

PIA PALME

Texts and Writings as Agencies in Composition: A Posthuman Tractate

Prelude

Listen.

Words surface on this page.
Sounds surface in mind.

More words
On the white stage in front of your eyes.
Words
Performing

Taking space

And time.

One by one, they enter your mind.

A Tractate – What We Carry

Words, texts, and writings are important agencies in my practice. They activate myself and others with whom I collaborate and communicate with the respective environment and audience. I prefer to explore texts as agencies – rather than objects or materials – because they interact with human beings, stimulating emotion, insight, and imagination. They act as artistic forces with whom I cooperate. Furthermore, texts and languages

carry a lot with them: they are formed by their respective origins and histories and are steeped in heritage, both in a personal and a cultural sense.

Often, I carry a collection of ideas, sounds and fragments of texts in my mind for a long time, before bringing them together and notating them into a consistent composition. I do the same in my research, and the ideas which I present here have been inhabiting my mind over years. During the period of gestation, some items of my collection might come to the surface, I might handle and explore them, and put them back in again. The Latin word *tractare* means ‘to carry, to handle, to investigate’. *Tractare* describes my artistic process in a nutshell: carrying ideas and knowledges through a gestation period, handling them and investigating, then composing. The term handling is important because it recognises the physicality of this process. Mental activities, writing and thinking are physical activities.

The embryonic collection I am pregnant with leads a life of its own. Interacting and inwardly heating up like Donna Haraway’s notorious compost pile,¹ materials mature, grow and rot, and re-assemble in an organic flow of fermentation and decomposition that contributes to my process. Another word comes to mind here: ‘compost’ and ‘composing’ do in fact have the same root. Examining both words, we find the term ‘with’ (Latin: *com*) right in the prefix. Composing is a deliberate action of bringing things together. Over time, I came to trust this ecological process. The materials in my internal compost heap – including words and text fragments – become agencies in themselves; they facilitate my compositional work. Sometimes single words stand out and become enzymes of my multifold practice. The American poet Amanda Gorman writes about the multiplicity of human nature, which appears as a collective ‘we’ rather than as a singular being, because of the countless entities we carry as agencies, on and within our very bodies and minds:

A human
Microbiome is all the writhing forms on

& inside this body
Drafted under our life.

We are not me –
We are we.

Call us
What we carry.²

When I refer to the work I carry out, I am referring to composing, performing and conducting artistic research, mainly around contemporary experimental music and 'music theatre' in the most inclusive sense. My practice is a coherent expanse of interrelated activities and disciplines, with listening perception at the core. Texts are part of my compositional activity, in making sketches, notation, and for verbal exchange with performers. Verbal productions are part of performance; my vocal parts contain a variety of sung and spoken texts. At times, I might implement writing on stage as a performative element. In my research, forms of reading, writing, speaking and listening are central means of communicating through/with text. I write poetic, experimental, artistic and scientific texts and find it important to develop ways to integrate these text-formats – because that kind of integrative polyphony corresponds with what my practice and experience are like today.

Posthuman thought calls for polyphonic thinking and integrationist approaches. In accordance with the philosopher Rosi Braidotti,³ I propose that composition is a compound field of art-with-research-practices, opening up terrains where artistic activity and knowledge production can co-emerge and interact, with listening as a defining and binding factor. What is even more interesting, any mode of working with texts, such as writing and reading, connects to the sense of hearing and activates inner vocality. Listening becomes the tool to integrate multiple approaches towards texts around composition and music theatre.

Composers like myself who use more complex settings or specialise in theatrical formats have long been confronted with how disciplines interact – and productively interfere – with each other and with various technologies and professional interests. In essence, the activity of composing interconnects human beings and non-human agencies in a meaningful way. This posthuman position allows me to look into composed works as theatrical – or performative – ecologies. With the planetary crisis as a frame of reference, my interest is to make music with environments, or environments with music. My practice more and more evolves into a complex ecofeminist activity well suited for a posthuman world.

From this area of departure, let us embark on a tractate on text and writings via listening perception – a tractate which is, in itself, a written experiment, designed to handle text in a more theatrical way. Poetic writing interacts with autobiographic observations and scholarly texts. As the composer Dylan Robinson mentions, a page is a stage, a space where text

can be consciously staged, and with the pacing and rendering of my exploration I would like to address ‘the ways by which space exerts agency’.⁴

Scene I

Paper as space and stage.
Inside our mind, words sing on yet another hidden stage
Mirroring the external visible one.

Do you hear them?
Listen again, they talk to you.

Take your time.

They take your time.

We love you, dear reader.
We have turned into sounds.
We have turned into voices, inner voices.
We have turned into thoughts.

Your thoughts.
You create us with your every breath.

Or is it the other way round? Do we create you?

[It doesn’t matter whether you read this text silently or whether you audibly pronounce it while reading.]

Lines of Aural Action: Listening, Reading, Thinking, Composing,
Voicing, Writing

From the faculty of hearing, there branches off a field of core activities which constantly intermingle in my artistic process as composer. To begin with, listening perception defines and underpins my practice. With my ears, I connect with the world around me. As perceptual process, listening is an embodied activity that involves one’s entire brain-body-in-culture – a con-

ception introduced by feminist neuroscience⁵ – and a creative act of world-making by ear.⁶ In an individual process, listeners use their ears and consciousness to tune into a situation.⁷ This idea deeply resonates with indigenous positions such as described by Dylan Robinson,⁸ and with ‘feminist listening’, a term which I introduced in my thesis to acknowledge a mode of listening from a female* position.⁹ As composer, I work professionally with human and non-human modes of sound production and listen to performers, musicians and instruments. With my inner ear, I imagine sounds which I then notate to activate others – who make them their own in their artistic process.

Decoding is the performer’s individual process of taking possession of the score, customising the mapped material to suit their needs – or, in a singer’s case, their individual voice. This holds especially true for vocal scores, as individual voices are unique in their characteristics and capabilities. It is imperative that performers receive ample time for their process of decoding my scores. Upon a composition’s performance, the audience also enters into their process of reception as decoding. Their perceptual process is as personal and creative as mine; their listening perception re-composes the work.¹⁰

Listening perception also interacts with language and the spoken word, and furthermore with most mental processes: that is, with thinking activity. Any spoken words, writings or texts that we utilise as human beings, regardless of their content or format, are inextricably tied to language and voice. They relate to hearing perception, activating an inner ear and vocality: we hear, read, and imagine words as sounds. Since my childhood, I have experienced my thinking process as a vivid vocal and sonic activity, an auditory dimension within. It is highly interesting to me as a composer that mind can be characterised by the qualities of a sonosphere.¹¹ This particular aspect of mental activity and awareness has been observed and described in detail in various cultures, such as by Western linguists, philosophers and phenomenologists, but also by Buddhist meditators in Asia, who have investigated mental phenomena, inner vocality and consciousness through meditation for more than 2000 years. In his phenomenology *Listening and Voice*, the American philosopher and researcher into acoustics and technology Don Ihde explains how the vocal quality of thoughts is easily overlooked because of its constant presence as a background sonority. With Ihde, inner speech is a bodily experience ‘marked by the intimate sense of *my active thinking*’. It appears as a ‘singing’ of phrases and sentences while changing its textures, colours and speed. It moves within, filling one’s entire inner space, as if following its own dramaturgy.¹² One could say that the mind’s

activities emerge as a complex inner opera. In a similar way, Buddhist philosophers liken the permanent mental commentary to an inner drama that accompanies our everyday lives, experiences, and actions.¹³

To sum up, listening mirrors composing – both in my own experience and in reference to contemporary brain research. As readers, we discover and decode a text in our individual process of perception and listening. Reading mirrors writing, as a creative and artistic process, in the same way as listening re-enacts composition. In the following, let me explore the multiple ways in which verbal or written communication, language and text appear in connection with my work and performative practice.

Scene II

We are your thoughts resounding in the theatre between your ears
Singing, murmuring, whispering, speaking, commenting, sometimes yelling,
sometimes barely audible
Ongoing and quite musical.
Do you notice? How do you like the performance?

We are your heartbeat opera, self-composed.
Always trying to entertain you.
To make you forget how lonely you feel.

We will always perform for you.
You can fall asleep if you want.
We will be with you until you die.
We will never leave you.

Time goes by.

Time taking space.
Space taking time.

Time is space is on this page.

Libretti and Poetic Texts. Composing and Staging (with)
Text in Performance

In vocal compositions, texts and language are agencies to transmit meaningful and political content. They enable me to integrate thinking mind, posthuman culture and consciousness in the performative nexus. Ever since my doctoral research at the University of Huddersfield, I regularly practice writing, handwriting and creating text as an author, in parallel with the compositional process or as a stand-alone activity. To quote from my thesis *The noise of mind. A feminist practice in composition*:

It was the writings of film-maker, composer and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha which inspired and encouraged me to begin writing texts myself. In her exploration about writing text as a woman, she notes the importance of becoming ‘a holder of speech’, that is to occupy a position of power and leadership through writing and the transformation of language.¹⁴

My texted works are characterised by an intentional conflict between composed vocality and text. Language’s representative function is disrupted, while the (composed) emotional urgency and intensity of the vocal exchange remain intact. Language is ‘exposed’: the text of a work neither communicates a narrative nor a story, nor does it need to be understood – in spite of the fact that the texts I use have been carefully researched, written, or selected for the respective composition. In my postdramatic works, a performing vocalist communicates to an audience by means of ‘language as such’,¹⁵ by the fact that typical sonic patterns of human speech are recognisable in listening.¹⁶

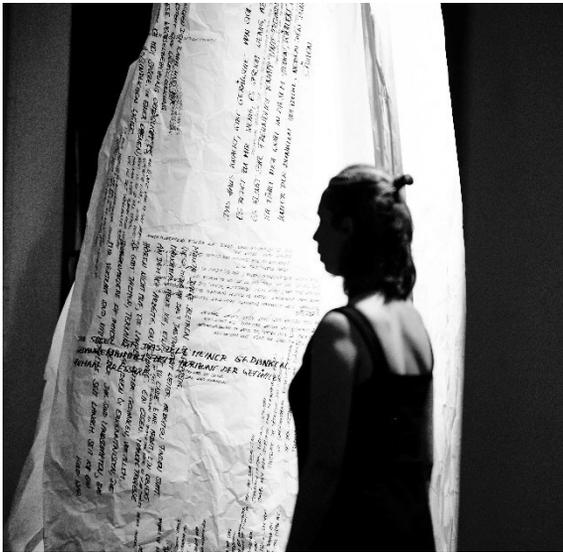
In composing libretti, I prefer to work with a collection of poetic texts or fields of texts, which I treat as a quarry or a treasure house. Selecting what is needed, I often edit text while composing. Single words as well as entire sentences can become significant in my search for specific weight and profundity. It is difficult to describe the selection procedure. Guided by perception, emotional impact and awareness, I scrutinise the quality and characteristics of specific passages of text: how do they touch me and speak to me, deep inside my entirety as brainbody-in-culture? What do I understand, what resonates? In my thesis, I wrote:

I listen into sentences, words, syllables, and phonemes while pursuing the aural core of a text. I expose myself to their tangible and emotional essence, to their meaning as I hear it, with text as a material sonic body. From there I process, distort, knead what I hear internally into a composed vocal shape. This self-exposure is intimate on an almost physical scale, as if I would take a listening

position touching sound from inside. At times I fragment text into particles beyond recognition, into shards, single sounds or phonemes. The final form of the text emerges as I compose, and may then appear as a severe violation of the original.¹⁷

However, I do so out of respect for human perception, resonance and awareness. With my own texts, I can easily do this. However, it is difficult to convince a living author about the necessity to handle their texts in such a way. Finding resonances and responses allows me to compose layers of relationships and engagement. I am interested in emotional developments and transitions between psychological states, in composing post-human dramaturgies.

Fig. 1: Soprano Juliet Fraser and the paper stage element in *WECHSELWIRKUNG*.
Photo by David Visnjic, Wien Modern 2020



I appreciate multiple languages such as German, English, or a bit of Latin and Italian; every language contributes its own unique sonic structure, culture and history to a libretto. Sometimes, single words stand out and become enzymes of my multifold practice, such as the term tractate,

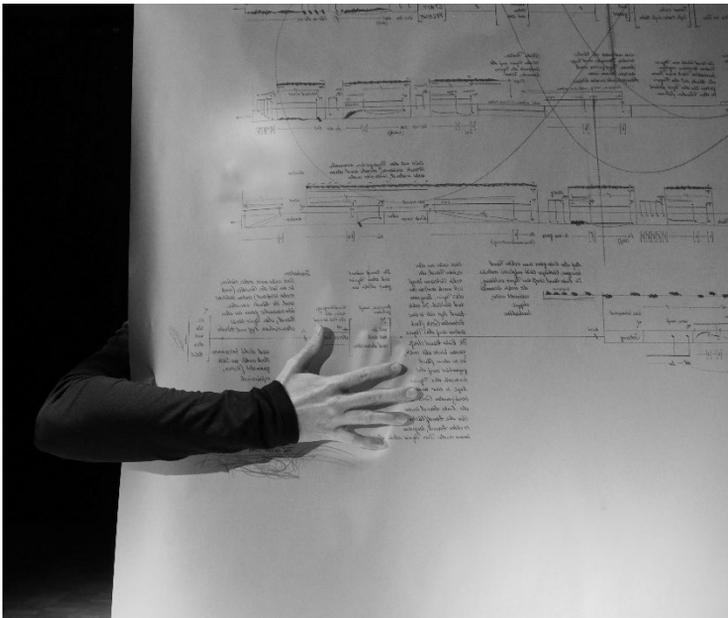
which influenced this exploration. For artistic and conceptual reasons, I might insert texts by historical authors. Such texts can inspire further processing, remixing or extending. A libretto brings together an ecology of languages, sounds, texts, and verbal cultures. I argue that in music theatre, text can be staged in different ways – singing or speaking are not the only possibilities. Therefore, I compose with texts in multiple layers and functions. Texts and words can be veiled or masked by instrumental sounds, hidden or spoken even with a closed mouth. Commentaries and libretti published in the program notes or as a booklet distributed in a performance can stimulate another form of text-experience and discourse. Text can become a visual element on stage, or be distributed electronically via loudspeakers. Through these means, I aim at making reading, writing, and decoding part of the audience's experience.

Let me give a few examples here. In my first collaborative opera *ABSTRAL* (2013), the solo baritone is at times asked to perform sung passages with a closed mouth, in order to integrate a veiled subtext – which was available to the audience in print. The libretto of my more recent collaborative work *WECHSELWIRKUNG* (2020) incorporates and extends the Italian Renaissance lyrics of an aria by the composer Francesca Caccini. They were integrated into the soprano part, and also into the part for the flutist, who is instructed to speak and whisper texts together with the instrumental performance. Furthermore, the performance of the work features a stage object – a tent-like installation which I made from paper – which displays handwritten texts as visual element. In the context of the piece and in reference to Francesca Caccini, this arrangement represents 'writing' as empowerment and can be read as a political statement about composition as feminist practice. The 'stage texts' were created in nighttime sessions of spontaneous handwriting during the final production stage, with a large pen on huge sheets of paper. I much enjoyed reflecting on my own compositional process in this way, using the opportunity to notate my experiences.

Yet another visual function of text can be found in the solo performance *SETZUNG 1.1* (2014) written for the singing actor Michaela Schausberger. Here, a semitranslucent score (2.5 by 1.2 metres) is hung as a banner on stage – a dominant visual element, mapping musical notation, the libretto, and written instructions for movement. The performer takes her position behind it. The audience can read the markings, although inverted. In this arrangement, the score membrane becomes a tool to compose the performer's visibility: touching the material, parts of the performer's body

temporarily come into clear focus, creating a kind of ‘zoom’ effect, while otherwise the score allows only a dim view of the performer’s shape (see Figure 2). The conception and text of *SETZUNG 1.1* are linked to the Baroque artist, poet, and nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Mexico, 1648–1695), whose life story and work continue to inspire me. From the age of twenty-one years onward, the highly successful author lived and worked confined in a Mexican convent. The membrane score re-enacts her retreat behind convent walls, while simultaneously exposing handwritten notation as an intermediary. At the end of the piece I quote a line from Sor Juana’s *Poem XXI*, a love poem: ‘Óyeme con los ojos’ – Hear me with eyes alone.¹⁸ Sor Juana’s paradox eloquently illustrates how, during the act of reading a love letter, visual perception invokes an inner voice in the recipient’s imagination, while at the same time calling forth the familiar sound of the author’s voice herself, speaking these lines to the beloved person.

Fig. 2: Actress Michaela Schausberger behind the membrane score in *SETZUNG 1.1*. Photo by Pia Palme, Cercle 2014



Scene III

Final scene, enter:
Silence

The white horizon.

The diva among words.

Lavishly, languidly, they trail their long white robe over the floor with a soft scraping noise.

Place your hand on this paper and stage. Touch it. Is it empty?

Gently sweep your hand across the page,
Then rest your palm lightly on your cheek.
Feel the warmth as skin touches skin.

Functional Texts and Research Writing in the Context of Music Theatre

Aside from musical notations, scores for my scenic pieces contain written text in the form of annotations, instructions, introductions or commentaries. These more functional texts can be short notes or more substantial passages. During the process of experimenting, rehearsing, producing and staging compositions, verbal communication is essential in our *métier*. Over centuries, concise vocabularies and languages have been developed by the community for their professional exchange, and passed on from one generation of artists to the next. Only recently, composers, performers, and artistic researchers began to systematically write down these exchanges, recording and innovating vocabularies in parallel with extending compositional ideas and performance techniques.

Living composers are being asked to talk about their process, for example in pre-concert talks, in conferences and academic lectures, or in interviews published in various media. Explorations from inside the compositional process and from the position of the artists themselves are becoming important. Both in academic fields and the music business, composers – as artistic researchers – learn to express their ideas skilfully and enhance their language and terminology. They find captivating words and develop individual textual styles, which are in turn influenced by the respective genre and context of their music. In increasing numbers, composers explore their practice in academia, conducting doctoral research and writing about their

findings. As a researcher and composer, I take great interest in how this verbalisation and language evolves, as more of my colleagues explore textual production and writing. This process can be understood as empowerment: writing and talking about one's music in public is a political act and transmits an awareness of power – in particular, this is true for female* composers. For Trinh T. Minh-Ha, writing is a process which distances the writer from her own text, and thus fosters empathic listening: first to one's own work, and further to the positions of others.¹⁹ This idea inspired my recent project *On the Fragility of Sounds* (2019 to 2022), a large-scale artistic research program in the field of music theatre; a focus was directed towards the creation and presentation of lectures, texts and essays by female composers and artists about their own process.²⁰ Some of them were subsequently published in the anthology *Sounding Fragilities* co-edited by theatre and performance scholar Irene Lehmann and myself.²¹

In my day-to-day routine, I notice how my mind-body setup changes when I switch from notating sound via musical notation to notating verbal content and writing texts. My internal sonic imagination deep within is more stimulated when I write music. Again, let me refer to Robinson, who explains that musical experience is 'remote from the hierarchy of syntax used to convey meaning in writing'.²² Writing functional or research texts brings me closer towards the abstract dimension, which I experience nearer to the surface and skin of my self. I might occasionally sing during composing; I might voice sentences, speaking as I think and write. To change from one time type of writing and notating to the other takes time; a substantial physical and mental change is happening. It feels like moving from one continent to the other. In my everyday practice, I have learned to allow enough space for a smooth transition to happen between different states and phases of work and writing.

Finale

They slowly, very slowly, cross the page
Now they, too, exit from this scene.

Do you feel the cool breath of Silence?
Another emptiness is unfolding
Soon, memories surface
Stories surface

We bow to you, dear reader.
Hear, hear!

Hands clapping.

Compositions

ABSTRIAL a radical opera (2013)

Collaborative music theatre – 60' with an organic installation by Ivan Fantini. Concept and direction by Paola Bianchi, Electric Indigo, Ivan Fantini, Pia Palme, Anne Waldman. Music composed by Pia Palme and Electric Indigo: score for four voices (soprano, mezzo soprano, alto, baritone), contrabass recorder, and an audio score for baritone, composed by Pia Palme; electronics composed by Electric Indigo. Libretto by Pia Palme compiled from texts by Anne Waldman, Ivan Fantini, and Pia Palme.

Premiered at Kosmos Theater, Vienna, April 24, 2013.

See under <https://piapalme.at/works/abstrial/>

SETZUNG I.I (2014)

For a female vocal performer, with a semitransparent membrane score installation – 14'

Premiered with Michaela Schausberger, voice and acting at Off-Theater, Vienna, cercle – konzertreihe für neue musik, September 24, 2014.

See under <https://piapalme.at/works/setzung-palme-2014/>

WECHSELWIRKUNG (2020)

Experimental music theatre by Pia Palme, Paola Bianchi, Juliet Fraser, Irene Lehmann, Christina Lessiak – an artistic research collaboration group as part of the PEEK Project *On the Fragility of Sounds* – 60'

Pia Palme – concept, composition, text, installation, bass recorder; Juliet Fraser – voice (soprano), dance; Paola Bianchi – choreography, dance; Christina Lessiak – artistic assistant, research, production; Irene Lehmann – dramaturgy, research; Lars Mlekusch – conductor; Molly McDolan – oboe da caccia; Sonja Leopold – harpsichord; and Ensemble PHACE.

Premiered at WUK Vienna, Projektraum, Wien Modern, November 13, 2020.

See under <https://www.fragilityofsounds.org/wechselwirkung/>

NOTES

- ¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC 2016.
- ² Amanda Gorman, *Call us What We Carry. Was wir mit uns tragen. Zweisprachige Ausgabe*, Marion Kraft and Daniela Seel (trans.), Hamburg 2021, p. 72.
- ³ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, Cambridge 2019.
- ⁴ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening. Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Minneapolis, MN 2020, p. 103.
- ⁵ Sigrid Schmitz and Grit Höppner (eds.), *Gendered Neurocultures. Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Current Brain Disorders*, Vienna 2014, p. 17.
- ⁶ Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind and Brain from Vienna 1900 to the Present*, New York, NY 2012.
- ⁷ Francisco J. Varela, Eleanor Thompson and Evan Rosch, *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge, MA 2016.
- ⁸ Robinson, *Hungry Listening* (note 4), p. 71.
- ⁹ A detailed discussion of ‘female listening’ can also be found in Christina Fischer-Lessiak’s essay ‘How feminism matters. An exploration of listening’, in Irene Lehmann and Pia Palme (eds.), *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, Hofheim 2022, pp. 85–100.
- ¹⁰ Pia Palme, *The Noise of Mind: A Feminist Practice in Composition. A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*, 2017, p. 115, http://piapalme.at/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Thesis_Palme2017_PPcorrect_last.pdf (Accessed: 2 October 2022).
- ¹¹ The term sonosphere was introduced by the composer Pauline Oliveros in her 2011 essay ‘Auralizing in the Sonosphere: A Vocabulary for Inner Sound and Sounding’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 10 (2011), Issue 2, p. 162–168, <http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/10/2/162> (Accessed: 2 October 2022).

- ¹² Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice. Phenomenologies of Sound*, Albany, NY 2007, p. 116.
- ¹³ Tetsuaki Kotoh, 'Language and Silence: Self-Inquiry in Heidegger and Zen', in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Graham Parkes (ed.), Delhi 1992, pp. 201–212.
- ¹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other. Postkolonialität und Feminismus schreiben*, Katharina Menke (trans.), Vienna 2010 (1989), p. 33.
- ¹⁵ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Karen Juers-Munby (trans.), London 2006, p. 145.
- ¹⁶ Palme, *The Noise of Mind* (note 10), p. 55.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ¹⁸ Juana Inés de la Cruz and Alan S. Trueblood (trans.), *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Cambridge, MA 1988, p. 71.
- ¹⁹ Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (note 14), p. 75.
- ²⁰ Centre for Gender Studies and Diversity, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz; the PEEK project AR537 *On the Fragility of Sounds*, www.fragilityofsounds.org (Accessed: 2 October 2022).
- ²¹ Lehmann and Palme (eds.), *Sounding Fragilities* (note 9).
- ²² Robinson, *Hungry Listening* (note 4), p. 86.