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I responded to a callout of d/deaf or hearing-impaired music-lovers to test the TouchSound device, an ergonomic, portable device designed to enhance the experience of live music by translating sounds into haptic vibrations. Petra forwarded this call to me and has since asked me to write a small reflection on my experience as a paid participant with mild hearing loss at lower frequencies, and moderate hearing loss at high frequencies. I wear hearing aids as and when I feel I need to.

I entered the space initially at the Southbank Centre in London, and began to witness Paraorchestra, who create,

...live orchestral music experiences that push boundaries in terms of genre, scale, and location, presenting audiences with unique opportunities to discover an orchestra in a non-conventional setting...inviting audiences to move about the performance space, empowering them to experience it in their own way...

The Anatomy of the Orchestra, led by conductor Charles Hazlewood and performed by Paraorchestra playing repertoire The Four Sections by Steve Reich, placed the audience at the centre of the orchestra, where we were able to autonomously explore each element of strings, woodwind, brass, percussion. The ensemble were spread across the Royal Festival Hall foyer, where the audience and members of the public could walk in and out of the space.

My interest in testing the TouchSound prototype stems from my observations as a dancer and a researcher. During my artistic practice, I am consistently aware of my own musicality, how I interreact with sound and silence and touch in space. In live music events, I enjoy and welcome technology that embraces both the tactile and the auditory to curate and create a holistic, embodied experience of sound and touch.

A piano, a clarinet, a violin, a trombone, a harp, an oboe

The device was small, featured a small microphone that could be directed at any sound source. In the context of The Anatomy of the Orchestra by Paraorchestra, I was free to explore. The sound was converted into vibrations, which I experienced through placing my fingers on the sensor pad of the device. I was able to sense the melody of each instrument with my thumb and fingers.

Whilst my experience of the TouchSound device was largely positive, I was acutely aware of the sound but not so aware of the music. I was aware that I should be hearing and feeling the music and became aware I was experiencing neither. My sensory focus, my attentional resources were spread too thin. I found myself trying to adjust and auditorily process the sounds of the orchestra with through hearing aids alongside the touch sensation of the vibratory sensor through my fingertips and thumbs with my kinaesthetic responses to stimuli, namely the people moving around the room freely. I was aware that not only was I trying to process the sound and the vibration from the instruments, but also from friends talking to each other, footsteps on the wooden flooring, children running and playing, bar staff serving drinks in the foyer. It was overwhelming.

The primary disruption, or distinction perhaps, was feeling the emotion, the expression, the harmony, the beauty of music in its form. The vibrations, at this stage of the prototype, did not capture this. Perhaps it is a question of the power of the vibrations, the intensity of the vibration as the volume and emotion of the piece builds to a crescendo. I began to wonder; how do we capture this experience in vibrations alone? I felt somewhat separated from the liveness of the orchestra; my focus was on the device.

The vibrations, initially, made me feel quite emotional. I was overcome with sensory stimulation, and as the 25-minute performance continued, I felt I had to remove my hearing aids. I became overstimulated and overloaded sensorily, I became disorientated, it was all,

too loud.

Sometimes known as Listeners Fatigue, adjusting to regularly wearing hearing aids can be tiring where you feel the effects on an overstimulation on your auditory systems. Where once I was unable to hear high frequencies, wearing hearing aids meant that unfamiliar high-pitched noises were present, hearing another coughing or sneezing from another room was distracting, knowing which direction each noise was coming from was disorientating. Whilst wearing hearing aids may “fix” or “aid” the lost noise, it takes effort and work to understand and process the new, loud sound.

My tinnitus, caused by my hearing loss where the hairs cells in my cochlea are affected means that they sometimes,

‘leak’ random electrical impulses to my brain.

A sound, a ringing, only I can hear, not caused by external sound often starts when I have been wearing headphones or my hearing aids. Sometimes described as

phantom noises,

this ringing is spontaneous and sporadic.

After the show, I was asked for my feedback on elements of the design, each of use, practicality and effectiveness, experience of the device. The researcher facilitated a safe space where I felt able to express myself freely, and it was a real pleasure to communicate with my fellow participants with varying degrees of hearing. BSL (British Sign Language) interpreters were provided for participants who were d/deaf. I confess I do not know BSL, and yet my fellow participants were exceedingly generous in ensuring I was able to lipread their reflections. Their willingness to cater to communicating their experience of the technology with me touched me. I felt exceedingly connected to them through this shared experience with their empathetic, open, and friendly characters.

I found myself feeling embarrassed for not knowing BSL as someone hearing impaired, almost as if I was not hearing impaired ‘enough’ to be in the space or to be testing the innovative technology. This feeling is not new to me, and I often feel I am not hearing impaired ‘enough’ to be classed as ‘disabled’ or to access certain support in professional and

personal spaces. I intend to learn BSL, not through necessity or a sense of duty, but to be able to enhance my communication skills with others who I share hearing loss with, to feel more part of the hearing loss community I am a part of.

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Bibliography

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