



# THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

## Quietude – In Search of Radio Silence

By Bilal Qureshi

**Bilal Qureshi:** In radio, the most feared sound is Dead Air. It was twelve years ago when I started working as a radio journalist that I first heard about the danger lurking in broadcast silence. A stretch of quiet on the airwaves could lead to a broadcasting crisis. Oliver Brod knows the danger of Dead Air also. He's a fellow radio producer from Berlin, Germany.

**Oliver Brod:** I actually did a radio broadcast, a radio drama, where I used this effect, and I had two seconds of silence, absolute silence, digital silence, no noise, no nothing in my show, and it came back from the broadcasting company and said "Oh there is an error, there's something wrong with your piece." I said no, I want it to be like that. So they said "Okay, but don't overdo it. Please next time don't do it, because we have some special routines in our system that want to prevent the broadcast to be silent." Because when silence occurs in radio, maybe something's wrong. There is something happening that is to be avoided.

**Bilal Qureshi:** I mean it's interesting you're basically implying that our field, our medium of radio, has kind of natural immunities or has built up sort of natural antibodies to silence.

**Oliver Brod:** Yeah that's interesting. So radio is against silence? That's interesting. Something against silence... *[pauses]*

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**Bilal Qureshi:** Why allow for silence where there could be music, ambient sound, chatter, conversation, and above all, the comfort of noise? Lately it seems to me that the fear of dead air – the fear of silence – has made its way outside the radio studio. Everywhere is noise... and noise is everywhere.

*[street noise from New Delhi]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** In the age of cities, traffic noise. In the age of global crisis, political noise. In the age of smartphones, incessant digital noise. Maybe it's everyone else... or maybe it's just me. But it seems like silence has gone missing. Quietly, I've started turning to apps to block the Internet, to try to block time, to try to stay focused. And then I keep seeing books about the idea of quiet, of mindfulness, of the attention economy that's taking all of our focus away from us. And then last year I saw a small, elegant book that's become an international bestseller. It's layered with beautiful images of horizons and brief sentences and it's called *Silence: In the Age of Noise*.

**Erling Kagge:** Today it's translated into 37 languages. What that says is that it's a global phenomenon. That people feel cheated by circumstances. That they really need silence in their lives.

**Bilal Qureshi:** It's written by Norwegian explorer and publisher Erling Kagge. Kagge had walked to the South Pole, and it made him realize that he had forgotten what it meant to listen and to listen in silence. I came to meet him at home in Oslo.

**Erling Kagge:** Man has always been scared of silence. And the reason of course is because in the silence you meet yourself while in the noise you live through other people. Noise will always be the easiest option and to search for silence, and discover silence is the difficult option.

**Bilal Qureshi:** The book *Silence* got me thinking about the geography of noise. It's definitely pretty loud in my neighborhood in Washington D.C. I had lived recently in India, in Delhi, where the noise levels were next level. And when I started thinking about when I had last remembered what silence felt like or what it had meant, I think about myself in Berlin, Germany. I had been there for a year on a fellowship in 2011/2012, and all I remember about the city is how quiet it seemed to be many days of the week and many hours of the day. *[pause]* I remember the large windows in my small Berlin apartment that sealed all noise out. *[window opening]* The bird songs in the forest nearby that you could hear every morning when you went for a walk. *[ambient sound of forest]* Long silent bike rides *[biking noise]* and people quietly reading their newspapers in lakeside cafes with no accompanying soundtrack. It was in Germany when I first heard the English-word 'Quietude' – the blend of quiet and solitude I think I've increasingly been yearning for again. So I decided to go back to Berlin this summer in search of 'Quietude'. *[church bells]* It's Sunday. It's the day of silence here. Minimal noise and sound is allowed. Shops are closed. Berlin's trains glide past me... speeding across an expansive city of villages where families are taking their day off, spending it in parks or at home, away from shopping centers and busy task-lists. *[ambience train]* If you step away from the streets of any Berlin neighborhood, you easily walk into an apartment complex that has an inner courtyard. They're known as 'Hinterhofs'. They're spaces that separate the street from private spaces, and that's how the quiet begins. *[courtyard silence]* The apartment I've rented for the summer has a large courtyard, and I have a tiny space in the very, very back. There are towering trees that stretch seven floors into the air creating a canopy of shade and silence just a few blocks from some of the busiest and famous clubs in the city. *[sirens of train doors closing]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** The next day I leave Kreuzberg for suburban West Berlin. *[train engine sound]* Past the street musicians and all the various metro stations I have to go through... *[U-Bahn street music]* I am traveling to meet a fellow American who has lived in Berlin for years. His name is Alex Marashian. He's a writer, a musician, a creative, an advertising executive. But above all, he's a walker, and he's made it his practice to spend every day walking across the city.

**Alex Marashian:** I think it didn't begin as me intending to have a practice but me enjoying having a bit of a walk to work, and then I realized that there were all of these opportunities to skip a different station. Taking a bit more time walking, it's a time to think about things that you aren't normally thinking of when you're answering emails and doing that. I realized that it was sort of a free form creative space, and that was really powerful and I felt that immediately "oh I've got that" besides just the feeling of feeling good of your body moving.

**Bilal Qureshi:** I meet Alex right outside the Grunewald, the forest where we're going to go for a walk.

**Alex Marashian:** It takes about a half an hour if I walk straight here fast, and then once I go in, I'm lost. So for the next few hours you can just be on trails and it's really great.

**Bilal Qureshi:** The crazy thing I'm always reminded of is that we're just steps away from the street traffic and busy neighborhood where he lives.

**Alex Marashian:** Part of my attraction and why I love to go without earphones is just to listen. Listening while walking is part of walking meditations that I do. And what I think is interesting about this is that in a way there is no silence. That's the point and... *[pauses]* *[ambience of car sound blending into bird sounds]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** There's so many birds all over...maybe it's just because there are so many trees it seems in Berlin?

**Alex Marashian:** Yeah. I think that because when you get into a place that's quiet you start to hear sounds more...and so it's an interesting kind of place to listen. *[ambience of birds singing]*



**Bilal Qureshi:** The German author and columnist Georg Diez has written for *Der Spiegel*, the leading magazine here, for many years. He's a columnist and a trained historian, and he tells me the love of the forest and contemplation and personal time is rooted in the history of German Romanticism and writers like Goethe and Schiller.

**Georg Diez:** It's how you see man in connection with nature, not in connection with societies. So you wander into the world, you're alone, and that's your way to make contact with the world. That is the Romantic project, the journey of the individual. So that inherent connection between loneliness and quiet is in major paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, bordering the depressive, so it's a thin line. The German Romanticism is a thin line, as is silence. It can be a blessing, but it can also be a burden.

*[pause]*

*[train engine sound restarts]*

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**Bilal Qureshi:** My next stop is at my friend and fellow radio producer Oliver Brod's studio in Northern Berlin.

**Oliver Brod:** So let's get upstairs...

*[keys shaking and door opens]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** Oliver has built his perfect silent island here in the middle of a busy multicultural neighborhood in the Berlin suburb of Wedding.

**Oliver Brod:** I feel so relaxed when entering my little sound atelier. First floor. My Avalon! *[sighs]* So this is the studio room where I do all the mixing. *[Silence]* ...what I love most in my studio is that we have this silence here...and then just open this sound-proof door to the balcony... *[ambience of outdoors, lawnmower, birds]* ...and there's the world! So what I found very healthy and very helpful is to get out of my artificial sound world, open this door, and be in a real sonic ambience.

**Bilal Qureshi:** And what we're hearing right outside your silent, extremely sound-proof studio as soon as you open the window is planes landing from Tegel, we have people partying, we have your wife mowing the lawn right below us...

**Oliver Brod:** And yeah that's the world. And what I found so interesting is that when you're going from this very quiet studio ambience into this ambient panorama here, I sometimes find it so rich, because my ears were allowed to have some silence and now I feel like this world is not very noisy, but very interesting. Maybe you want to just listen to this. Even the lawnmower is... *[laughs]* is interesting.

*[lawnmower sound]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** Oliver's wife Clau, who has just come back from a foreign assignment, is mowing the lawn outside. It's a good idea since this is not going to be possible tomorrow, that being Sunday.

**Oliver Brod:** Is it allowed in America, for example, to mow your lawn on Sunday?

**Bilal Qureshi:** To mow your lawn?

**Oliver Brod:** To mow, yeah.

**Bilal Qureshi:** Yeah you can mow your lawn whenever you want. Nobody can stop...

**Oliver Brod:** It's not allowed in Germany.

**Bilal Qureshi:** You couldn't do this on Sunday?

**Oliver Brod:** You couldn't do that on Sunday. Definitely, you couldn't do that on Sunday. We would always do our mowing... all the loud work is not allowed on Sundays. If some neighbor would call the police and would say "...hey my neighbor is doing the lawn or doing other loud stuff like renovating your house or something like that," police would come, really, and tell you, don't you do that. It's not allowed, because the

Sunday is a quiet day...'Stiller Feiertag'. *[laughs]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** Is the 'Stiller Tag' idea very important to you as well, the idea of quiet?

**Clau Knobloch:** Yes of course. I never, for example, listen to music at home because I prefer silence.

**Bilal Qureshi:** You travel a lot. Do you really notice a difference between Germany and other countries when it comes to quiet and silence?

**Clau Knobloch:** Well, in a lot of countries that I travel to it's really hard to get any silence at all because even if there's kind of no noise from traffic, there's at least an air conditioning making this swirling sound. So yeah it's usually hard to get pure silence in the countries that I'm traveling to.

**Bilal Qureshi:** ...and now on Samstag, Saturday, Clau can begin the lawnmower again.

*[lawnmower restarts]*

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**Sieglinde Geisel:** Germany certainly belongs to the societies that tries to curb noise more than others maybe. In Germany you have regulations and rules about everything so... *[laughs]*.

**Bilal Qureshi:** The journalist Sieglinde Geisel tells me that beyond the historical role of the church in creating those quiet Sundays, there is very little patience for noisy people, noisy machines, and even the kinds of toys that would pass for normal in many other parts of the world.

**Sieglinde Geisel:** Germany is not the most boisterous country you can imagine. So it has both sides. On the one hand, one tries not to be too noisy because people are easily disturbed by noise, but on the other hand, you know, it has always this kind of...you can also be a Nazi about noise.

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*[lawnmower]*

**Oliver Brod:** There is also a sign on the machine that says it's 96db maximum, so there is a loudness level on the machine that was tested so it is in technical terms, it is not too loud.

**Bilal Qureshi:** Is that true for other machines as well for home?

**Oliver Brod:** Yeah we have this. I bought a dishwasher that is 42db. Okay I am a noise addict, I am a sound addict, so I always look for this one but yeah...

*[toddler and Brod family chatting]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** He lives with his family in a large villa located directly next to the quietest place you might find in Berlin... an old cemetery.

**Oliver Brod:** One of the reasons we picked this house was that it is actually built next door to a cemetery. We have a retreat here, a silent retreat. I grew up in the middle of

a forest, so at least the feeling on a Sunday morning when the city is really quiet and nothing is happening here, it's really making me feel very much at home.

**Bilal Qureshi:** Oliver and I step out of his house for a walk through the cemetery. It sits directly behind the back wall of his home. *[airplane and park sounds]* The tombstones of Berlin can't help but make me think about the history of this particular city.

**Oliver Brod:** This is a very interesting memorial here. We're standing... I don't know if this has anything to do with silence but this is the memorial of the Familie Eugen Gutmann, which was one of the founders of Dresdner Bank, a very, very important businessman in the 20s. And he built his memorial on this special cemetery here, because this is a non-Christian cemetery. And obviously they were Jewish, of Jewish origin. See, there is a signature there or is written that the children, both children Fritz Gutmann and Louise Gutmann were not buried here. They were murdered in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. *[pause]* And...this speaks a lot to me, this, this memorial here. *[birds and cemetery ambience]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** It's interesting this whole idea of thinking about Germany and thinking about noise because in so many ways speaker technology, radio technology, microphones, it's really a German specialty, and it's something that people all over the world think about, how incredible German sound technology is. And of course remembering always that we're in a profoundly postwar country where the soundscape of Berlin must have been...I mean, unreal during the war. The idea for years all this noise that would have been part of what it would have meant to be at war. And now, as part of postwar Germany, it seems there's a lot of reflection and contemplation all the time about what it means to be a society, what it means to be in politics. Your Chancellor was seen as a kind of quiet leader rather than a loud, kind of intense leader. So there's also this interesting thing where I almost feel like is the quiet and the kind of slower way of thinking about things here also connected to the fact that once this was this extraordinarily loud engine of a society?

**Oliver Brod:** I think Germany was too loud 70 years ago. We caused too much noise in the world. We started two wars, and even in my house you see the bullet holes of Russian bullets outside. Maybe that led to a quieter approach to how could we as Germans really be part of this international dialogue? What is our way to express ourselves? That we have to think first before speaking. That's one of the educational goals my grandma told me: "Think first before speaking!" - "Denk nach bevor du redest!" This is the German saying. "Erst nachdenken, dann sprechen". And maybe it has something to do with our history, because there was so much said and done without thinking...from the guts, just from the guts, that caused so much pain and so much terror in the world...that we are more like looking for our inner voice to really get further.

*[birds chirping, silence]*

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*[jazzy street musician ambience]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** But contemporary Berlin is now a global, multicultural, modern city, and the culture of silence that has defined history here, it's rooted in its Romanticism or its postwar need for quiet, all of that culture is changing as the city is changing.

*[Ambience in Berlin-Kreuzberg: sirens, horns, drilling]*

My own coveted Berlin quietude is being frequently disrupted by a huge drilling project on my street. Car-sharing services are choking traffic and there are lots of tourists from everywhere, speaking in every language, at very different volume levels.

*[Spanish tourists scream "Mallorca!"]*

**Bilal Qureshi:** And to puncture my silent fantasies even more, the latest article to go viral is about the breaking point of German nerves about the overcrowding and noise in cities like Berlin.

**Marcus Rohwetter:** My name is Marcus Rohwetter. I work for the weekly paper *Die Zeit* and I wrote the cover story called "Der Kampf um Raum und Ruhe," which may be translated as the fight for space and quietness. The headline was "Platz Da!" we say in German, may translate it into "Gimme Space!" And...we're facing a rising level of road rage and aggression on the streets during the last years in Germany, because you have to know that the German cities are very old, centuries old, and when they were designed no one knew that one day people will drive with SUVs *[laughs]* or even with cars. Everyone wants to get his personal moment of quietness, of loneliness, of relaxing in a vibrant, urban area, and no one has the ideal way of solving the problem, but everyone is aware that there is a problem.



**Bilal Qureshi:** The journalist Sieglinde Geisel says the current crisis of silence – that not only I'm facing but that many have been complaining about – is not actually about physical noise.

**Sieglinde Geisel:** I mean the question is of course, what is noise? My central thesis is that noise originates in your head and not in the environment, because it's always an interpretation of sound that makes a sound noise. No sound is per se can be noise. It becomes noise only in the moment it is perceived as noise, and we say "oh we don't want that, oh it scares me!"

**Bilal Qureshi:** Her book is called *Nur im Weltall ist es wirklich still* – "Only in Outer-space is there actual Silence."

**Sieglinde Geisel:** I give a history of noise that I feel that there are certain noise revolutions that have been happening. And the first revolution is when people started to work with metal so when you put metal on metal, it produces noises that are far louder than anything that nature can produce, so that was the first. Then the second revolution was when machines came into play, you know the industrialization. And the third noise revolution to my mind is when it became possible to record and to store sound and to play it at will. And the last revolution, the fourth revolution, is not

audible really. It's the digital noise and I consider this to be noise because of my reaction to it. When I go on Facebook and I see in a heated debate all those commentaries, I feel like I'm in a marketplace and people are shouting at each other. I experience it very much like noise.

**Bilal Qureshi:** Geisel makes me think about whether the real reason I feel an absence of quietude in my life is because I've wasted yet another day streaming Netflix, answering WhatsApp notes, posting images on Instagram. Geisel suggests that the idea of finding a perfect setting, some perfect country, some perfect city, like Berlin, is an oppressive and unrealistic idea.

**Sieglinde Geisel:** I mean the idea that we could find the ideal auditive environment is actually a very repressive idea, because it always includes that other people shut up. And if you understand the psychological forces that are behind our awareness of noise, then you understand it has much more to do with you yourself than with the environment.

**Bilal Qureshi:** Sieglinde Geisel says it's not physical noise but the noise inside our heads that's causing a lot of the crisis of silence today.

**Sieglinde Geisel:** Seneca, like two thousand years ago, he said the real problem is not so much the sounds that we perceive as noise but the "restlessness of our soul." People are so much starved of silence and they of course they're not aware that it has nothing to do with noise but with their inner noise.

*[park ambience]*



**Bilal Qureshi:** Erling Kagge, the author of the other bestseller on silence, admits that Northern Europe may be filled with islands of silence. But he agrees with Geisel: Silence is a practice. It's a habit and it's a routine that can be integrated into every day.

**Erling Kagge:** You can't wait for the silence to come to you, so you have to invent your own silence. I have traveled to more than a hundred countries, met many, many people, and I think, you know, to search for silence is something deeply human. It's not about where you're born or how we grew up, because a life without silence is a very, very difficult life.

**Bilal Qureshi:** It seems that what you're also saying is that we don't have to go to a specific place to find silence. That it's something that we all have within us, it's primal, it's a human tendency that we have just been neglecting.

**Erling Kagge:** Absolutely. I think you can find silence anywhere, and you can't wait for silence to come to you, and it's there inside you at all times. I once flew from Oslo to Sri Lanka to this yoga, vegan Ayurveda retreat. It was a fantastic trip. I stayed for ten days. It was quite a silent place. But when I returned back home, I was just questioning myself why do I have to go to Sri Lanka, fly half the world to experience silence? So that taught me a little lesson: to not make it too complicated and don't think too much. Instead of thinking all the time - I like thinking but not all the time - I like

experiencing. And I think we should sometimes experience more than actually thinking.  
**Bilal Qureshi:** Great. Well, is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to say?  
**Erling Kagge:** I think you know it's... [pauses] ...I think you know it's... uhm... the best is kind of communicated in silence.

[silence]

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**Bilal Qureshi:** For a radio project about my search for Quietude, I think I've already spoken too much. There is perhaps no more appropriate fitting end to this quest for Quietude than radio silence. [pause] As I leave Berlin, I remember the fear of dead air where this journey began and where it now draws to its close. Silence should be broadcast – and it should be heard. Now, more than ever, it feels like essential listening. And as I'm starting to learn, it's even streaming at home. [silence] I'm Bilal Qureshi.

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