

One Who Listens Speaks: An Interview With Dr. Alfred Tomatis

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: There is absolutely nothing so inviting for any speaker as a good listener. The wise clinician knows this; so does the good radio interviewer. Really making room for what another will say is a dynamic, active affair. This is at the core of Alfred Tomatis' work over the years. Thousands know him as a uniquely sympathetic listener who, when he speaks, goes right to the point-often the deepest and most intimate point-of their lives. "I like to practice counseling just as I once did surgery," he says. In this case the good doctor himself found his listener in Marie-Andrée Michaud, an interviewer with the French-language network of Radio-Canada. In their conversation, broadcast in November, 1986, she encouraged Dr. Tomatis to expand on subjects ranging from details of his own birth to the most abstract of philosophical speculations. He accepted the invitation eagerly. The result, excerpts from which we've reproduced here, is a tantalizing introduction to Dr. Tomatis' life and work. It happens to be as well, in both style and substance, an uncanny foretaste of his autobiography, *A Life of Listening*, which will soon be published in English. ON HIS EARLY LIFE I was two and a half months premature, an adventure which came in useful later on. First of all, the experience gave me a tenacious desire to live, and secondly, it led me into a fascination with intrauterine life. That life for me had of course been lacking, and I always wanted to try to find out what happens in it. So now it's been 35 years that I've occupied myself with this study. I was very ill as a child, and spent a great deal of time hovering between life and death. But I really don't believe in sickness. It's far more a matter of psychology than we think. I think, looking back on it, that my mother did not want to have me. While she was pregnant she dressed in extraordinarily tight corsets, as was the style at the time (1920). So there I was, squeezed into the most confined uterine world imaginable! It was a place where I couldn't live, and so sure enough I was kicked out of the uterus before the full term of the pregnancy. For a while in my life I couldn't live without creating similar circumstances for myself. I couldn't sleep without a heavy blanket, I wore a tight belt, and I even had shoes that pinched my toes. Only later on was I able to let go of all that. My father was an exceptional man, one of the great singers of Europe. He was a Piedmontais, self-taught to write and speak in both Italian and French, and also self-taught in music. We worked all the time. In fact, I never once saw him go to bed. And that stayed with me. For me, life is work, but "work" is hardly the right word for it. That comes from the word "torture" and suggests people are sick. "Culture" is a better word, suggesting we "cultivate" ourselves. And becoming the person that one is, for me, is to enter into a knowledge which is always available to us. A knowledge which can't be accumulated but must be distributed. Then one has everything one needs, and it's a pleasure that one knows, that one lives. ON THE GENESIS OF THE METHOD Having followed the metier of my father and become an ear, nose and throat specialist, I was looking into the problems of hearing loss among aircraft factory workers, but at the same time was treating an operatic baritone-the leading baritone, in fact, of all Europe at the time. He was having difficulty singing in tune, and specialists all over had told him it was because his vocal chords were stretched, too slack. So they were giving him strychnine; at first I was even doing that too, doubling and tripling the doses with no success. Then one day I decided to give him the same test as the factory workers, and the first surprise was that there appeared to be the first stages, in him, of the same kind of loss-the beginnings of professional deafness. He'd been singing a long time, which led me to the hypothesis that singers over a long period could damage their own ears, which would lead to professional deafness. And what I found after looking at hundreds of singers was a deficiency around the frequency of 4,000 cycles, which is about an octave above the range of the flute. It was the same deficiency as I had found with workers exposed

to factory noise. When the loss reached down into the area of 1,000 to 1,500 Hz, I found that singers had real trouble with control of pitch. From this I concluded that there was a range of response which allows one to sing in tune. I called this "the musical ear."

ON THE ENERGY OF LISTENING Marie-Andrée Michaud: One can hear, but not listen, isn't that so? Dr. Tomatis: That's the case with most people. And the more I go into it, the more I'm convinced that those who know how to listen are the exceptions. Most people hear, they're equipped with ears, and think that they have reached the summit. No. That's a passive phenomenon-you let yourself be bathed in sound, but you don't integrate any of it. But listening is integrating, and the will is an essential part of it, so that we go from a passive phenomenon to an active one. Amongst other things, listening has an advantage because if you make the ear work to its full potential, it acts as a charging dynamo for the cortex. The more the listener knows how to listen, the more he is stimulated. And it goes much farther than the ear. It's the whole body which reaches out to listen. You become an antenna, which leads to vertically. And immediately the voice becomes more beautiful. The more you speak and sing well, the more you charge the brain; the more it is charged, the more you want to speak, the greater the ability to formulate your thoughts, and the feedback loop between the voice and the ear is closed. The better you feel, the more you sing; the more you sing, the better you feel. And your consciousness rises at the same time. Human misery is the reverse. The more tired you are, the less sound you make, the less you tolerate sound. You're in a kind of sensory deprivation, your consciousness dims, and you're in real difficulty.

ON LISTENING, LANGUAGE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Listening isn't everything, but so many things unfold because of it. The world exists because we listen at a given moment to that world because we have learned to give names to it. And it thereby takes on a significance for us, for the group in which we live. We live in a sociological reality, which means that something exists only to the extent that I can transmit to you my perception of it. Thus it is language which inserts us into the social reality. As long as we speak, all's well. But real dialogue with another also means listening. Most people simply make monologues; they listen less than they talk. That's not language, it's a kind of hidden autism. So many people lead lives like that, it's tragic. Listening, then, is essential for dialogue. What's more, it's necessary even for the formation of your own thought. If you don't awaken the cortex by proper listening and sound-making, thinking cannot elaborate itself in the brain. There isn't enough richness of vocabulary, and to arrive at a certain level of conceptual, abstract thought, requires that richness. Language operates a little like the cyclotron accelerator you use to speed up electrons to get a reaction. Language makes possible the process of thinking, of abstraction. Ultimately you reach a level where you don't need words any longer. There is practically no gravitation, and you can think of things that are extremely profound without having to attach names to them.

ON THE MOTHER'S VOICE

What we do with the voice of the mother, filtered and treated in a specific way, is to recreate the dynamic of intrauterine life, the dynamic of the desire to communicate. It is the mother who gives the "heart," the desire to live, and the voice to a child. The voice is a kind of fantastic modelling clay on which the father is going to imprint language. He gives an orientation, a direction, to the child's desire to live, and so he too has an essential role. The big problem for the infant is in leaving the liquid of the womb and adapting to an environment of air. The adaptation is easy if that environment is as tranquil as things were inside, if there is a good relationship between the parents. But if there are tensions in the family, for example, the child does not allow his ear to open, and he stays trapped.

ON ADULTS AND LISTENING Marie-Andrée Michaud: You speak of children, but adults can go through the same thing. Dr. Tomatis: It's the same thing. Man is always a child, often even a nursing child. And the whole thing is to grow up. Growing up is to turn around a nucleus which is the mother, and to change orbits, to see her more and more with the eyes of an adult. To the extent that one is trapped at this level of the nursing child, even if one is adult, one doesn't really love one's mother, one devours her, like the suckling. When adults are trapped at the level of the child, they crap on their mother, which is no fun for her. Just like a child, they end up by being tyrannical. An adolescent adores his mother up until he rejects and wounds her. You have to be an adult to love another. So we teach people how to pass from one stage to another, from one orbit to another, and in that way to take their true dimension. This is different from

what you usually see in psychology, where one is always trying to cut the umbilical cord. It's a fundamental error. We cannot cut this cord, because it is our pipeline to life. The adult is one who realizes that he has to love his mother as she is. And many people are in danger of literally not being,* which is to say of simply existing, because there is always a fountain of hatred either for the father or for the mother. They confuse the father and mother, who are the nucleus of creativity, with the shell that envelops them. We must not confuse the persons of the father and mother with all their faults and difficulties, who are the products of a culture, the products of many things, with the fact that they have created, made life. They have literally re-made the Creation. That's fabulous.

ON THE ELECTRONIC EAR The Electronic Ear is a device for training the human ear. It's a set of headphones, a microphone and certain filters which together are a working model of the real ear. Put in parallel, they train it to function without distortion, as it should. As soon as the subject has recovered this kind of listening, and along with it the proper functioning of his own voice, the human voice and ear replaces the machine. Actually, the Electronic Ear plays on two tiny muscles connected to the hammer and stirrup, two of the ossicles of the middle ear, so that one becomes an expert in their mobility. One isn't trying to be an "athlete," who often lacks suppleness in his movements, like a weight lifter with huge muscles who has little agility. What's continually going on is a play of adaptability, a fantastic flexibility of the muscles, and so the idea is to become a virtuoso, really, of those muscles. That's what knowing how to listen is. When the ear has been properly trained you have such an amount of energy in the cortex that you can be fully conscious, you can live twenty-four hours out of twenty four. You can leave your boredom and ennui, leave the passive dynamic for the active one. And that's where, immediately, the Other Person appears. You become active, then, but for another as well as yourself. To put it another way, we can give someone a lot of energy by this method, but it's not so that he can sit comfortably at home with his pipe by the fire, keeping it to himself. It's so that he can distribute it at large. That's the only place there's happiness, and the only reason for making this listening training available. We're in a body of humanity, and that body must be served by all those who can.

ON FAITH Marie-Andrée Michaud: Are you a believer? Dr. Tomatis: I became a believer, and one of the curious things that led me in that direction were the flashes that came to me from children, especially those who had had no language. When I would restore this facility to a child who had never spoken, his first words were always to do with the divine. Always. Afterwards, it would bother him, because he got the impression of dependence, but that dependence is really on life. Deus in Latin is "energy"-the way a biologist or physician would describe life. For a poet it's love, for a psychologist it's the opening of consciousness. We have all these words, but what it comes down to is that believing in life is believing in creation itself. What I am trying to do is to join a person again to that faith. I don't really know how to pray. I know how to work for others. I'm sure that prayer carries a lot. So my way of praying is to work. Yours, I'm sure, is to be here doing what you're doing. If in this dynamic one is rendering service to others, that is prayer. Footnote * Tomatis frequently points out this semantic implication of the word "existence," which derives from the Latin ex, indicating exclusion from the verb which indicates "being." AuthorAffiliation Address correspondence to the author at 80 Hogarth Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M4K 1K3, Canada.

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