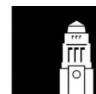
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *'"Are You Still There?" Experiencing Sonic Bothy's Verbaaaaatim'*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/219830/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Docherty, C., Iddon, M. orcid.org/0000-0003-4282-4334, Jensenius, A.R. et al. (2 more authors) (Cover date: October 2024) '"Are You Still There?" Experiencing Sonic Bothy's Verbaaaaatim'. Tempo, 78 (310). pp. 13-24. ISSN 0040-2982

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298224000354

This is an author produced version of an article published in Tempo, made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

“Are You Still There?” Experiencing Sonic Bothy’s *Verbaaaaatim*

Claire Docherty, Martin Iddon, Alexander Refsum Jensenius, Raymond MacDonald, and Jane Stanley

Introduction

Sonic Bothy is an inclusive new music ensemble that explores, composes and performs original experimental music. It comprises a group of musicians with and without additional learning support needs and works across genres in seeking to define new ideas and directions in collaborative composition. Its learning and equalities aims are not distinct from or neatly separable from its artistic aims: Sonic Bothy’s defined aim to be an experimental music ensemble is shaped by its approaches to learning and vice versa. The ensemble has explored, where possible, the approaches and activities of non-disabled emerging experimental artists in pursuit of a holistic approach to learning. It has played locally in Glasgow, integrating itself into the regional experimental music scene. It has released an album. It has moved on, particularly in 2019 and 2021, to larger festivals and commissions. Success and increased visibility for the group have raised questions about the broader cultural and media environment, at times highlighting a general absence of confidence in evaluating disabled musicians’ work, as well as gaps in understanding and the language to do so. These gaps negatively affect feelings amongst disabled musicians of ‘being received’. Those same musicians experience the need for there to be understandings of their musical identities to be urgent.

The idea of bringing ‘the whole self’ to Sonic Bothy’s work is important for all members, and can be sensed in the music, as well as being explored a little in the documentary film which accompanies the multimedia piece, *Verbaaaatim*, to which this essay turns presently. Access needs become part of relational language between participants and, too, the material qualities of these needs are explored within creative work. This is both comfortable and exciting for the group. The disconnect is, instead, a product of the reflected perceptions of wider culture, whether that be through the media or interactions with festivals, events, and so on. This ultimately affects group decisions about the musical work it presents in public.

Sonic Bothy’s *Verbaaaaatim* was commissioned for the 2021 Tectonics festival in Glasgow. It was originally intended as a live performance piece for the previous year’s festival, but became an audio-visual commission, presented online when the festival more generally moved online as a result of COVID-19 restrictions on performances and events. Shaped as much by the circumstances of the time as by the previous nine years of ensemble work, *Verbaaaaatim* is decidedly a true piece of ‘pandemic work’. Between November 2020 and April 2021, when the piece was created, the ensemble members were working remotely across Scotland—in Glasgow City, East Renfrew, Edinburgh, the Highland and Perth and Kinross—via the video conferencing platform Zoom. Two of the ensemble’s hearing-impaired members found that their hearing aids were incompatible with the technology. This resulted in one member introducing a live captioner: though the captioner initially captioned speech, this soon developed to include live audio descriptions of the improvised music played by the hearing musicians. The text which was created in the process not only permanently documented the described music but, more, over time became the basis of

interest as a score (or set of scores), both a reproduction of past improvisations and the basis for new ones.

Until April 2020, Sonic Bothy Ensemble had been a live performing group. One unexpected result of enforced remote working and the need to create an audio-visual piece of work was an accelerated shift in the ensemble's relationship with its visual identity. Previously, this had focussed, more conventionally, on album art and marketing materials, with the visual elements of performance as such restricted to decisions led by the sonic dimension of the placement of instruments and players on stage. Two collaborators were invited into the process of making the film: Matthew Walkerdine of GoodPress, Glasgow, who had previously, using materials from the group, worked on Sonic Bothy's album art and marketing posters and who was the originator of the company's current visual identity and Jen Martin, a film maker, who created the film for *Verbaaaaatim*. The existing collaboration with Walkerdine thus extended into the ensemble's musical work, while retaining a sense of continuity, stemming from the long-standing work together on visual identity. Walkerdine responded to the music and to the text to create drawings, textures, and patterns which appear in the film. Martin worked with these materials and with video recordings of the ensemble's Zoom performance, and also introduced and extended [**details from Claire**]. The audio recording comprises a single live take: demonstrating the group's abilities to improvise live was central to making this decision, though it means, too, that the video elements were created after and in response to the audio.

An Encounter

A first encounter with *Verbaaaaatim* leaves more questions than answers. It is a multimedia piece, comprised of layers of instrumental sounds (some familiar, some unfamiliar), spoken words, written words, static and dynamic graphics, and video recordings of the performers. The layers are woven together to form a complex audiovisual artwork, which feels consistently and persistently in motion, like a fast-flowing river. As a perceiver—distinct, importantly, from being a listener—it is not always clear what the force is that drives that flow forward. Is it the spoken words? Is there a narrative—produced by those words or otherwise—which acts as a conductor or commentator? What is the role of the (written) text? Are the closed captions *descriptive*? Or *instructional*? Or both? Do the graphics reflect the sonic performance or give rise to it?

Viewing *Verbaaaaatim* on a laptop, listening through headphones, eyes open for the initial screening quickly prompts questions to help scaffold the encounter, reflecting on the qualities of and the relationship between sonic and visual elements, encountered in real time, as the piece unfolds. What is the source of each of the sounds? What is the effect created by the interaction between two or more sonic events? What relationships can be identified between the sonic and visual dimensions of the piece? What sorts of embodiment are in evidence at any given point, based on what can be seen and heard?

In the opening twenty seconds, trilling and tremolandi might be identified on the violin, alongside subtle timbre changes with a brief movement towards *sul ponticello*, succeeded by the addition of repeated strikes on a high gong or chime. The interaction between the two elements momentarily demands attention, a consideration of the effect that the

percussive strikes have on the perception of the speed of the violin gestures. These initial events are accompanied by abstract images but not, at first, with any videos or photos of the performers. From the first entry of the clarinettist (0:20) brief images and videos of the performers begin to appear, often associated with particular sonic elements, often embedded in small windows within the abstract illustrations. Even early on, it is impossible not to notice—not to attend to—the closed caption descriptions of unfolding musical events: they heighten the rapid flow of (inter)connected sonic and visual events. At *ca.* 0:24, the closed captions read: "Low voice speaks gobbledegook, another voice joins in from further away". This is associated with the sound of the principal vocalist speaking rapidly, joined a few seconds later by the percussionist who imitates her. The (albeit brief) video appearance of the percussionist at this moment feels revealing: it is the first point in the piece where a viewer can see the source of the sound they can hear.

Figure XX.1: A screenshot from the opening of Verbaaaaatim*, showing a recording of the Zoom window with performers overlaid with graphical elements and closed captions.*

Already in the first few minutes, it is obvious that there is a lot of information to take in. The combination of recorded (and layered sound), animation, video and photos of the performers, closed captions, and spoken text demands a lot in terms of processing these multiple types of information simultaneously. The cognitive load created by their interaction is high. Nonetheless, for a viewer with prior knowledge of having seen some of the members of Sonic Bothy perform in different contexts, it is also difficult not to try to find point of triangulation not only between the sonic and visual dimensions of the piece, but also with contextual knowledge of the piece and the ensemble. Even so, perhaps especially so, hearing people known in other settings perform together as Sonic Bothy feels novel.

The temptation is to gravitate toward features which can be readily identified and categorised. Such features include the principal vocalist's part, specifically the prominent repetition of the word "loop" (0:47), followed by the imitation of the rhythm of that repetition

by a male voice moments later (0:57). The seemingly descriptive phrases delivered by the principal vocalist have formal functions and effects: the spoke text, "lower single note, whistling" (1:15) is answered by a quivering *tremolando* on a high whistle; "piano trill, piano trill, piano trill" (2:15) is succeeded by just that, by a rapid oscillation of several high pitches of the piano; "man clears throat in background" (4:26) results in two low voices coughing vigorously; "very short ting" (5:24) prompts one player to strike a crystal glass repeatedly with a mallet and (at 5:27) another player to strike a metallic (or perhaps glass: this object is concealed from view) object twice.

Often associated with these descriptive spoken statements are cascades of overlapping, gesturally related sounds, connected by the physical motion required to produce them. A case in point emerges following the phrase "scrubbing noise like something with sharp nails trying to get out of a plastic box" (6:17). Subtle, rapid scratching, apparently on a hard surface, begins. This scratching is distinct from the violin's tremolo, which has already been present sonically and visually for several seconds. The rapidity of the actions producing these elements is echoed by the principal vocalist, who rapidly and repeatedly utters the word "gibberish", layered atop at least two lower voices uttering and grunting rapidly. The rapid repetitive (physical) motion acts as a unifying feature. The guttural voices develop, seemingly organically, into coughing, signposted by the primary vocalist literally uttering the word "coughing" (6:35).

Notwithstanding the visual dimension of the piece, perhaps especially because the visual is so central to it, a purely auditory experience—an active retreat from the visual—is striking, especially having already watched *and* listened. Dialling down the brightness of the screen until it is black, amplifies the imaginary space of the piece, in which the players are rendered in the mind's eye as they produce sounds which, themselves, produce senses of the relative presence and distance of sound and player alike. Without the visual cues for the passage which emerges around 12:43 (initiated by the words "scissor snip", neither which player is responsible for the sounds being produced nor *how* they are being produced. A popping sound is readily identifiable as being produced vocally and, cued by this, it is possible to hear other sounds which might well be produced by a person's mouth. But these sounds are surrounded by multiple repeated tapping sounds, which are made using objects not identifiable through listening alone. The desire to identify them, to make sense of them, might prompt a restoration of the screen's brightness settings, followed by a review of the passage, this time, once again, with the visual cues that make it easier to link sounds to sources. There is a tension between the enjoyment of listening without visual information—and the attendant exercise of the imagination—and the curiosity about *how* sounds are being made, a curiosity which seems to demand satisfaction.

Conviviality

One striking element of the piece is the way in which the performers reach out and support one another in creative gestures that are simultaneously artistic and social. In *Verbaaaatim*, the narrative unfolds alongside and through the relational and improvisatory development of new ideas *between* performers. Many of the creative ideas appear to emerge from this social nexus: the needs of the moment take priority over any strict compositional path. This is not, however, an embrace of an 'anything goes and everything is wonderful' attitude. Rather, it is

the adoption of a fundamental principle that creativity is social, distributed, and emergent in communications between performers and across disciplines.

Creating a piece like *Verbaaaaatim* with the aim of producing an engaging, innovative, and entertaining piece of art without reference to the psychological and social background of the performers resonates strongly with many current debates within contemporary art practice. For one thing, the compositional credit is shared equally among all performers, exemplifying its co-creation and co-authorship. The complete social environment becomes integral to the development of the piece, as seen in the way in which captions initially used to aid accessibility become a channel for artistic communication. "The violin bows fast back and forth and sounds like an angry hovering bee", the captions read, in a way which not only describes what is happening but also gently guides the receiver of the piece toward a particular image and way of interpreting the sound.

Figure XX.2: An example of how the captions guide the listening.

The piece invites audiences into an artistic space where words, sounds, and images merge, such that the particular constellation of those elements is in persistent flux, with modalities bleeding into and informing one another. There is no leader, no conductor, no composer. Everyone shares these responsibilities in an emerging 'community of practice', an idea which has been explored in numerous artistic and social contexts, broadly in reference to groups who share common interests and goals and who come together to fulfil both those aims which they hold in common and those which are particular to individuals (Wenger 1999). Communities of practice emerge and develop when groups of individuals share, engage, and commit to a particular long-term goal that requires sustained engagement around generally defined themes, examined in a musical context in detail by Margaret Barrett (2020). Sonic Bothy's commitment to their particular ways of working in *Verbaaaaatim* exemplify well the concepts discussed by Wenger and Barrett alike.

Tia De Nora (2000 and 2013) outlines how musical engagement can be more informal, including and inclusive of everyday activities, an idea which appears in a more recent concept, Theatre of Home, which explains that (and how) domestic environments became folded into artistic processes and outcomes during the period of the pandemic as creative practices migrated to environments both domestic and, often, online, such that the home became a site of and for creative collaboration (MacDonald et al. 2021). In *Verbaaaaatim*, too, domestic environments are deployed in artistic ways which connote that same conception of the Theatre of Home.

Sonic Bothy's loose improvisational framework in *Verbaaaaatim*, which blends and merges different artistic disciplines, shifts the focus with regard to the embodiment of musical and artistic communication. Hands are often foregrounded, appearing large—larger than life—on screen, becoming as a result a primary audience focus. The virtuality of both the artistic process and its mediated presentation on screen is yoked to the ways in which individual bodies are frequently only partially presented. Often more than one person appears on screen or is heard within a particular shot. These features lend the impression of what Haraway (2007) describes as a post-human identity, in which individual bodies become fragmented by the artistic and technical processes at play, challenging conventional (unitary) notions of musical embodiment. These post-human elements are enhanced further by the 'stage' upon which the piece is performed being simultaneously virtual and physical. Events unfold in specific, recognisably domestic spaces, yet are modified by performers in other locations and, too, by the text on the screen. That text—and the piece as a whole—is engaged with by the audience watching and listening in a concert-hall setting, but also on computers, phones, and other devices.

Humour is central to the relational aesthetics of conviviality at play in *Verbaaaaatim*. Humour is a delicate artistic device, particularly in improvisational context. Often the artistic heft of a piece can be overshadowed by humour, the joke becoming the take-home punchline. However, here, humour is subtly deployed; other creative and conceptual priorities remain consistently in play. Indeed, the playfulness of the piece's conviviality is quite serious: this is serious fun. It challenges, too, conventional notions of artistic virtuosity or, rather, contributes to recent debates which challenge defining virtuosity along narrow technical lines. *Verbaaaaatim* foregrounds creative virtuosity, collaborative virtuosity, and virtuosities of listening (MacDonald 2021), while also signalling the importance of identity process within artistic contexts (MacDonald et al 2017).

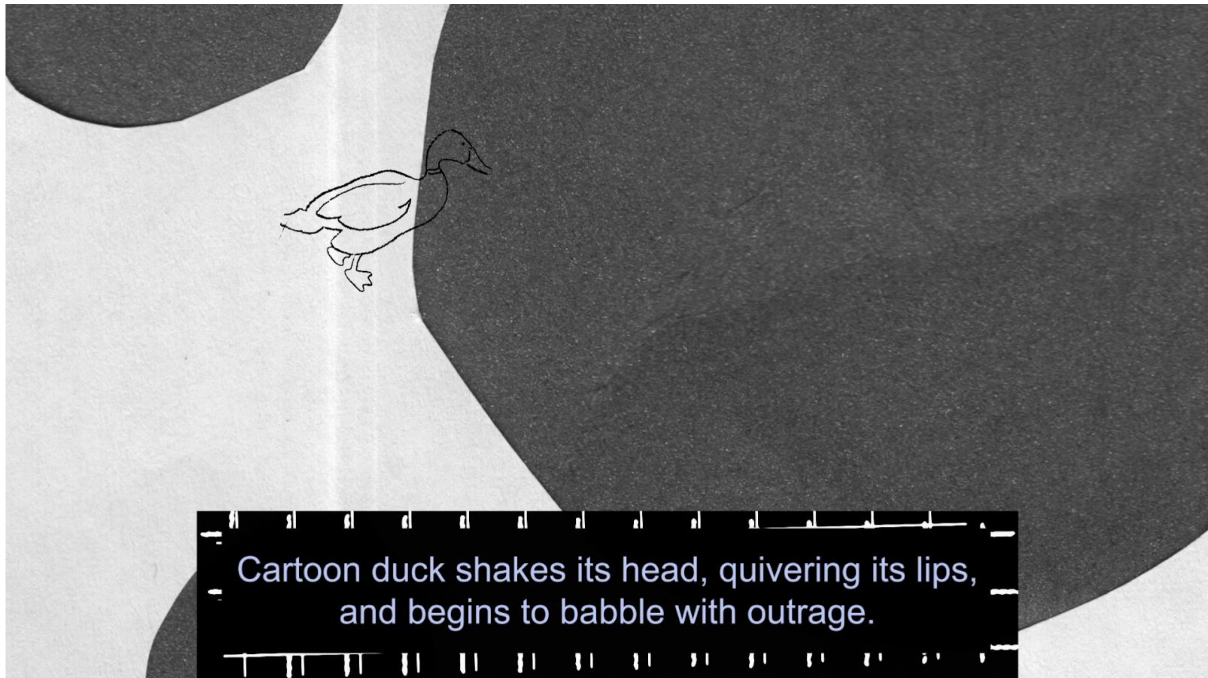

Figure XX.3: Humour is used throughout the piece.

Experimentality

These modes of conviviality resonate with larger histories of experimental musics, both in terms of the relationalities between individuals and the ways in which those relationalities are mediated. If 'experimental music' might be taken as having its origins—at least in the sense that it's normally understood in the contemporary Western tradition—in the music of Cage and his circle, it is not insignificant that that be understood precisely in the relationships between a group of friends (see, for instance, Dohoney 2022), nor that many of the fundamentals of that tradition come from the ways in which so much of Cage's music of the 1950s took the form of puzzles, set precisely in ways in which the setter thought would be engaging for the solver: in almost all cases his close friend, David Tudor (see Holzaepfel 2002 and Iddon 2013).

The 'double act' of Cage and Tudor rapidly came to act as a model for other experimental musicians, such as the Sonic Arts Union, itself conceived as a collective of like-minded musicians—Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma, initially—as an outgrowth of Ann Arbor's ONCE Group. In its desire to push against 'established techniques', ONCE performances came to involve dance and multimedia (Rothfuss 2014, 172). These events, too, seemed to mirror Cage's ongoing activities, as in, for instance, *Variations V* (1965), itself an intermedia piece, involving dance choreographed by Merce Cunningham, film made by Stan VanDerBeek, and still—though distorted—images created by Nam June Paik. No less significantly, the sonic materials of the piece were generated through the interactions of dancers with electronics. Conceived by Cage and Tudor, and devised by Bell Labs's Billy Klüver, a system of photoelectric cells activated tapes and radios whenever dancers broke beams of light, while antennae sensed the proximity of dancers and, too, triggered electronic sounds, sounds which were modified and processed by Cage, Tudor, and Mumma (Miller 2001; Mccracy 2020, 97). After *Variations V*, in fact, Cage would note that composition might *be* the 'activity of a sound system', even if, as You Nakai notes,

in this case it was a sound system that the named composer could not, himself, create (Nakai 2021, 168). On the one hand, a cynical viewer (and there were plenty of those) might have felt that 'music' was increasingly being abandoned or, on the other, a less cynical response might have been that the question of where the boundaries of 'music' lay—and how flexible those boundaries might be—was being placed into question.

On the other side of the country from Ann Arbor, similar intersections between technologies and collaboration were being explored at the San Francisco Tape Music Center (SFTMC), which would later move, as would Ashley, to Mills College. Questions both of what music *was* and what (and whom) it was *for*, and the framing of ways to explore that, were central to the *Sonic Meditations* of one of the SFTMC's leading composers, Pauline Oliveros.

Oliveros (2005, xvii) began, she says, with herself. She "started to sing and play long tones, and to listen and observe how these tones affected [her] mentally and physically." "I noticed that I could feel my body responding with relaxation or tension", she continues." Prolonged practice brought about a heightened state of awareness that gave me a sense of well-being". The personal experience she described in starting to re-think her practice is captured in the very first of her *Sonic Meditations*, 'Teach Yourself to Fly':

> Any number of persons sit in a circle facing the center. Illuminate the space with dim blue light. Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible. Then gradually introduce your voice. Allow your vocal cords to vibrate in any mode which occurs naturally. All the intensity to increase very slowly. Continue as long as possible naturally, and until all others are quiet, always observing your own breath cycle.

"Music", the introduction to Oliveros's score for the whole sequence of meditations, "is a welcome by-product of this activity." The primary activity, however, is quite clearly learning an increased sort of aural attentiveness, as is clear from Oliveros's later 'Re Cognition', which asks the 'performer' to "listen to a sound until you no longer recognize it" or from one of the most famous *Sonic Meditations*, 'Native': "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears."

Though Oliveros was willing to use the word 'piece' to describe her *Sonic Meditations*, there is a persistent friction between their status as 'meditations' and their status as 'art works', a friction which is not only not resolved but, more, the unresolved status of which is integral to the character of the meditations. The meditations are activities to be undertaken, in some cases by an individual, in other cases by groups. There seems to be little to prevent an audience being present while a meditation is undertaken but, equally, there is nothing to require it. In the case of those meditations designed to be undertaken by a group, it is clear that the important relationality is that between the participants, not between a group of performers and a listening audience.

One might find a potent parallel in the near-contemporaneous Scratch Orchestra. Though the draft constitution of the Scratch Orchestra stressed its intent "to function in the public sphere" and, more, that that meant "for lack of a better word [...] concerts", it is notable that its more foundational *definition* was that it comprised "a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources [...] and assembling for action". Cardew's stress on *action*–as distinct

from performance–runs through the constitution which is, above all, concerned with the relationalities between the members of the orchestra, relationalities which are seemingly rather more prized than defined 'musical' outcomes, as in the instructions for the performance of 'popular classics': "a qualified member [someone to whom the 'popular classic' is familiar] plays the given particle [part of a score or an arrangement, or an analysis, or a recording], while the remaining players join in as best they can, playing along, contributing whatever they can recall of the work in question, filling the gaps of memory with improvised variational material. [...] These works should be programmed under their original titles" (Cardew 2006 [1969], 90–91). The very use of these titles draws attention to the fact that the listener is expected to hear not, say, Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony but, rather, the relational *actions* of those players involved in the act of performance, an element amplified by Michael Chant later insistence that even though he knew "no one who claims to understand what Cornelius Cardew means by 'scratch music'", nonetheless "the common mystery that in action all the problems vanish may be why a scratch music and an activity are similar" (Chant in Cardew 2006 [1972], 147).

A Multimodal/Multimedia Reflection

Again: a first encounter with *Verbaaaaatim* leaves more questions than answers. *Verbaaaaatim* comprises layers of instrumental sounds (familiar and unfamiliar), spoken words, written words, static and dynamic graphics, and video recordings of the performers. The layers merge into a complex audiovisual artwork, in continuous movement, akin to a fast-flowing river. A perceiver—the multimodal nature of the work makes 'listener' seem inadequate—might be expected to wonder what it is that is creating that motion, driving the piece forward. Is it the spoken words? Does the narrative level function as conductor or commentator? What is the role of the text? Are these closed caption descriptions of what is happening visually and sonically? Or are they instructions for the performers? Or both? Do the graphic elements lead to the sonic performance? Or do they follow the audio?

Figure XX.4: Does the text function as a score or does it narrate the content of the audio and video?

One fascinating aspect of *Verbaaaaatim* is the way the piece plays with what might be called 'sound actions' (see Jensenius 2022). Sound actions are 'chunks' of sound and body motion that fall within the range of normal human short-term memory, which is to say approximately 0.5–5 seconds. A sound action is partly related to Pierre Schaeffer's concept of a 'sound object' (1966). But while Schaeffer explicitly wanted to explore sound objects without considering their source (specifically through and because of the concept of reduced listening), sound actions build on Rolf Inge Godøy's theory of motor-mimetic music cognition (2003). Here, the idea is that listening to sound necessarily leads to an experience of corresponding motor imagery. The reverse also follows: watching a sound-producing action leads to the experience of sonic imagery. This duality is embedded in a sound action in that it is experienced as a multimodel phenomenon. This is not to say that a perceiver would literally 'see' an image of a clarinet when hearing a clarinet sound but, rather, that the perceiver would have a sensation of the (blowing-like) action and (clarinet-like) object involved when and in hearing a clarinet sound.

Verbaaaaatim is full of sound actions which can be either seen or heard (or both) in various combinations throughout the piece. Sometimes there are clear causal relationships between actions and sounds. Elsewhere, the causality is less clear, which prompts the question of what has caused the sound to occur. Is it an acoustic instrument? An electronic sound? A recording of an animal? To be sure, the narrative and captions sometimes help the perceiver to answer the implicit question. Sometimes, though, they muddy the water. For example, at 8:29, there is rolling noise, described in the caption as a 'rolling scraping noise, like a dislodged rock'. Immediately, the question arises: what is the sound the sound *of*, to borrow a term from Eric Clarke's ecological listening approach (2005). Seeing one of the performers with an egg, rolling backwards and forwards in a spoon, resolves the question of the source of the sound action.

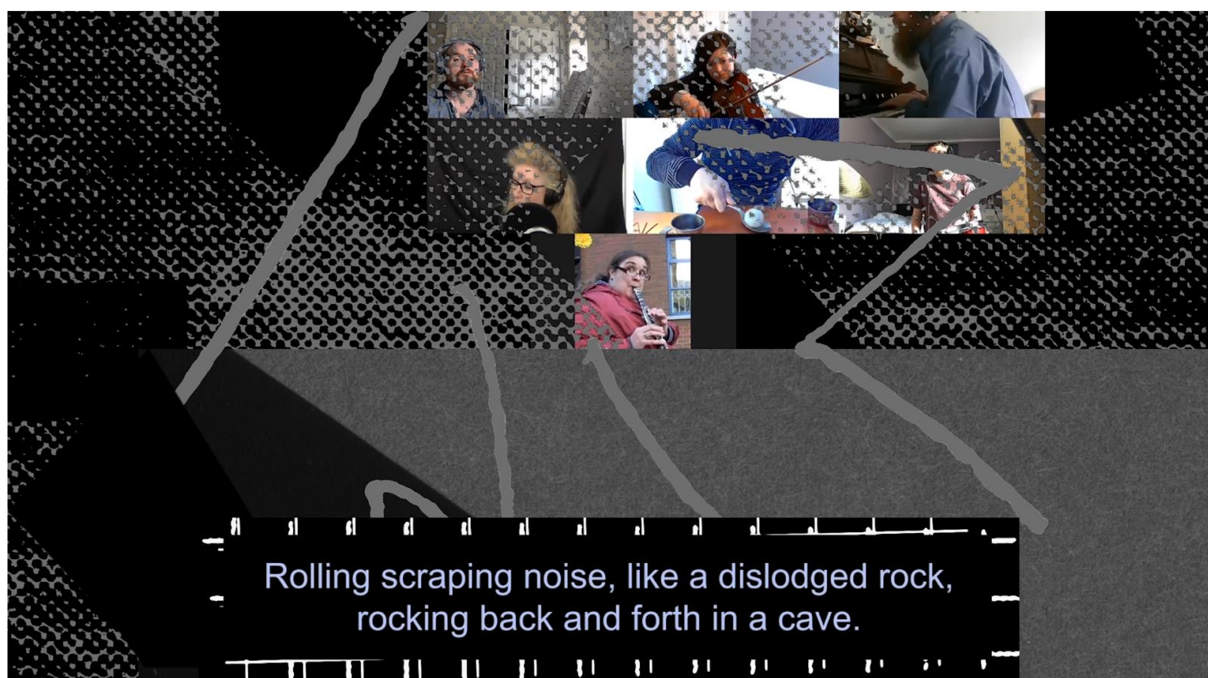

Figure XX.5: An example of the play with sound actions (here, a textual description of a 'rolling' sound, which is manifested through an egg rolling in a spoon).

After watching and listening to the piece several times, the idea might stick that this is a piece that 'rolls' on with a high level of energy throughout. As can be seen from piece-level visualisations of the audio and video (see Figures XX.6–7 of waveforms, sonograms and videograms), there are few breaks in either the audio or video. Nor are there clear structural changes throughout the performance. This helps create the musical flow and drive, sonically and visually. Instead of looking for large-scale structure, the perceiver experiences the flow from sound action to sound action, the way one sound action *rolls* toward the next, with combinations of static and slowly-moving graphical elements. The placement of video elements in various parts of the screen causes the eye to move around, while constantly jumping back to the text at the bottom. Similar attentional shifts happen with the audio: the perceiver is asked to 'jump' between listening to the voice and the various instrumental sounds. One of the few resting points comes around 7:29, where there is an intermezzo with only the sound of a drum and an almost black screen (see Figure XX.8).

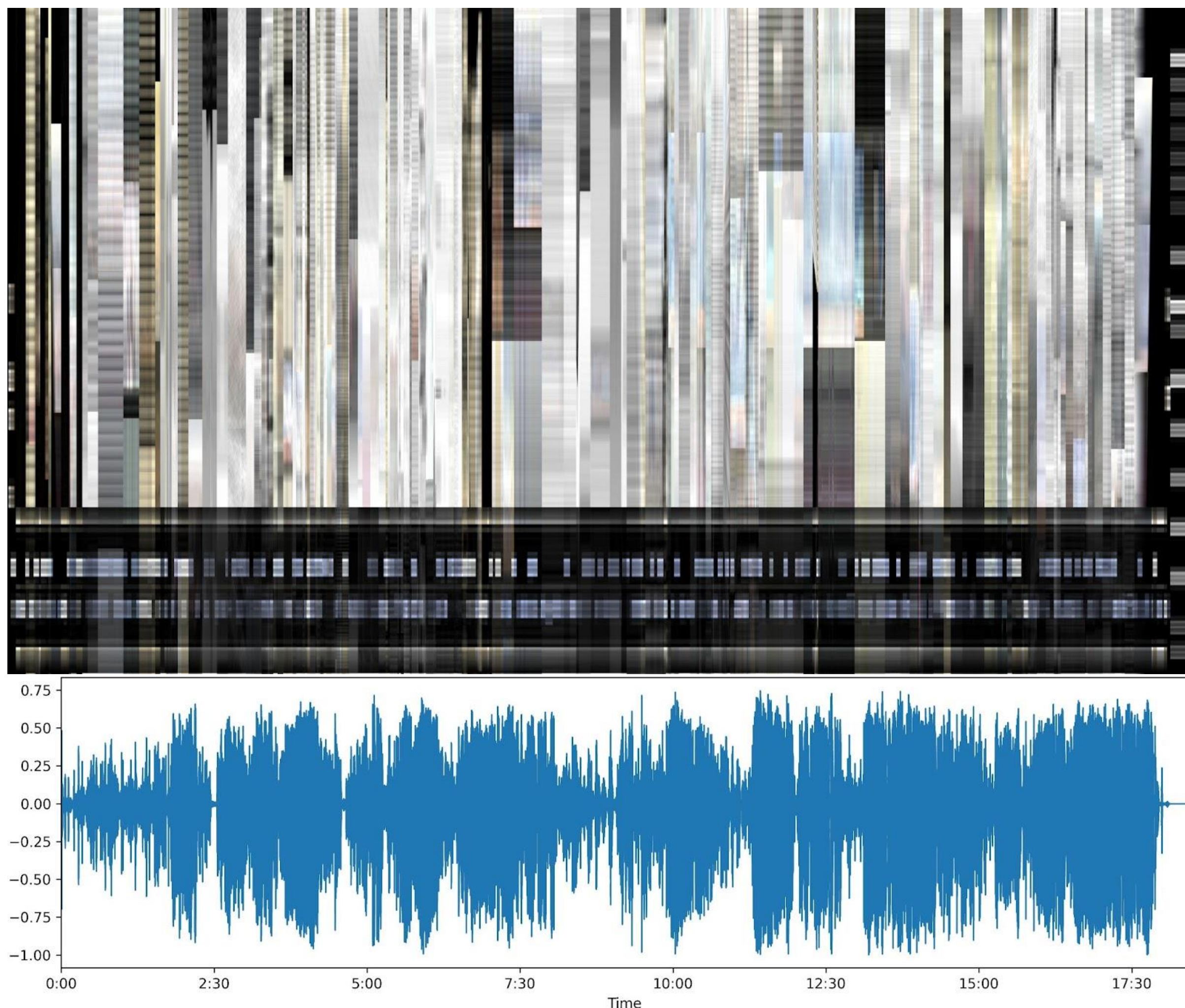

Figure XX.6. A videogram of the piece shows the visual structure of the performance, aligned with (c) a waveform display of the audio.

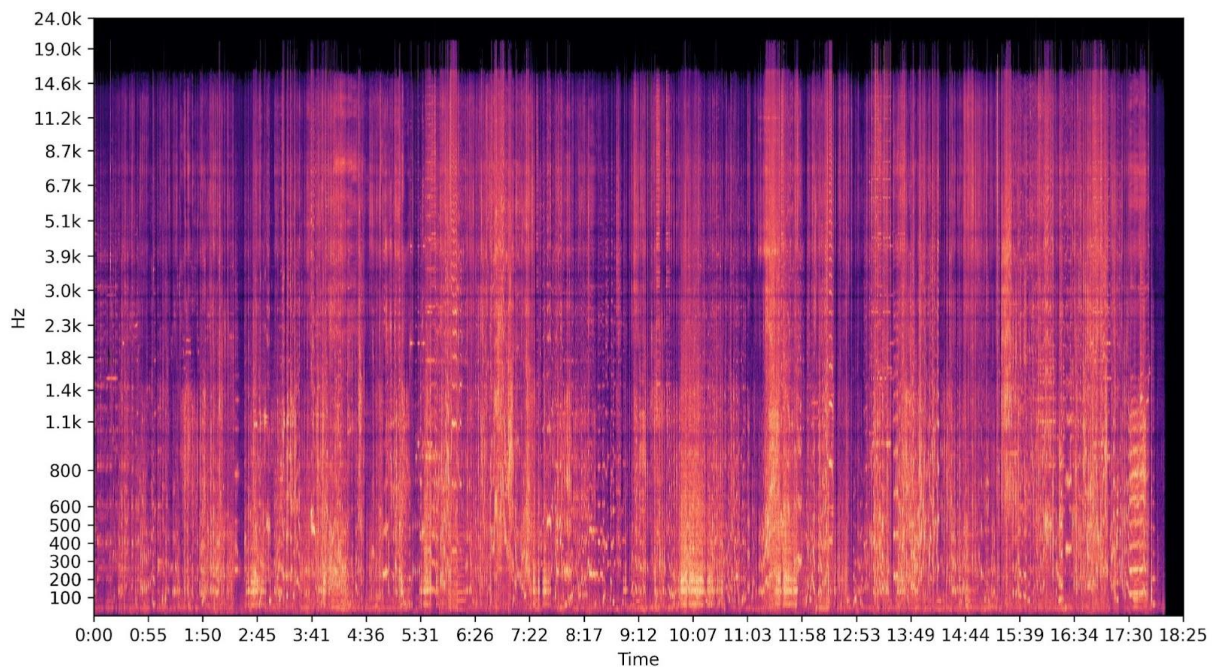

Figure XX.7: A sonogram of the piece shows the continuous flow of sound with a relatively even texture throughout.

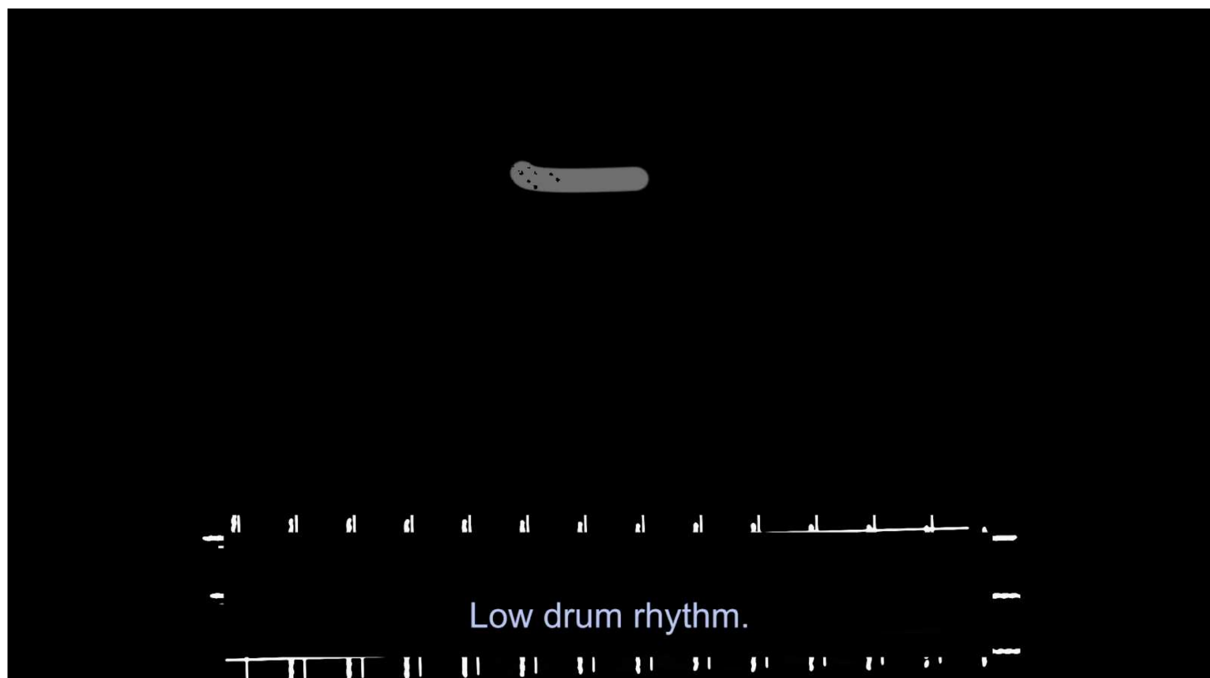

Figure XX.8: A screenshot from around 07:29, an intermezzo with only drum sound and an almost black screen.

One of the most fascinating moments occurs around 14:29 (figure XX.9), where the question is asked: 'Are you still there?' Perhaps that question is one which is being posed to the other performers. But as a perceiver, perceiving this as a pandemic work, it is hard not to recall the pandemic experience of challenges with video conferencing systems. It is also a point where any perceiver is challenged to provide an answer: Am I following the performance? What do I experience? What *have I experienced*? Am I here?

Figure XX.8: 'Are you still there?'