

## **Big Ears**

by W. A. Mathieu from *The Listening Book* (Shambhala, c.1991)

In earlier years, when I first began to go to the concerts of my teacher Pandit Pran Nath, I noticed flowers everywhere, incense, and clean white clothes. A thin brown man sitting cross-legged on a rug would sing North Indian classical music for two hours in front of forty or fifty devoted listeners. The air filled with honey. Our borders melted. We merged into flickering light. Our ears got big.

After the concert, people would stand around, quietly smiling. “Thank you, Guru-ji.”

“Thank you so much.”

He would reply, in Hindi-accented English, “Everything is God,” or in Arabic, “Ya Malik,” God is King.

In those same years, I often gave day-long seminars followed by a concert at night. The seminars were to help people find the next step in their music making. At the end of the day people would stand around and say, “Thank Allaudin, I’m so glad I came.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Thank you, thank you, this was really helpful.”

In the evening after a concert of my own improvisations, people would stand around and say, “Very interesting.”

“Interesting.”

“You play very interesting music, young man.”

“Very interesting, Allaudin.”

This went on for years. Something was wrong.

About a dozen years ago I gave such an all-day seminar, followed by an evening concert, in Boston. There were about twenty-five people at the seminar. Afterward they stood around and said, “Thank you, Allaudin.”

“I got something I really needed. Thank you.”

“Many, many thanks.”

My evening concert was in the recital hall of the Harvard University Music Department. I had been practicing well and was in fine form. As it happened, there was a huge blizzard that night, and only fourteen people showed up. But I was inspired by the gorgeous Steinway and the intimacy of the small crowd. At the end of the concert, people stood around and said, “Very interesting, Allaudin.”

“Interesting music.”

“I was very interested.”

I was staying that evening with a friend of mine, a Sufi teacher. We drove home calmly through bright streaks of snow lit by the headlights. He waited until the heater warmed the car, then asked me what I thought about the concert.

“I liked it. I played well. But people don’t seem to share my high opinion. You know, it’s a funny thing.” I frowned in the dark. “After Pandit Pran Nath’s concerts, people say, ‘Thank you, thank you.’ After my concerts, people say, ‘Very interesting.’ “

I realized I was angry. “Guru-ji sings: ‘Thank you.’ I teach: ‘Thank you.’ I play: ‘Very interesting.’ If one more person tells me my music is interesting, I’m going to kill myself!”

I saw the lighted crystals falling into the windshield as if I had just woken from a coma. They slanted in from the void, from dark impersonal nature. I might as well have been on Neptune. The universe could get along quite well without me. I was stunned by what I had said.

We drove slowly for a while over the white blanket, the car remarkably quiet. My friend said softly, “What is the purpose of your life?”

I must have been ready to hear the question, because my entire life did become coherent in that moment. I saw that my mission had been to compress the world’s music into a personal style, to squeeze the wisdom and beauty of cultures into a many-colored ball, which I threw into the air to win esteem from my listeners. I had thought of myself as a clearing house for the world’s brains, a switching center for cultures, a touchstone. I had studied everything and could demonstrate interrelatedness on all levels. I could use African and Asian and European essences the way Beethoven used themes,

and weave a planetary counterpoint, *spontaneously*, to show that it could be done and that I could do it.

Naturally, people found that very interesting.

My teaching had taken quite another tack. Teaching had been kind to me, a good income, a gentle way of supporting my art. I never developed it methodically, just did the best I could to help people whatever the circumstances. To help people, whatever...

Ah.

*What is the purpose of your life?*

In teaching, the act of showing off or parading my abilities would be obscene. The object of teaching is to bring others forward, to set useful examples, to foster self-confidence and a love of the medium. You learn to listen to students - not with musically big ears, which recognize pitches and key changes, but with the Big Ears of compassion, which recognize desire and pain.

Of course people said thank you.

Now, rolling through Boston, I realized my music had gotten stuck because I was trying to prove something. Too much ego in it. I hadn't stepped out of the way. Whereas in teaching I did get out of the way - I had nothing to prove. I just gave. Now I had to learn to give my music away. My friend's question framed teaching and music-making into one and the same life, a helping life.

I began to hear music differently. I began to hear something in bare sound I had never heard before, to experience in the very act of hearing an upward intention, as if some current were drawing us toward it. I learned that sound is alive. I learned that sound *itself* is a purposeful life, and that music is the evolution of that purpose. I found my purpose hidden in the swell, my pure chord in the roar of waters. My music and my life began to grow reciprocally, like longtime lovers who grow to look alike.

Life purpose evolves through a hundred million stokes, through the necklace of stroked and plucked and blown notes that stretches around the moon and back again. Stroke by stroke, your ears are tuned to the heart of the world, and when you are ready, you give away all of the strokes, everything you have learned. Your ears grow huge and, finally, you give them away too. The tables are turned. Music is hearing you. Music plays you.

A miller grinds wheat all day. By sunset he has a bag of perfect white flour.

The flour says, "Are you fine enough yet?"

He takes the flour to be baked into bread.

Next morning the bread comes steaming hot out of the oven and says to the baker, "You certainly look delicious to me."

The secret of big ears is remembering - remembering to listen. When we forget, circles break into fragments, inner and outer keep to themselves.

I do not know why we are so forgetful.

Teachers have been telling me to observe my breath for twenty years, but I cannot remember to do it for more than a few minutes at a stretch.

“Remember to listen” sounds easy, but try to do it for a half an hour while living life. These sayings fade in and out.

I guess we have a lot to do. No single thing fixes everything. But don't you feel full and round when the fresh bread loves your mouth? There is no end to where that love goes.