

Urgent Listening: A Conversation with Hardi Kurda

This conversation, which took place in Oxford, England, is part of a series of conversations hosted by Gascia Ouzounian on the theme “Countersonics: Radical Sonic Imaginaries.” It has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Gascia Ouzounian

I wanted to start by exploring your connection to radio. You have a special connection to this medium—what you also describe as an instrument—both as an artist, but also as a young person growing up in Southern Kurdistan and listening to the radio during the revolution. After the revolution in 1991, your brothers owned a radio repair shop, and that was also an early influence for you. Could you tell us a bit about your early experiences with radio?

Hardi Kurda

I found this connection late, when I emigrated to Sweden, when I found myself composing my first electronic music piece. I found I was asking myself why I’m interested in bringing an element of radio noise into this electronic piece.

Then I went back again to remember the time when I was first in contact with the radio, as you mentioned. It was in the beginning when I learned violin... It was not like making any nice melody with the violin, you just practice, and it sounds terrible. [Laughing]. So, I had no choice but to go to my brothers’ radio repair shop in the heat of 40 degrees at lunchtime when they were not in the shop. That was the only place that I could play violin.

But what happened in this environment—smelling the solder, and the radio circuit boards—it was partly while practicing, but also partly when I was taking a rest because it was too hot, I was just exploring the radios. I was young, I had never seen inside technology devices. So that was the first touch, the first meeting with those.

And the most interesting part: I was very interested how they knew how the circuit board works when they put a wet finger on the board. There was no device to detect or to analyze whether the circuit board had any problems. They put a wet finger on the board, just to get “this circuit is not working” and so on. That was also one of the one of the methods that I later work with in my practice, to explore noises from the radio.

Gascia Ouzounian

I know that you were also concerned at the time with radio as a political medium. Could you tell us about that?

Hardi Kurda

People used the radio when military attacks were coming. For example, when a flight is just coming around or is close to the city, they used the radio in a certain tuning. I guess they hacked the radio, similar to how I now do. They found a certain type of cracking noise that told them certain information—that there’s an airplane nearby. Because there were no private airplanes. In this time there was no airport. The only flights

coming to the city were military airplanes. So, they used it in this in this way, as a survival tool, not just to listen to the channels, because at this time there were not so many channels, during the dictatorship.

Gascia Ouzounian

Listening to radio and listening as a mode of survival: I think it connects in a very powerful way to the experience that you have shared of immigrating illegally from Kurdistan to Europe in 2002, in a shipping container. This was a very dangerous passage, a life-risking passage that took several days. And you had brought with you a small, concealed radio for this passage; you were listening.

Stemming from this experience, a lot of your work is inviting us to think about what is legitimate or illegitimate in sonic practice; how someone might test those boundaries of legitimacy; and how legitimacy is even conceptualized.

Can you take us back to that moment, to that passage? What did it mean for you to listen in that context? And how did you come to understand *listening* differently through that experience? I will just quote something that you wrote, briefly: “Listening in that time of crisis was urgent, crucial, and for me, it was a matter of survival. But listening was also creative, tactical, narrational, curious searching for something.”

Hardi Kurda

What I experienced in this time, part of it I can only talk about now.

Most of these kinds of scenarios or stories about immigrants, generally for societies in Europe, it's the tragic part, this part that's more traumatic [that is told]. That's true. There is this part. But there are also other stories behind it. There are also stories that are not just about the traumatic, not just about a tragic accident. It's also a part of human *instinct*—a human way to survive. When it's needed, when it's necessary, then you need to be *creative*, you need to search for the way: how to get out of the situation. But at the same time, you actually *enjoy* the moment: the moment of creating, of discovering what is necessary for this time.

So, in the moment of listening—sometimes, when I remember, I also laugh, because there were also moments which were really funny. I mean, I was 20, 21 years old, with my little brother. There were 10 other passengers. We were a total of 12. But I was like a conductor. I was the only one that could tell them information [about] where we are. I mean, the sound changed. The FM frequency from the Turkish radio to Greek radio to Italian radio. I didn't know those languages, but I knew that the voices had changed. So, everyone just looked at me in the darkness. There was no light, absolutely. But when I heard something new, they always looked at me, like, “Do you have something, like, with eyes?” And I was the one that [could give them information].

So, I had a really funny story about this moment. We wanted to laugh, but we were not allowed to laugh. But for me, the time when I listen, [there was] this responsibility to give the others information, because I knew they were waiting for me to give them. I'm the only one. So, this listening was particularly more *creative* because I *had* to. I had to search for something. I had to listen to find something. And in this noisy radio in the Mediterranean Sea... for a long time, for long hours, you don't get any frequencies. So, you just *imagine*. I mean, somehow, my brain translated all those frequencies to an imaginary voice that's telling me something *different*, making me suspect that actually I hear something—but I wasn't.

So, it was both this imaginary, and searching for information. All this emotion involved. But I never... Even now, I don't feel this kind of traumatic... I don't have any traumatic experience with the radio when I listen to it. It's more that I feel more creative when I work with the radio, because there's a background of my childhood *and* this experience.

Gascia Ouzounian

It's wonderful to think about the radio as a medium that enabled you in this moment to really think about the limits of what is possible to hear; how the sense of hearing can be extended—and what *is* that sense, what are our sensitivities. Listening as a way of sense-making, but also that there may be other sensitivities that we're not even always aware of that are emerging through listening.

Another thing that really strikes me about what you have just shared is of immigration as a kind of creative act and act of survival. The poet Ocean Vuong says about his own family's experiences of immigrating to the United States (they were also going through very difficult situations)—he thinks of them as survival *artists*; that this is a *creative* act. So, we can think about those histories of migration and the creative acts embedded within them.

Something you have drawn attention to is how you were listening with other senses or listening *to* other senses. If I might quote you again, you write, “At that moment, I needed to listen very deeply to what I could *not* hear. It was urgent to open my other senses—like smell, touch, and vibrations.” And then, in another place, you write, “it was urgent to experience listening through other senses. To connect listening to the smell and taste of the silence, in that dark space inside that container, which smelled like human sweat and machine.” Why is it important for you to develop this idea of listening with all the senses?

Hardi Kurda

Back again to the necessity of different types of listening in different [situations]. When I couldn't see enough of what's around me, it was not something that *I* activated. It had *been* activated.... I felt this. I mean, I felt it before I *knew* it.

Listening in the context of other senses is not the way how listening actually works in the sense of physical listening. It is understanding what the other matters are: how I feel, how I was sweating in the August months in the Mediterranean Sea, the sun hitting us directly, and [being] locked in a box: it was absolutely important to know my body—what condition I am in. So, listening *reacting* to the body condition. How I hear my heartbeats and breathing. But also back to the breathing, back to the sweating, and sweating reflecting back to the smell. And it's not just your smell; it's the smell of other people around you. All these other senses become other sources [of] information that tell you *where you are*, or which condition you are in, [what the] situation is. All these *signals* that come from the body, translated through a different way of listening. As I say, this listening is more an *awareness* of the condition of the situation, rather than a physical sound.

But at the same time, we *heard* sounds outside the container. Personally, that's what was the most challenging listening: to avoid hearing them. Because that made me more terrified, when people passed by the container. When someone passed by, I mean, if someone discovered that there are people here, then you are *done*.

Each time when they were there, your heartbeat just raced, like, incredible. So, what happened: your body [reacts], you sweat more, you breathe more, you make more sounds. So, how [do] you challenge ‘*don't listen to this*’.

Fortunately, I had the noise with the radio set, so that was my survival. I was just focusing on this part, and just *avoiding* this [other] part. I discovered it's more useful for me, or more enjoyable, to just discover this feeling: “Okay, let me imagine how the smell is connected to the noises, and integrate with the noises, like my breathing, my heartbeat.” So it was, as I say, a time of discovery. Which is how that's connected to my artistic practice: some of those *unwilling* practices have been a very interesting part of my practice.

Gascia Ouzounian

It is amazing to think about how the sense of self, sense of body, sense of surrounding can be utterly transformed through listening, and how listening can, as you are suggesting, activate sensitivities that we are not even aware of until you are in these situations where you have a very heightened sense of self and surrounding.

You mentioned that this also informs your artistic practice. I know that as part of your practice you have developed work around what you call the “found score.” Can you tell us what you mean by the found score, and of locating scores within everyday materials and everyday situations?

Hardi Kurda

When I worked with the [musical] score as a composer, I always found this disconnection. I did the work, but I was disconnected to the work. In 2008, I found the connection when we had our first son, and I found this ECG monitor in the hospital. It struck me how this is directly translating the body condition of a human into a graphic notation.

To continue working with this concept of found object or found sound: I also work with carpets. That’s also a score, already storytelling. People made those carpets. They didn’t have recordings like we do now, but they sewed it in the carpet. So, there is some sonic imagination in the story in the carpet—especially Kurdish carpets, because they’re small. And they are not used as a “normal” carpet. They use it as a kind of painting, for putting on the wall or decorating small houses. It’s not like Persian or Turkish carpet—because they have big houses, empires, so their carpet is more symmetry. But the Kurdish [carpet] is more symbols. And there is a lot of interpretation of those symbols.

In the end, I found that [what’s] amazing with the found score—connecting to this story about listening—is that the found score is not an *extension* of a musical score. It has nothing to do with a musical score. It has an element of interpretation. But the found score itself is another listening medium. It’s like how we understand what surrounds us in this room, and why it’s particularly designed in this way.

Gascia Ouzounian

I think this is fascinating in terms of thinking about sonic information being embedded into, inscribed into, and—in the case of the carpet—sewn into other mediums, visual mediums. We have that in paintings. You can also see representations of musical instruments or things like that. It’s a way of transmitting something about the sonic through this other visual medium.

Something that I find is fascinating in terms of your conception of the found score, and the found score itself as a medium of listening, [is] that it’s containing some kind of hidden knowledge, secret knowledge, maybe untranslated-as-of-yet knowledge that is *inviting* someone to engage with it in that sense of “searching for.” And what do you find when you’re searching...

I think that’s a very exciting idea, because it invites us to kind of look differently to our surroundings and think about what we can *hear* within what we see and what we’re encountering in these other ways.

I also appreciate that you’re developing this practice of scoring but *beyond* the musical. There is such a tradition of experimental graphic scores now. But they have a musical objective or musical aim, or they’re emerging from a musical tradition. In your case, you are searching for something which is not musical.

So, maybe we can think about one of your found score projects, *Listening's Urgency*. Maybe you could describe what it is, and after that, I want look at the score with you and think about the score together.

Hardi Kurda

This project had been developed when I got this radio art residency in Halle. I wanted to go back to what radio and “listening’s urgency” means for me. What we talked about in the beginning in this radio repair shop and the radio circuit boards. I see the circuit board as not just a circuit board. I see also the voices it transforms over those lines and dots... all [of what] makes this transformation. It’s both imaginary but also scientific, technological— but how. How we can see a circuit board behind this all this other information?

That’s why it developed as this score—a found score of a radio circuit board: just to discover, explore what radio circuit board means—more than just ‘radio circuit board’. And also how we play with the radio, but not through the tuner (that’s also connected to legitimating the device in a certain way). How, if we freely open the radio, and *touch* the circuit board, [as] my brothers did, but did for other reasons. I’m not searching for any failure in the radio. I’m searching for the non-heard noises.

And that’s what strikes me when I tried to experiment with the circuit board, and I read about legalization. It’s not legal to manipulate the circuit board. The problem is that you get the public frequencies, which is not allowed. You need to have permission for that. When you touch it, it’s possible [to get those frequencies]. It’s not guaranteed, because you cannot control it. But it’s possible and it happened to me. Sometimes I heard Morse code. Sometimes I heard very strange cracking voices...

So, engaging with the radio in a more creative way than just tuning the channel. That’s why I developed *Listening's Urgency* and connected [that] to the radio circuit board. It’s absolutely urgent, and it’s necessary for us to know what’s happening through the frequencies: what was sent through the frequencies. And it’s urgent to touch, because that’s what gives us the hidden information and reveals voices.

After this score, I thought, okay if listening is just something that I play for the audience, what if the audience explores by themselves those experiences? So, the project developed into an *interactive antenna*, where the audience can go and touch by themselves and explore those frequencies going around them in an uncontrolled way.

Gascia Ouzounian

It’s wonderful to invite others into this mode of listening and listening to the unheard. And using this device, which has been standardized in a certain way— the radio circuit board, as you said—has a legal limit in terms of its use and how it’s supposed to be used, and the legitimacy of doing things that *aren't* supposed to be done with it, and listening to things that are forbidden or that are prohibited or that are lying *outside* the permitted frame of listening, and using [the radio circuit board] to discover that.

Maybe you could talk a little bit about this score, which is part of *Listening's Urgency*, which looks like radio circuit board, but which has also your words and notes on it, including “social,” “solidarity,” “immigrants,” “politics,” “medium,” “silence.”

Hardi Kurda

First of all, I have as I mentioned before, I try to not contextualize the found score to a musical score, but to give a kind of *view* of the listening’s perspective. Like, when for example, I say, “this is the frequency range.” So, give an input for the listener. When I say “this is dynamic—high and low”— it automatically translates [for the player].

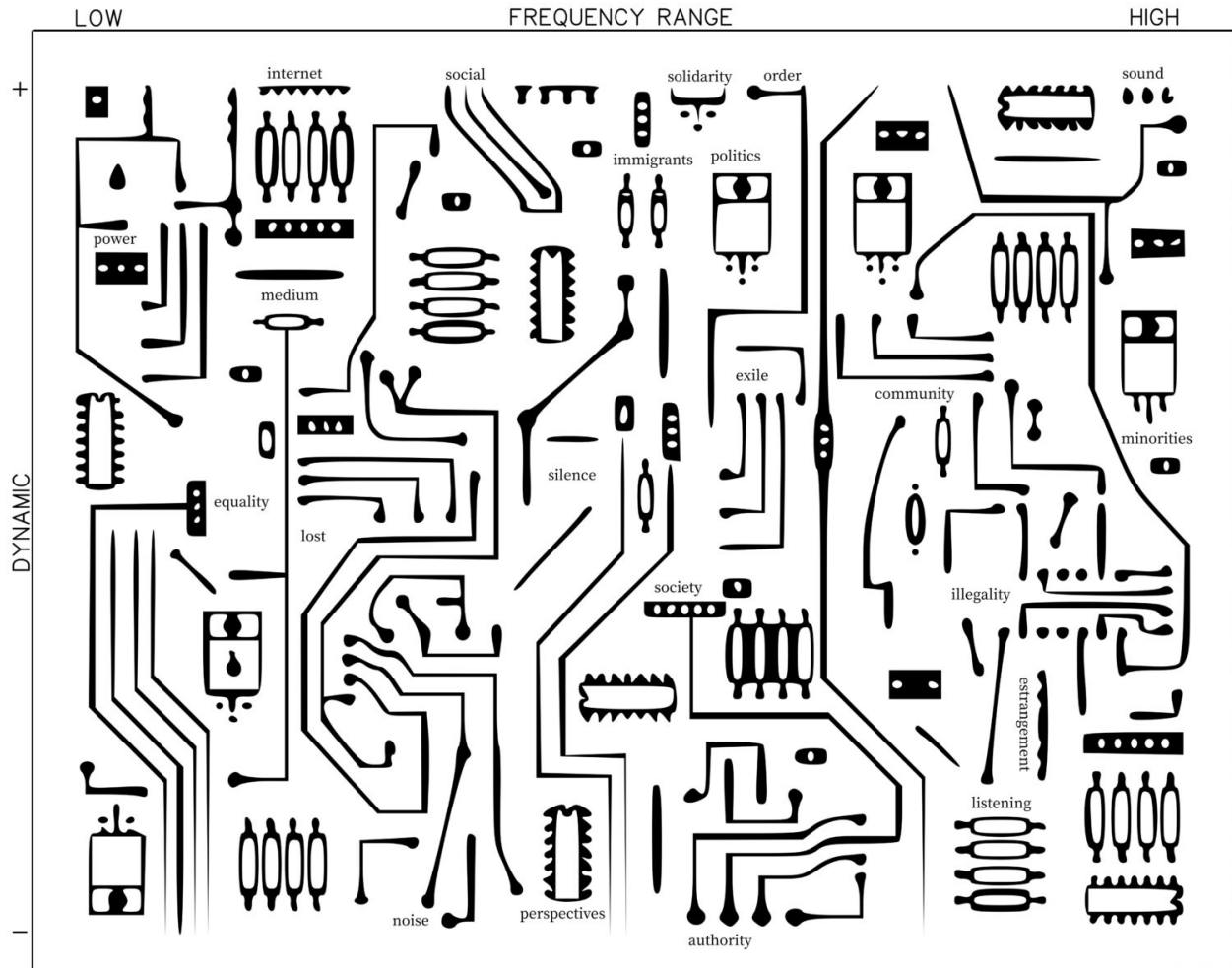


Figure 1. Hardi Kurda, from *Listening's Urgency* (2020); the found score of a manipulated radio circuit board. Used with permission.

For example, “here’s a frequency range, and low and high [dynamics].” And they’re all playing with open radio. It will not always [be that] you get the high [frequencies]; you don’t know. But I’m asking the performer [who] is playing with the open radio: when they come across this part, to try to make the highest frequencies. Going to the high frequencies is very challenging. It’s not a violin, [where] you play with on E string and go up to the sixth position and get the highest note. No, the radio is completely different. What happens is you’re just searching. It’s a process.

And then the connection between the words and the score. In the beginning of the radio circuit board score, it’s how those circuit boards [are] transforming all those keywords through the radio. Those are the keywords that we always hear from radio. That’s also a connection between the performer and the place where they are. They can interpret it in a completely different way. But at least they can find the connection—so they have a reference.

Gascia Ouzounian

Can you please explain for those who might not be familiar with the term, what is “open radio”?

Hardi Kurda

It's actually, literally, you open the radio. Not every radio circuit board has the same capacity or feature of a circuit board that works [through] touching. For example, the Japanese radio I work with, when I open it, the soldering technique they use does not allow you to touch [the board]. It is so interesting. The [other] one I have, the Chinese one, is fantastic. It's very easy to touch and very sensitive. I mean, even with a small touch, you get crazy frequencies. So, basically, you open the radio. Sometimes I need you to break some of the part[s], like the tuning part, because I need you to get to the circuit board, sometimes upside down. So, I need you to open it completely. Unfortunately, sometimes I break all those [parts], just to get to the main circuit board. I open it; that's the open radio.

Gascia Ouzounian

That's interesting also in terms of thinking about listening illegally. This idea that you have to break something in order to participate in this other realm of listening and listening beyond prescribed limits.

You have talked about this idea of tactical listening in connection to illegal voices. And you've described your work as building a new artistic practice focused on questioning unwanted sounds and illegal voices [using] the score of everyday material that demands to change how we understand listening. So, maybe the question is simply to reflect on listening to unwanted sounds, listening to unheard voices, and listening as a kind of tactics.

Hardi Kurda

After the piece I mentioned, the first electronic piece, I found this connection with listening as a strategy. And more on the political side: how that has an *impact* on listeners, not just on me. I mean, I'm doing the work. But I'm not just sending the message or telling listeners how I felt or how was my experience. No, it's not about me anymore. It's about how [there] would be [a] more tactical listening, exploring the tactical listening for the audience, so that they freely experience themselves, in their own terms. Their own experience, not transferring my experience, because it's impossible. It doesn't go.

Gascia Ouzounian

In a way your answer is answering the question I wanted to ask, which is exactly this: how do you invite others into this world of listening? And perhaps this is the question that your broader work in general is posing. How can you share this way of listening with others and open this world?

Hardi Kurda

In the last years I have been very interested in interactive sound art, mostly because of this reason. I found this disconnection I mentioned before. Because it was my piece, and the performer, they played, and it [was] finished. And there was no *connection*. I even lost this connection with the performer because it was like a job. I wanted to say, "it's *not about me*."

And that's what I found amazing about the interactive machine, this ECG machine in hospital. That was amazing. The design of the sound... If your heartbeat is low/high [or you hold your breath], then you get a new design of sound, like a discovery of a new orchestra. It's all hidden. You discover them by how you actually feel your inner body, exactly how I felt in the container.

That's what I want you to experience: what happens when you do that, and how you listen differently when you hold [your breath]. It's necessary to do that: you *want* [to hear], [you're] curious to hear this voice.

This kind of interacting, co-touching the antennas, to go find the noises, you're always *aware* of what you do. And so, this experience is not about me. It's your experience.

Gascia Ouzounian

Thank you so much. I think it's a wonderful kind of idea to close our conversation with. This idea that you're listening through your entire body, all of your senses, you're tuning in to how *you* are connected to the sonic world around you, and how your emotions, your physiology, your psychology is also part of that world. But that part of your aim as a practitioner is to not necessarily to determine that or say to people, "you must listen to this, or in this way," but to enable others to have that moment of discovery of themselves within this larger sonic world, sonic realm—and that your work is enabling that to emerge. So, thank you.

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