Sound Tasting at Abbey Road Studios:

The Lost Art of Listening

To appreciate sound, we really need to rediscover the art of listening. It's vital to sound connoisseurship. With wine tasting there is a process to help you really appreciate and evaluate the wine - See, Swirl, Sniff, Sip and Savour. So when it comes to listening - what do you really need to do to fully appreciate sound?
I've got five steps for you. The target of which is to help listening become your primary sensory focus

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- which can be a real challenge if you have got used to sound being something that exists only in the background. None of the below is new or particularly esoteric: indeed in the 60's at the birth of stereo this sort of understanding was common knowledge.

1. Ensure your sound system is set up to reach its full potential: speakers and you in an equilateral triangle to create a stereo 'image' at ear height neither you or your speakers should be close to a wall to prevent distortions
2. Make it an event, appreciation shouldn't be rushed
3. Press play and get comfortable - a comfy sofa is vital! Comfort can greatly change your appreciation of sound
4. Relax, it's important to clear the mind and breath to force yourself to slow down and recognize the space you're in and the time you have made
5. Close your eyes, you may feel odd, but this is a vital stage in sound appreciation. Once you've closed your eyes, within 10 seconds your brain tunes more closely into the sounds its hearing

If you follow these simple steps you should reach a state of immersion where sound (and the appreciation of it) becomes your primary experience - far removed from sound convenience and the white noise mentality.

Sound Terminology

As you listen - what should you be listening for to help understand the quality of what you're looking to appreciate? Here are six terms to share with you and some short clips of music to help illustrate the terms I'm referring to.

Transparency:

This is about the overall clarity of the sound. Similarly to a clean window, what you should hear should be crystal clear and feel natural. Here you should listen for that overall clarity of sound - each individual instruments is clearly defined within the sound

Wallflower Waltz: Hershy Kay and Walter Piston's Cakewalk Ballet, Albany Records

Detail:

This is all about the distinct elements within the sound - if there's detail in the sound you'll be able to hear clearly all the instruments and elements. Here you should listen for the plucking of the strings; the detail in this track is such that you can really feel the movement of the guitarist's fingers and the strength of the notes as they are played

Keith Don't Go: Acoustic Live! By Nils Lofgren: Vision Music

Timing:

Describes the precision of the notes within the sound. Here you should be listening to how infectiously the speaker relays the rhythmic aspects of the music. Good sound should make rhythms taut and crisp so you tap you feet when you should.

Waiting in Vain: Exodus by Bob Marley, Island Records

Stereo image:

As I mentioned earlier you should have a good distance between the speakers to enjoy a stereo image. On this track an engineer (like Andy) has mixed the track to place the various instruments in different places to reflect a real orchestral set up. Here you should concentrate on listening to where you hear the instruments in the space in front of you. You should find that for example the violins are on the left down to the double bass on the right, with the wind section behind the strings

Fever: Peggy Lee, Capitol Masters (unreleased demo)

Air and ambience:

As Andy demonstrated with reverb and echo, good sound should give a sense of the natural space around the recording - it's all about Air and Ambience. For this next track, close your eyes and see if you can imagine the hall that this track was recorded in from the auditory clues in the sound. It's all about sound that makes you feel you're actually 'there'

Track 17: Eteri Gvazava, La Traviata a Paris (OST), Teldec

Slam and attack:

Recognizing 'Slam' is very easy, it's the percussive force that you feel as much as hear from, for example a drum beat. Slam provides a very obvious demonstration of the power and quality of a speaker. In this track I think you'll hear the slam very clearly when the drums kick in…

Take The Power Back: Rage Against the Machine by Rage Against the Machine, Sony.

So transparency, detail, timing and attack, stereo image, air and ambience, slam all help contribute to a frame of reference to help describe and sound and to identify quality. Next time you'll be able to say whether sound has good detail, transparency and much more