

Déjeuner with Professor Alfred Tomatis:

About the thalamus and cho-la-cote

Author: Susan Andrews

Contact: suzieandrews@mac.com

Center/Institution: Listening and Learning Center

Country: United States (Metairie, Louisiana)

Month: January

Year: 2008

Any number of the international group of consultants trained in the Tomatis Method by Dr. Tomatis himself will surely appreciate this vignette of my time with the Professor. It was in 1991 or 1992 that I trained with Dr. Tomatis in Paris. You will remember, I am sure, the many levels of protocol and proper behavior of which we had to be aware. One of the most intimidating, and at the same time invigorating, moments of our training in those days came with the “Invitation to *Déjeuner* with Dr. and Lena Tomatis.” Senior staff was also often present. It was toward the end of our first 2 weeks of training.

Two of us, both trainees from New Orleans, were invited that day –Dr. Michelle Trumps and I. When we were invited, Madame Tomatis warned us sternly to “be on time.” She failed, however, to warn us that *déjeuner* for the Professor consisted of an apple and a morsel of *fromage*. Further, she did not indicate that what Professor Tomatis ate, we also ate. In the end, this was fine with me, as I was too nervous to eat anyway. Protocol demanded that I sit at the Professor’s right hand (ear).

May I digress from my story for a moment? My professional training is that of a clinical neuropsychologist. What that means in plain language is that I study the brain and what parts of the brain are specifically adapted to performing certain tasks, like reading or learning to speak. So, I hope that you can understand the question that I had been waiting to ask the Professor.

After some shuffling of seats and positions, we were all seated. Lunch was served, starting with the fruit. Not being fond of fruit, I declined. Madame Tomatis looked severely at my empty plate, but I have managed to outlast even my own mother on this personal preference. The Professor was cutting his apple when I asked a question that had been burning in my brain for days since arriving in Paris.

I cleared my throat and asked in my best college-level French, “Professor, why does the Method work?”

Most of the people at the table looked stricken, but the Professor understood where I was coming from, as he had always had a great interest in neurology. In the silence that followed, he did not say a word for a moment and then, as if suddenly making a decision, he called out for someone to bring him a “tape machine.” It took at least 4 or 5 minutes for a tape recorder to be delivered to the table during which time no one uttered a sound. I remember becoming distinctly uncomfortable in this interim for fear I had opened a Pandora’s Box.

When the recording machine arrived at the table, the Professor tested it by pressing the button for recording and saying “Recording, recording...*un, deux, trois...*” Then, he played it back several times. In all of this time and activity, no one spoke. I was becoming distinctly uncomfortable. Dr. Tomatis adjusted his chair to face mine a bit more closely and rearranged the plates and glasses slightly to accommodate the microphone and the tape recorder.

Finally, with a flourish, he turned on the machine and turned to face me, beaming! “Thalamus!” he boomed. “Thalamus,” he insisted a second time and then looked expectantly at me, as he waited for some notion of insight to dawn in my brain (now numb due to low blood sugar).

“Thalamus?” I questioned weakly.

“Thalamus,” he boomed, with a note of finality. He then embarked on a long discourse about how the thalamus and the Method worked.

Most of the neurological detail of his response is covered in his books and articles, particularly those that refer to *les trois intégrateurs*. I will not attempt a full explanation here; however, this was the single most important interaction for me with Professor Tomatis, as it truly set the tone for my many subsequent years of study concerning the Tomatis Method. I had been so sure that the success of the Method could not have been due simply to those tiny ear muscles, but rather, the reason that the Method works just had to be due to the brain and the effect of the music on the brain.

Dr. Tomatis went on to explain why he believed that the thalamus was primarily responsible for the success of the Method. The thalamus, he said, is like a huge intersection of many major highways that run through the brain and connect up different areas of brain function with sensory information, coming primarily from the ears and eyes. Or, you could think of the thalamus as a big train station (*Gare du Nord*); the train tracks are the nerves, and the trains are the packets of information running along the nerve tracks.

Just like our major highways or train stations, with the trains or cars running on them for years, the thalamus gets dirty from people throwing trash out of their car. In the case of adults, the trash is usually bits of emotion that are no longer properly connected to their thoughts. So, he explained, when adults do “the Listening,” they will often have little outbursts of tears or anger, without even knowing why they are suddenly tearing up. This passes quickly without incident, *normalement*.

Young children usually do not have time to build up the road trash of adults.

However, some of the child’s highways may not be fully or properly constructed. In such cases, the Method helps make the connections complete.

Many years later, in 2000, in an article [\[1\]](#) for the *Integrative Physiological and Behavioral Science* journal that I wrote with Dr. Billie Thompson, I attempted to offer a neuropsychological explanation for why the Tomatis Method works. The seeds of that article came from my *déjeuner* with Professor Tomatis.

On our second personal invitation to dine with Dr. Tomatis, it was Dr. Michelle Trumps’ turn to ask the conversation-setting question. By the way, when Lena Tomatis invited us to lunch the second time, she fixed me firmly in the eye and said,

“And, we will be having fruit and cheese.” I replied mischievously, “In that case, I will be eating before I come.”

Dr. Trumps, now a chiropractic physician, was an occupational therapist at the time. She was very interested in obtaining more information about the senses, how the

Method helps to integrate sensory information for the individual, and the issues of dyslexia.

Dr. Tomatis loved working with Dr. Trumps. She does not speak French well, and he was always at pains to make his explanations clear for her in English. Here is a summary of what he said that day at lunch.

“The eye, the ear, the face, and the mouth are all connected.”

“You must have an association between the eye and the ear. If you have a right ear dominance and a left eye dominance, you will not have symmetrization [synchronized speed pattern of sound and sight]. If you are reading a word with different letters, and the ear is quicker than the eye, you will hear in your mind the sound of the letter before you are reading the letters. Then you may reverse some of the letters.”

“For example,” Dr. Tomatis continued, “your eye is watching letter by letter (C-H-O-C-O-L-A-T-E), but your ear is hearing (CHO – CO – LATE). If the ear is quicker than the eye, in fact, you could see C-H-O-C-O-L-A-T-E and be looking at ‘L-A-T-E’ when the ear is hearing ‘CO’ and you might say, ‘CHO-LA-COTE.’ This is because your eye is in back of what you are hearing.”

In the above example, Dr. Tomatis used the word *chocolate* to illustrate the fact that, if you are left ear dominant and right eye dominant, you could have a problem with reading. If your eye is quicker than your ear, you may be looking at the sound of one letter and hearing the sound of the next letter. When the eye is quicker than the ear, the association will be made by the syllables and not the letters.

“If someone is right eared and right eyed,” he went on, “then there is usually no problem. If, however, the person is left eared and left eyed, it will take more time to transcribe and read. He will not have fluency in his reading and will not understand what he is reading. In the case of someone who is too right eared, he will be reading too quickly and the risk would be that he would not have any memorizing of what he is reading. Each has to find his own rhythm to adapt his reading to memorize at the same time.

Dr. Tomatis finished by saying that many problems with language and learning to read (such as many of the forms of dyslexia) are related to timing issues and to a proper or improper balance of the speed and content of information that one gets from the eyes and ears.

I hope that other IARCTC Consultants can remember special stories with Dr. Tomatis that illustrate the Method and how it works. And, I hope that you will be willing to share these stories in coming issues of *Ricochet*

Footnotes

1. Thompson, B.M. and Andrews, S.R. An historical commentary on the physiological effects of music: Tomatis, Mozart and neuropsychology. *Integrative Physiological and Behavioral Science*, 35(3), 174-188.