract that she internalized from a young age as a born profoundly deaf, that divides sharply along the lines of hearing and deafness. So, in her work, she really tries to sort of discard this repressive social conditioning, and freely explore the physicality of sound, primarily through vision and visual cues stemming from sign language. Yeah.

Will Robin 27:04

How do you navigate... You know, this is a familiar problem for especially folks who do ethnomusicological work, talking about the Deaf community while not being part of the Deaf community, and how do you find a place to address these issues while also understanding that you are not the subject of your own research?

Jessica A. Holmes 27:28

A very important question. I'm reluctant to use the word ally because it is so politically charged and fraught. I am an outsider to Deaf culture. I think of myself as having, from a young age, kind of internalized a certain understanding and appreciation of deafness, vis-a-vis my uncle, but of course, he was not a member of Deaf culture. So when I first got started, I was an outsider to Deaf culture I couldn't sign and I had a very limited understanding of sign language. And understandably, there is an initial sort of apprehensiveness on the part of interlocutors who self-identify with Deaf culture, because

of the degree to which deafness has been stigmatized historically. And this failure on the part of many to really take the time to learn about some of their cultural values. So I certainly had ... when I first started to educate myself, I read as much as I could in the Deaf Studies literature about Deaf Gain. So that I was able to find some kind of common ground. When I engage with members of Deaf culture, I'm there to learn, I'm not there to dictate. While I may have a research agenda, nine times out of 10, you know, at the end of an interview, my perspective has been challenged in new and unexpected ways. So I approach it with these kinds of engagements in our interactions with a desire to learn, and an openness; while being fully cognizant of my White, able bodied hearing privilege, in this case. And more than that, like you I am a musician who is trained in the Western conservatory tradition, and a musicologist, right? So again, there's a sense in which musicology, and the way in which we think about listening expertise, this is sort of antithetical to a lot of, or very perhaps intimidating to, members of the Deaf community. So I have to be very mindful of these different points of privilege. And to really approach all of these interactions with a sort of openness and a desire to learn.

Will Robin 30:29

Do you share your work with your interlocutors? Have you had that kind of back-and-forth relationship?

Jessica A. Holmes 30:33

Yeah, absolutely. Especially with Christine Sun Kim, I've had to approach her on different occasions, when writing different things, for clarification in my framing of certain ideas. I remember I was writing a piece recently, and the editor was adamant that there be some kind of recording attached. And I said, well, that kind of defeats the purpose of her work, and being that she is profoundly Deaf and doesn't engage with music through this format, I don't ... I think I would be doing her work a disservice. And I thought, well, I'm going to just be earnest with Christine and tell her about this interaction. And she affirmed my own feelings and shared that, yes, this would be my preference, while I have worked, I have limited experience working with sound recordings, there are certain sound recordings up on her website, it would be my preference to not include a recording, precisely for the reasons that you've listed, so there is this kind of back and forth, and a desire to get it right, to find common ground. And I really ... I don't take that for granted. It's very humbling to have that kind of a relationship with your interlocutors. Recently, I've started writing about Monica Germino, the Dutch-American experimental violinist, and her hyperacusis. And her hearing loss as a result of prolonged exposure to loud volumes through violin playing. And, again, we're engaged in this kind of ongoing correspondence. And this takes many, many months and years to establish this kind of trust. And so again, it's very humbling, and I don't take it for granted. But yes, so there's this back and forth -- to answer your question, there's certainly this kind of back-and-forth dialogue.

Will Robin 32:51

Yeah, that's super interesting. You write in the JAMS piece, and I really liked the sentence, "musicology stands to gain from deafness," which I guess, I just realized now reading it, it's also riff on this idea of Deaf Gain versus hearing loss, right? I assume that was intentional. What does musicology stand to gain from deafness? Like what has the discipline gained by understanding your work and this broader topic?

Jessica A. Holmes 33:21

Big question! I'll try to answer it succinctly. [laughs]

Will Robin 33:26

[laughs] You don't have to be succinct at all, actually. We've got time!

Jessica A. Holmes 33:31

I'm still trying to answer that question.

Will Robin 33:34

Your book will hopefully answer it.

Jessica A. Holmes 33:36

I hope Yeah, I hope. So -- what is known in Deaf culture as Deaf Gain is a sort of rhetorical inverse of the pathologizing term hearing loss, and a reconfiguration of deafness as a source of physiological, social and creative gain. So when I say musicology stands to gain from deafness, what I mean is that we stand to learn from these people. Deafness offers an alternative starting point, an alternative entry point, beyond the sort of straightforward, singular sensory paradigms, namely hearing, and vibration to a lesser extent, and really sort of draws our attention to the full spectrum of musical experiences, and some of those experiences exists beyond the sonorous.

Will Robin 34:39

Well, thank you so much. This was really fantastic. And I learned a lot, I appreciate it.

Jessica A. Holmes 34:42

Great. Thank you so much for having me, Will. It's really an honor and I so appreciate your taking the time to read my work.

34:54

[Outro music]

Will Robin 34:56

I'm very grateful to Jessica A. Holmes for that fascinating conversation. Professor Holmes is currently a lecturer in the department of musicology at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, and will be starting a new position this June as Assistant Professor of musicology in the department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen. You can check out links to her writing over on our website, soundexpertise.org, and you can follow me on twitter @seatedovation. As always, please check out the music of our amazing producer D Edward Davis on Soundcloud at warm silence. I try not to play favorites but next week we have what I think is actually my favorite episode of Sound Expertise ever: a conversation about the role of Black women musicians singing for freedom at the 1963 March on Washington with Professor Tammy Kernodle. See you then.

35:55

[Outro music]