

Evelyn Glennie
Master Percussionist Extraordinaire

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ASL II Report

Fall 2006 Quarter

Instructor: Sandy J. Carr

December 5th, 2006

This essay is about the remarkable master percussionist, Evelyn Glennie. A comment by Evelyn Glennie in the movie docu-music-video “Touch The Sound – A Sound Journey With Evelyn Glennie”, that seems to sum her up in one line is: “My whole life is about sound. It's what makes me tick as a human being”.

Though hearing impaired, she goes to great lengths to emphasize that she is first and foremost a musician, who just happens to be deaf, and not a “deaf musician”. She goes into great detail in an essay on her website about her beliefs about “disabilities” in general and how having a hearing impairment does not need to be a limitation in life any more than a football player's knee injury is a disability. She considers it more a minor annoyance to be overcome. She believes it can sometimes be an inconvenience, but that taking on any such “disabilities” can be worked around. She believes she can “hear” far better than the average hearing person, because she “opens up” and uses her entire body to experience sound longer and more richly, than one could with just one's ears.

Mrs Evelyn Elizabeth Ann Glennie was born in Aberdeenshire Scotland on July 19th, 1965. Evelyn was influenced throughout her life by music, and it began at an early age at home. Both her parents were musically inclined. Her father played the accordion and her mother played the church organ. The family farmhouse did not have a phonograph or other outside means of music, so her primary method of learning music was from sheet music, or local musicians including her family. Evelyn Glennie started learning to play piano at 8 years old, and her instructor stated she had the rare gift of “perfect pitch”.

Sometime later that same year, Evelyn began to notice that her hearing was beginning to fail. It progressed for the next 4 years. The doctors finally diagnosed it as severe nerve damage. She was diagnosed as “profoundly deaf” by age 12. This means she still has very little residual hearing left, if

enhanced with hearing aides.

The audiologists stated that due to her profound hearing loss, she was no longer going to be able to play music, that she would have to wear hearing aides, that she wouldn't be able to function “normally” in society and school, and that she would have to go to a school for the deaf. She commented on the experience of when she walked into the audiologist doctor's office when she was twelve, in the film “Touch The Sound”, she said, “It was just so strange that 30 minutes before walking in the door, I could do whatever I wanted to do, but then 30 minutes later, apparently the medical profession tells you that you can't do something... And of course my parents were extremely concerned, And my father said, 'Look, there is absolutely no difference in how she does what she wants to do. And hearing or not she will do what she wants to do.’”

She considered herself very fortunate that her parents, in conjunction with good friends, and teachers, worked with her to allow her to continue in the “normal” school system. The teachers were willing to wear a small microphone that sent an audio signal to her hearing aides directly. She soon removed her hearing aides however because she didn't like how they distorted sound, especially with music, and tended to distract her, so over time Evelyn learned to lip read quite proficiently, and has functioned very well ever since without hearing aides. She attributes her being able to speak so clearly as well, with her “perfect pitch”. When hearing her speak you can not tell at all that she is deaf. It was only during a phone interview in the “Tough the Sound” video, that she had to have someone act as a relay by mouthing the words of the person over the phone so she could read what was being said, that one actually realized there was anything affecting her hearing.

It was around the time that she was diagnosed profoundly deaf, that she noticed her classmates playing percussion instruments, and she decided to try them out. She quickly discovered it just “felt

right” for her to be playing percussion. By the end of her term in “secondary school”, she realized that her deafness made it too difficult for her to participate fully within a typical orchestra, which led her to focus more on a solo percussionist approach.

Her music instructor took the time to work with her learning how to “feel” music in lieu of her ears. The teacher started out with having her touch the sides of some large timpani (kettle) drums. He would then hit them, and adjust them to various tones. She would then start to notice that different vibrations reverberated with different parts of her hand, and later the rest of her body. Then he had her stand with her hand to the wall, and feel the more subtle vibrations there. This continued to progress. She oft times performs barefoot so she can feel the music in the floorboards of the stage from her instruments as well as the instruments of others.

When she applied to London's Royal Academy of Music, she had to go through the unusual additional process of not just one, but two auditions, with each audition judged by separate groups of judges. Fortunately she was able to convince the school that she could function at a high level of musicianship despite her hearing impairment. She studied percussion as well as piano. She even gave the first ever Percussion recital and Percussion concerto in the history of Britain's Royal Academy of Music, which was originally founded in 1822. She graduated in three years, with honors.

She has many awards, and works constantly and at a frenetic pace in accordance with her energy on stage. Evelyn has received her country's highest non-combatant honor, a recipient of “The Order of the British Empire”. According to one biography she was the first classical musician to have her own website. She tours all over the Northern Hemisphere, as well as spends 4 months of every year in the United States. In conjunction with the composer Leonard Slatkin, she has organized an annual percussion festival held initially in Washington D.C. She plays in over 100 performances per year,

teaches “master classes” , and participates in “music in the school” performances. Her repertoire includes 53 concertos, 56 recitals, 18 concert pieces, and 2 works for percussion ensemble. She regularly uses up to 60 different instruments in a single live performance, and she has upwards of a thousand different instruments. She has more than 20 albums of her own, in addition to many collaborative works, and she has also worked with the popular singer Bjork on a duet titled “My Spine”, which was also an MTV music video. Recently she has also started playing the Scottish “Great Highland” Bagpipes and has her own registered tartan known as “The Rhythms of Evelyn Glennie”. She has written an autobiography titled “Good Vibrations” that has been a best seller in the UK.

She also takes time in her busy schedule to work with deaf students using very similar techniques to what her primary school instructor used to help her gain sensitivity to feeling music. She is a very strong proponent of music for the hearing impaired, in fact she has created a scholarship specifically to help those with hearing impairments that want to become musicians. She is also a patron for the ADAPT Trust (Access for Disabled People to Arts Today) and the Aberdeen International Youth Festival.

Evelyn Glennie believes that she can actually hear MORE by not using hearing aides, and feeling through her body, using the body as the entire “resonating chamber” rather than just the ears. She demonstrates this in great detail in the video “Touch the Sound” with a young hearing impaired student. If a hearing person asks her, “How do you hear that?”. Her standard reply is, “I really don't know, I just basically hear that through my body, through opening myself up. How do YOU hear that?”

Evelyn Glennie admits she has a limited understanding of “Music Therapy”, though she once attended a convention in Tennessee for the “National Association of Music Therapists” while she was in town for a performance in Nashville. While much of what she saw at the convention she found

encouraging, she felt a lot of what was being used was more “Sound Therapy” and that the term “Music Therapy” is a misnomer. She did give an example however of her work with a young boy who was deaf, blind, brain damaged, and had to be in restraints because he could not control the constant involuntary movement of his muscles. They placed the boy on a wooden floor under her marimba. When she played a gentle piece, the boy was soothed and calmed down his movements and relaxed his muscles within minutes. Later, when she played a more “cheeky” piece, the boy waved his arms in a controlled manner, and actually smiled. According to those who took care of the boy all his life, in the child's 9 years no one had ever seen him actually smile before.

I originally came to EWU to work towards a degree in Recreation Therapy with a Music minor, in the hopes that I could tie in my background as an amateur musician who finds great solace and benefit from music, and hope to use it as a tool to help others. I planned on using more “true music therapy” rather than just “sound therapy” on children with behavioral, cognitive, and other challenges to help soothe, motivate, and inspire. I agree with her assessment that many so called music therapists just use “sound therapy” rather than really “music therapy”, but I think there is a direction in true music therapy that is very viable, and I hope to learn more about it, and pursue it as a powerful therapeutic tool.

I had first acquired a CD of Evelyn Glennie's back in the early 90's called “Light in Darkness”, but I never knew over all those years about her background, I just enjoyed the music. It was during a Fall 2006 class in “Music in the Humanities” at EWU (Eastern Washington University) that the instructor was playing snippets from the video “Touch the Sound” that I found out more about her, and was intrigued, so I rented the video myself.

Now after viewing the video several times and acquiring about 18 pages of notes from

researching her on the Internet, I see a whole other possible area that my background and goals in Therapeutic Recreation and Music Therapy may tie in to, and tie in with my studies in ASL (American Sign Language). Originally I was planning to just use learning ASL to help me teach the hearing impaired martial arts such as Kung Fu, as well as in a standard TR (Therapeutic Recreation) venue. Now I see a possibility of actually using Music Therapy with those who have hearing impairments, which I, like most, never thought possible. I hope to use various tools to help people develop their own tools for coping, soothing, and a better quality of life. These tools include music, martial arts, outdoors & other recreational activities.

I am quite amazed at all that Evelyn Glennie has accomplished as a musician. Her energy, very positive and driven philosophical outlook on life, compassion for others, and absolute love of what she does is energizing, and to top it all off with her considering, according her essay, that her hearing impairment is “irrelevant to being a musician” opens up an entire avenue of prospects I never imagined, but which she is proof of the seemingly limitless possibilities.

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