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Listening

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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LISTENING

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When one is in the sound business, particularly the reproduced sound business, the subject of how things “should sound” is often discussed and debated. A sound reinforcement system can easily be turned off to hear how well it’s doing its job because we have the live source right there to compare it to.



St. Stephen’s Pummerin

metric ton “Pummerin” bell sitting atop Vienna’s St. Stephen’s Church. Every living person in the entire city will not only hear it, but, without a doubt, know exactly what it is. Though it may be the last thing that YOU hear for a while, the sound you will perceive is not exactly the same sound everyone else hears. Distance from the source, wind, humidity, being indoors or out plus other variables such as a person’s age and the kind of sound they happen to like all effect what and how a listener “hears.” It is often said that we each have our own personal filter in our brains through which we listen. Though everyone throughout Vienna will recognize the sound as that of the Pummerin, the way they “hear” it and “listen” to it will widely differ.

Motion picture sound is especially perilous as there is no such point of reference. In a case like this we must rely on skill and even taste in the design and tuning of sound systems. And so the free-for-all begins.

Given the nature of sound and hearing this is to be expected. Suppose, for example, you clang really hard on the gigantic 21.4

Like the rest of the world, the theatre industry is full of people with ears of different ages, tastes and filters. After listening to so many films for so many years, some all but claim they know exactly how every one should sound and how every theatre’s sound system should be tuned, even if they’ve never heard either one before. My question is how can we

be so sure? I don't think we can.

I say “we” because I have made part of my living based on how well I hear. My success depends on it. But it's not how well we hear that really matters, it's how well we listen. After nearly three decades of serious listening to music as well as sound systems, I am still learning how to listen. I do not listen the way I used to even just a few years ago. My judgment of what is best is, I hope, improving.

How does a theatre owner, a musician, a sound engineer or anyone else become what Aaron Copeland called a “talented listener?” Well for one thing, we do not do it by listening to sound systems, any sound systems. We need to spend years (at least I do) carefully listening to as well as enjoying all kinds of live natural sounds and orchestras.



Vienna's St. Stephen's Church

Listening to orchestras can be difficult, even misleading. Some are better than others. So are instruments and the concert halls themselves. If you can't hear a “good” orchestra under a skilled conductor in a “good” concert hall, you can't possibly learn how “good” the music can really sound. Poor acoustics, for instance, can keep some sounds from ever reaching your ears. This happens in movie theatres too, by the way.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Which orchestras, which halls, which sounds, which films should you select to educate your ears? Wow. The answer is probably all of them. For myself, I can say that I am thoroughly enjoying my continuing lessons around the world. At least I am also fortunate to live where I do. I say fortunate because I can have Boston's famed Symphony Hall to serve as a reference. I return there regularly not only to enjoy the symphony, but also to “calibrate” my ears. Critical listeners need live references and, like musicians, constant practice to maintain their edge.

If one is primarily accustomed to listening to recordings over loudspeakers and tries to make judgments about sound quality, I submit they shouldn't be too sure about their

opinions. Too often in these situations one's hearing can become biased by the timbre and quality, no matter how good, of the sound systems they are listening to, not to mention their own particular tastes which have developed and changed over time.

A "trained" critical listener is one who learns nuances and tones. He or she does not make qualitative judgments based on personal likes and dislikes, but rather on the accuracy of the sound reproduction. This can be thought of as analytical listening.

COMPARATIVE LISTENING IN THEATRES

When you think about it, if a salesman or technician is to demonstrate a sound system to a theatre owner, they are all at a disadvantage. None of them really know what the film should sound like because they didn't make it. And who is to say that the sound system in question might just play the film better than it was made? So the theatre owner is supposed to decide, usually in too short a time, whether he "likes" the way a film sounds as compared to the way it played over another sound system in another theatre on another day. This is the worst way to evaluate sound systems, but it happens in theatres and Hi Fi stores every day.

After the completion of a recent installation of one of our systems, the customer was obviously very pleased with the results. "However" he said, "I want to wait a few weeks and hear other films before forming a final opinion." I have a lot of respect for that approach. We need to be very careful not to make hasty decisions when comparing high quality sound equipment. For example, when comparing the same film on two systems and, for some reason, one system masks a problem in the recording while the other system reveals the flaw, we can't stop there. Too many seem too quick to mistakenly blame the more revealing, ie more accurate and superior sound system. This is foolish.

LEARNING TO LISTEN TO FILMS

As you can see, listening to films can be a bit of a gray area. The ART of creating a film's sound and the ART of tuning a theatre's sound system have both grown and changed dramatically over the years. The way the we and the public listen to films has also changed. What may have been considered "good" sound in the past is, in some cases, all but un-listenable today. Tomorrow's recordings will just as surely put the light on today's deficiencies. Since films are each unique creations, the ART of listening needs to grow as well. We need to widen our tastes considerably. In some cases our expectations must be changed, perhaps even enlightened.

When listening to films, we must keep in mind that we are indeed hearing an illusion created by reproduced sound, not perfect sound. The qualities and imperfections in a

film's soundtrack can be influenced by many factors from creativity to the number of recording generations encountered during the production process. Sound effects for instance, whose sole intent is to fool you, may even be purposely distorted. Their success lies not in accurately reproducing a particular recording, but in making us believe that we have heard the sound of something that may not even exist. This is a totally subjective art form.

PLAYING FILMS

As Dolby's Ioan Allen likes to point out, different films sound different. Unfortunately the practice in some theatres is to attempt to "correct" this "problem" by retuning or rebalancing the theatre's sound system for different films. Serious listeners of films should learn to accept and appreciate these differences, though they certainly do not have to like them or agree with them. Consider the often debated subject of the surround channel. The use and level of the surrounds can vary considerably from film to film. Some directors prefer the effect more than others. One may feel their use should be reserved for only certain scenes or special effects, while others also like the continuing, perhaps even haunting, sense of ambiance that surrounds can create. Remember DAS BOOT?

Why should we expect all creative people to create the same thing? This situation might be compared to the way various composers have used voices in their symphonies. Mahler employed vocal forces in four of his ten symphonies, Beethoven in only one. Brahms never did, though some might wish he had. We can discuss forever whether we agree with the way a film or any work has been created, but we owe it to the public to present these works as cleanly as we can and let them decide what they think for themselves. Properly balanced sound systems should be left alone.

The skill, art and joy of listening is for many of us a most gratifying, life enhancing and nourishing experience. No matter what kind of music or sound you prefer, just imagine a world without it. It's here where we may find the source of many of the debates about how things should sound. Since various sounds evoke so many different feelings and emotions among so many different people, we might well understand how the rich complex textures of tones and harmonics can sound as clear as an elegant Vienna church bell to one, while meaning nothing more than a one o'clock chime to another.

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