Listening in the Gaps: On Creative Practice, Knowledge Making and Archival Sound

Écouter dans les silences : Sur les pratiques créatives, la production des
connaissances et le son des archives

Ariana Phillips-Hutton

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Introduction

1   For more than fifty years since Michel Foucault fired a starting gun in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* the archive has been viewed as a site of power and of its critique.[1] But what is the relationship between the archive as a discursive system identified by Foucault and archives more generally? The answer is inflected by disciplinary norms. For some historians, among them Carolyn Steedman, the archive is a collective, best understood as a series of spaces wherein those involved in the historical disciplines come into intimate contact with objects of the past.[2] According to Achille Mbembe, it is a similarly multi-sited and delicate 'entanglement of building and documents' that creates institutional, cultural, and political imaginaries.[3] Other theorists have conceived of the archive in more abstract terms: as an exteriorization of memory, a means of political damage control, or a technology.[4] Most writers on archives have focused on written records and for these and other theorists of 'the archival turn', the questions of primary importance are those of ontology and epistemology: what is an archive and how do its architectures shape what is possible to know and by whom?[5] Still other scholars have been more concerned with the practical and ethical questions: who should own or access archival materials? How should we interpret them and how do they correspond to lived experience?

2   These and other questions remain salient. As Irving Velody notes, the archive/s in one form or another stands behind scholarly research, in that 'appeals to ultimate truth,

adequacy and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions'.[6] From this perspective, the power of any given archive lies first in its gatekeeping of documents and materials that are to be preserved and made (semi)public for future generations of scholars. By conferring a status of *archivability* on particular materials, and by preserving and arranging them in particular ways, archives exercise authority over the production of knowledge within their institutional purview. Yet it is not only how the contents of an archive are chosen, preserved, and arranged (or not) that matters to scholars, but also how that archive shapes knowledge and experience outside its material contents: 'in the story it makes possible'.[7]

3   It is the musical stories that archives make possible that occupy me in this essay. Specifically, I consider how contemporary composers engage with archival materials not necessarily in the same way as historians, who may seek to 'conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater', but as creative artists, whose aim is to imagine new juxtapositions between past and present and who tell different kinds of stories through sound.[8] There are multiple ways we might approach this question of how we hear with/in archival sound, and giving an empirical ground to what and who 'we' might hear in archival sound in general is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, in what follows I attempt to lay out some of the conditions under which we as listeners hear archival stories and their lacunae as mediated through musical composition. I look first at the nature of sound archives, then turn to listen to the complementary processes of decay and preservation or transformation in contemporary composition and performance. Finally, I turn to two examples of relational storytelling through engagement with historical voices as components of creative storytelling in the archive.

4   In order to carry out this analysis, I draw on a range of interdisciplinary approaches, including Saidiya Hartman's literary genre-crossing 'critical fabulation' and Adriana Cavarero's philosophical approach to vocal relationality, both of which offer perspectives on storytelling and the relationship of past and present or of self and other.[9] The compositional re-framing of archival sound becomes not an act of recovery or salvage – activities which characterise early sound archives in general – so much as a creative re-telling that promises manifold possibilities. This argument plays on and with the essentially liminal position of sound within the archive and the ways in which this liminality shows the limits and possibilities of our ways of hearing with/in archival sound.

Hearing stories with/in an archive

5   Storytelling is a foundational cultural technique that highlights the transmission of multiple kinds of knowledge through (re)narration. It also implies interpersonal reciprocity and a relationship between the one who demands 'tell me a story' and the one who obliges. In other words, all stories contain knowledge and all have audiences, because to tell a story is always to tell it *to* someone. Moreover, human beings need stories – and we need stories about ourselves, a point made by the feminist philosopher Cavarero in her exploration of intersubjective relationality. Cavarero goes beyond merely acknowledging the central importance of storytelling in establishing personal histories to argue that most modern knowledge comes to us via what she terms a story-taker – 'the one who solicits and listens to life-stories told by others, in order to then transcribe them into the scientific canons of his discipline'.[10] Although the story-taker

is identified with the archetypal modern figure of the psychoanalyst in Cavarero's work, we might argue that the anthropologist, the oral historian, the ethnomusicologist-folklorist, or – pertinently for my purposes – the archivist might furnish equally resonant examples.

6 The relationship between the story-teller and the story-taker (who in translating the original story into disciplinary knowledge becomes a story-teller themselves) is shot through with questions about power relationships and potential imbalance, abuse, and deception. In *Time and Narrative* Paul Ricoeur frames this by noting that narratives are both lived and told; later in his work, the act of narration is given an ethical cast, in that 'it is always possible to tell in another way [...] an exercise in *telling otherwise*'.[11] Yet because the archive is only ever partial, telling otherwise often means engaging with the archive's silences. One creative possibility is that developed by Saidiya Hartman in her article, 'Venus in Two Acts'. In the essay, she wrestles with the gaps in the historical archive of slavery, both in the sense of lamenting the fragmentary character of what is present within the archive and in frustration with the 'impossibility of discovering anything [...] that hasn't already been stated'.[12] This is a dilemma that faces all historical research in one way or another, but in Hartman's work it takes an unexpected turn, for she is less interested in historical recovery than in the imaginative, generative, and reparative possibilities for telling new stories about old events. This is a wrestling with gaps in the archival record that has no interest in closing them. As she writes, 'I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story [...] capable of retrieving what lies dormant [...] without committing further violence in my own act of narration'.[13]

7 Hartman attempts this through what she calls *critical fabulation*, an impossible kind of writing that displaces the known-as facts of the archive by imagining 'what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done'.[14] This is related conceptually (and temporally) to the postmodern turn in history as a discipline, particularly to the question of historical representation as developed by Frank Ankersmit and the 'postmodern' openness to ambiguity and self-reflexivity within historical research championed by Beverley Southgate.[15] Yet critical fabulation is not tantamount, as some might have it, to historical fiction, at least not in the common-sense understanding of the genre. Neither is it a straightforward account of how historical narratives are shaped in response to authorial choice. Rather, it is a creative practice of writing a kind of counter-history that illuminates not history itself, but the ways in which the present is connected to the past, or the ways in which we (collectively) are because of who we (collectively) have been. Examples of the genre include Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984) and Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* (1991), which both use critical fabulation (*avant la lettre*) to overcome lacunae in the archives. Although grounded in extensive archival research, critical fabulation deliberately goes beyond the boundaries of the archive and of historical knowledge in search of meaningful stories to tell.

8 Such an approach was and remains controversial, but critical fabulation bears some resemblance to other storytelling efforts that attempt to find a way through the incomprehensible gaps between the archive and lived experience. For example, the South African journalist and poet Antjie Krog used a method she called 'quilting' in her account of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull*

(1999), which closes with the extraordinary line: 'I have told many lies in this book about the truth'.[16] The revelation of some of the ways in which Krog altered and conflated material from the Commission's testimonies caused a sensation, precisely because *Country of My Skull* was not framed as a 'once upon a time' story (a phrase Neil Gaiman suggests is code for 'I'm lying to you').[17] This raises questions about the ethical implications of re-working archival material more generally. Whether it is called quilting or fabulating or story-taking, the question of how artists manipulate sources to put them to new purposes – and what they might do with those sources in the process – reveals new, and not always comfortable, kinds of stories found within and among archival gaps.

9   The examples thus far have been centred on language and on verbal and written information, which make up the bulk of conventional archives, and which might lead one to question whether there is the distinctive role for sound in storytelling. After all, not all sounds are easily assimilable into narrative. Despite this, I suggest that Ricoeur's 'telling otherwise' applies to sonic materials just as much as to linguistic materials. Here I take up Nina Eidsheim's contention that sound itself is a complex amalgamation of reception, material constraints, and phenomena that – crucially – includes interpretive listening as a constituent part.[18] This in turn suggests that the act of listening is inevitably mediated, whether by space, time, technologies, or bodies; through this mediation, many sounds are incorporated into narratives, and even those narratives are often individual and malleable. Listening to sound is thus transformed into a tactile and social hearing-with others, in a return to the relationality emphasised by Cavarero. Moreover, this hearing-with contains within it the potential of (multiple) narration. Indeed, the polysemic nature of sound together with what Ian Cross has called music's 'floating intentionality' means that creative re-working of archival sounds takes on particular resonance as one such 'exercise in telling otherwise'.[19]

10   Finally, I am interested in the way that archival sound might be a medium that 'cuts "things" together and apart' – a provocative statement from Karen Barad that highlights sound's active role in moulding experience and (re-)creating meaning.[20] Sound as cutting and suturing agent indicates that not only the process of sound manipulation but the reciprocal one of hearing-with can be thought of as invoking relationships emergent through the movement of sound in time and space. By focusing on this kind of listening or hearing-with as arising within a network of subjects, socialities, and spaces that is subject to a sonic cutting together/apart, we can trace how meaning is generated through the web of relationships that flow from a particular object or encounter. This opens the way to a deeper consideration of the multiple relations between archival sound, artist/composer, and listener. By exploring the contingent, and ultimately ephemeral, relations on which the musical work depends, we can better understand how listening practices inform creative processes as well as consider the emergent meanings in these artistic uses of sonic remnants.

Sound in the archive: Decay

11   As the framing for this special issue indicates, archival theorists and historians have long been haunted by the knowledge that archives are both fragile and fragmented, requiring interpretive work and active curation for their maintenance. Indeed, without engagement and curation, archives can be lost or become mere collections of

inaccessible historical debris. Nowhere is the fragility of archived materials more apparent than in the case of archives of sound, which are dependent for their preservation and re-animation on specific technologies of storage and playback. The first sound archives in which sounds were collected as sounds – that is, as recordings rather than as notation – came about at the turn of the twentieth century, with the Phonogram Archives in Vienna (founded 1899) and Berlin (founded 1900). Notably, the Viennese archive was created not to house existing records, but in anticipation of the possibilities of nascent recording technology to aid academic research.[21] It sought to create, and thereby to preserve, records of languages, musical traditions, and individual voices, generating its own contents over time in the way a research centre generates data and ideas. In other places, commercial companies played significant roles in forming early collections of sound recordings. For example, in the UK what would eventually become the British Library Sound Archive began in about 1905 with donations from The Gramophone Company, while by the 1920s the Library of Congress in the United States began collecting recordings from companies alongside generating their own field recordings of American music and other folklore. Like the phonograph itself, which in its inventor's claim would 'retain a perfect mechanical memory of many things which we may forget', the sound archive promised to catalogue and preserve the totality of the world's sounds.[22]

12   These early Euro-American sound archives are in many ways exceptions, rather than the rule, but their promise of comprehensive and accessible memory was always infelicitous. Across the world, today's sound libraries and archives are full not only of delicate shellac and vinyl discs, but magnetic wires and tape, wax cylinders, and a host of other recorded formats – together (or not, as the case may be) with the accompanying playback technologies. As is the case in the Library of Congress, many of these collections include audio recordings gathered during folkloric and anthropological research undertaken between the late nineteenth century and the present: for example, the American Folklife Center has among its collection the cylinder recordings of Korean songs made by Alice Cunningham Fletcher in 1896 and the discs of American folk songs made by John and Alan Lomax in the 1930s and 1940s; the British Library counts the collection of 141 wax cylinders recorded by Alfred Cort Haddon as part of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits in its Sound Archive; and the World Music Archives at Wesleyan University hold one of the only known collections of Afghan music in the recordings of the Mark Slobin Fieldwork Archive, Music in the Afghan North, 1967–1972.[23] This offers another important perspective on the significance of archival sound more generally, which is to say that sound archives demonstrate through their structure and contents how generations of largely European and American researchers came to exercise a particular kind of catalogic control over the sounds and voices of people and places around the world.

13   In recent years, discussions over the ownership and custodianship of these recordings have become more pronounced. Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Andrew Weintraub highlight the significance of not only returning archived materials to communities from which they were taken, but of providing those communities with the technological means to access those sounds now and in the future. They describe this as 'sound repatriation', which is a 'process of returning cultural knowledge encoded in sound to the source of origin as well as presenting it in a format that is accessible to the

communities to which it is returned'.[24] This presents significant difficulties, not least of which is that early sound recordings made from wax, shellac, and other similar substances often have a limited playing lifespan before the materials degrade – as do more recent formats, including vinyl and CD.

14   The very same technological dependence that makes sounds vulnerable to silencing has made sound archives a site of intensive creative production by contemporary musical artists. The results evidence a variety of motivations: some are influenced by an aesthetic of pastiche or palimpsest in explicating the relationship of past and present in sound, while others are primarily interested in the new sonic resources offered by archival sound, rather than their semiotic potential. Still others are primarily concerned with drawing out the temporal character of musical sound and silence through compositions that highlight time's passage. A well-known example of the latter within the sphere of contemporary classical music is William Basinski's four-album cycle *The Disintegration Loops* (2002–2003), which records the process of physical decay as a piece of magnetic tape from his personal archive of sound recordings is played again and again, gradually losing its sound-holding coating.[25] With every reiteration, the gaps encroach on the surrounding sounds until nothing remains but a mechanical crackle.

15   This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document http://journals.openedition.org/filigrane/2098

16   Ironically, Basinski (b. 1958) came upon this core phenomenon of time-lapse audio destruction by accident as he attempted to digitise, and thereby preserve, his earlier found sound recordings. Once he realised what was happening, Basinski's initial impulse was to combine the taped audio with newly composed musical material. Yet, as he said in a 2012 interview with Emile Friedlander:

> I sat there watching the recorder, monitoring it as this thing over the length of a CD-R completely disintegrated in the most profoundly beautiful way. [...] I realized I didn't need any countermelodies there; I just need to concentrate on what's happening and stay out of the way and make sure the recorder is on.[26]

17   This is a simple version of the origin story for *The Disintegration Loops* that Basinski has told on many occasions, but it is also incomplete. For instance, the resulting recordings in the release are treated with reverb and other subtle effects added by the composer – they are not 'just' the sounds of decay. More than twenty years on, *The Disintegration Loops* have become Basinski's best-selling albums; the individual loops are regularly performed live (in versions for orchestra by Maxim Moston) and the processes of looping, decay, and recording remain central to Basinski's artistic practice.

18   Nonetheless, what is most interesting about *The Disintegration Loops* is not so much the technical process of recording, but how it surfaces the phenomenon of listening across time. What are we hearing in *The Disintegration Loops*? Are we listening to history or to a sound crafted and mediated by Basinski? Is it the past or the present that falls away in pieces? Some of these questions present false binaries, but in so doing, they highlight the tension between what we might, following James Mansell, call 'listening to' versus 'hearing with' archival sounds, where the latter implies a sensitivity to the production and sustaining of ways of hearing and to the historical situatedness of the listening ear.[27] In *The Disintegration Loops* we inhabit an uncanny space between sounds that are at

once past, present, and future; how we hear these is shaped by the discursive and archival frame in which they are presented.

19   All materials are subject to loss, whether through damage, accidental destruction, or decay, but sound recordings can be distinguished from archivable material culture on the basis of their representation of moments in time and the resulting intimate connections to memory and forgetting.[28] This quality inflects Britta Lange's argument that the time-based medium of recording renders sound distinct from other objects collected *as* historical. She writes:

> the principal documents of sound archives are time-based media, and they therefore 'speak' themselves; [...] the aesthetic experience of the time-based medium of the sound recording is not only that the sound is played back over time and that a segment of historical time seems to reoccur in the present, but also that the sound in this passage of time, as sound, can be suspended, can become silent, while the medium and time continue running.[29]

20   Sound's distinctive, articulated engagement with time is key for understanding its re-creative potential. In fact, the phenomenon of sonic disintegration or suspension as a metaphor for the passing of time has proved popular amongst sound artists, including Leyland James Kirby (b. 1974), who, in his guise as The Caretaker, released the six-part musical series *Everywhere at the End of Time* on his label History Always Favours the Winners between 2016 and 2019.[30]

21   This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document http://journals.openedition.org/filigrane/2098

22   Across the first half of the 6.5-hour project, crackly vinyl recordings of big band and ballroom music from the early and mid-twentieth century are heard dimly through an aqueous sound field. The insistence in the production on temporal distance is perhaps less than subtle, but it is what happens in the second half of the project that elevates the project beyond nostalgia. The samples – 'found', in Meaghan Garvey's phrase, 'on forgotten 78s in dollar bins worldwide' – lack the regularity of Basinski's looping.[31] Rather, from pieces presented more or less in their entirety, sounds start to break up into snatches or to repeat themselves erratically, drowned within layers of drones, mechanical noise and a production sufficiently woozy as to make the listener feel unsteady. This is music succumbing to unheard ravages in what the composer describes as a reflection of the sonic world of The Caretaker himself succumbing to the grip of Alzheimer's disease, a form of dementia. The result is a stunning, if harrowing, exteriorization of the experience of time and memory instantiated in sounds lifted from an archive of the musical past and transformed in their decay past all recognition.

23   Beyond the human drama of the piece's 'brief', one of the striking features of listening to *Everywhere at the End of Time* is that it takes place in time even as the music itself depicts the passage of time. The strength of this depiction relies at least in part on the durational experience of listening as the experience of hearing 'old-timey' sounds from the archive changes across the multiple hours of a full cycle. As Stage Six of the piece proceeds from 'Confusion So Thick You Forget Forgetting' through 'Long Decline is Over' and 'A Brutal Bliss Beyond This Empty Defeat',[32] critic Andrew Ryce notes that 'the music remains frustratingly out of reach – at times you can sense it's there, but it's impossible to make out'.[33] This sense of frustration becomes stronger as the sounds decay further into mush until they, too, cut out abruptly five minutes from the end. Out

of the silence, a brief crackle of vinyl heralds the return of musical material, this time a choral piece so heavily distorted as to be almost unrecognisable as vocal music at all. This is a new and private sonic world, but the relative coherence of the final few minutes makes no attempt to ameliorate what came before. Instead, the manipulation of sounds from the past and their decay in the listening present etches a version of the indescribable experience not just of losing one's mind, but also having lost it, through soundwaves that seem to wobble across past and present.

24   As these examples suggest, sonic loss provides both material and metaphorical resources for artists diving into archival material. This is not the result of a 'homesickness for the past', to quote cultural theorist Mark Fisher on The Caretaker; rather it is in recognition of the enduring value of the past and its records for the creation of new musical resources for the present and the future.[34]

Sound in the archive: Preservation and transformation

25   While some artists engage with decay and silence as a creative resource, others link their work with preservation and transformation: processes of curation and knowledge production that have long structured both archives and the archive. It is possible to trace a musical lineage for such transformations through the recorded age via the works of artists as varied as Hildegard Westerkamp (b. 1946), Pierre Schaeffer (1910–1995), and Halim El-Dabh (1921–2017). In the digital age, the desire to preserve material has taken on new impetus. For example, in 2015, the British Library launched a multi-million-pound project called Save Our Sounds, which worked to digitise half a million rare, unique, or at-risk recordings from key UK collections. In addition to preserving sounds that might otherwise have been destroyed, the project aligned with the aims of the British Library itself, which is 'to ensure the nation's cultural and intellectual memory is sustained and accessible' – though achieving this via digitisation presumes a longevity and accessibility for digital audio formats that may turn out to be less future-proof than once imagined.[35] This is merely one instance of a widespread drive to digitise historical collections that has transformed the nature of archival research and opened these resources to new audiences on a large scale (with the caveat that the unequal distribution of resources affects the scope, quality, and accessibility of these digital collections). When this is taken into consideration, the interest in using archival material in creative work takes on a distinctly temporal character of its own.

26   I have argued previously that the transformational process that musicians engage in synthesizes multiple kinds of knowledge through bringing together that which is gleaned from the archive and what Diana Taylor has called the repertoire, or knowledge disseminated through embodied practices and enacted in performance.[36] Crucially, this exceeds – or at least has the potential to exceed – the boundaries of knowledge maintained by the archive. The overlap between these two realms of knowledge production within artistic practice comes into particularly sharp focus when archival recordings become intertwined with new repertoires. The clearest instance of this can be found where performers have engaged deeply with historical research as the foundations for creative practice. A familiar example is known as 'historically informed performance', but the contemporary engagement with past performance as a creative site for exploration extends beyond that tradition. One such performer is the pianist Anna Scott, who has produced new interpretations of

nineteenth-century classics by Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann by studying archival recordings by their contemporaries and pupils such as Ilona Eibenshütz (1872–1967).[37] The results often depend on laborious listening and copying as well as visual aids such as tempo graphs, but the process does not end with a single performance or a new recording. Through long-term engagement, note-by-note imitation of historical recordings is transformed into an embodied practice that challenges the aesthetic values that underpin current Western art music performance. As Daniel Leech-Wilkinson writes in *Challenging Performance*, 'It can be highly productive to copy past recordings; not mindless, as one might imagine, but revelatory in teaching one's body to be differently musical'.[38] In listening to Scott one is confronted with an alien, yet creatively generative performance aesthetic. The archival material, in the form of the historical recordings she consults, disappears, but the repertory archive, in the sense of the types of knowledge generated through performance, is surfaced, troubled, and reshaped. This is contemporary playing that is thoroughly entangled with performances and performers of the past.

27   In a counterpart to the work of Scott, the American composer Richard Beaudoin (b. 1975) has analysed the expressive timing of historical recordings as a basis for several series of newly composed works, notably the series *Études d'un prelude*, which begins from a 1975 recording of Frédéric Chopin's Prelude Op. 28, no. 2 by Martha Argerich, and *The Artist and his Model*, which uses Alfred Corot's recording from 1931 of Claude Debussy's 'La fille aux cheveux de lin'. As archival snapshots of recorded performances, Beaudoin's scores are reconceptualised artifacts that create new kinds of knowledge as they move back and forth across the boundaries of archive and repertoire.[39] Other composers take a more overtly transformative approach to the archive. Take, for example, Gavin Bryars' 1990 version of *The Sinking of the Titanic*, which originates in a personal recollection from the historical archives, but moves quickly beyond it. Bryars (b. 1943) writes:

> All the materials used in the piece are derived from research and speculations about the sinking of the 'unsinkable' luxury liner. [...] The initial starting point for the piece was the reported fact of the band having played a hymn tune in the final moments of the ship's sinking. A number of other features of the disaster which generate musical or sounding performance material, or which 'take the mind to other regions', are also included.[40]

28   Particularly noteworthy here is how the composer moves from representation, as when the music produced by the ensemble recreates the reported sound of the Titanic's band, to an artistic speculation on sound in time, as the 'band music' continues even after the ship 'sinks' – as though the vibrations of those sounds from 1912 continue to move slowly through the water.[41] Meanwhile, in some versions of the work these sounds are joined by recorded fragments of interviews with survivors from the Titanic looking back at the experience, though these are often muffled and partially unintelligible.[42] The overall effect is one of deepening and reimagining a spectacular moment through a combination of artistic engagement with archival information and a form of critical fabulation: 'research and speculations' that expand into the gaps in the historical record to give sonic form to what might have been.

Sound in the archive: Voices from the past

29   Re-framing historical events as contemporary is part of a broader documentary aesthetic, in which composers use archival sounds to 'giv[e] sensory embodiment to the historical world' and establish in the music a sense of historical veracity and significance that engages audiences in an immersive narrative structure.[43] Although vocal recordings play minor roles in the preceding examples, the use of pre-recorded human voices is a particularly powerful way to imply an historical re-animation. Voices, particularly those identified with a past event, emphasise a sense of an uncanny layering of different temporal frames and seem to speak anew to audiences; accordingly, they have formed a large proportion of both sonic archives and archival reimaginings in music since the very earliest days.[44]

30   Both well-known and unknown moments in history can be used successfully to ground works in historical events. At times, this historical impulse becomes the artistic *raison d'etre*; thus, the London-based group Public Service Broadcasting explicitly frames their work as 'teaching the lessons of the past through the music of the future'.[45] As their name suggests, Public Service Broadcasting is primarily interested in what we might call 'public history' as expressed in institutional archives and mass media. They use extracts from public information films, propaganda, and other archival material – often focusing on the work of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and the British Film Institute (BFI) – to drive their compositions. Their first album (released in 2013) adopted as its title elements of the BBC's founding principles *Inform – Educate – Entertain*, while their recent release, *This New Noise* (2023), remixes their August 2022 concert at the BBC Proms and features recordings from *BBC: Voice of Britain* and other recordings from the National Archives. Other Public Service Broadcasting works focus on particular historical moments (notably 2015's *The Race for Space*, which combines samples from NASA Audio Collection and the British Film Institute National Archive) or trace the long tail of history through social lenses (2017's *Every Valley*, which follows the rise and fall of the coal industry in south Wales). The vocal snippets in these pieces, including in *Every Valley* (2017) an interview with Richard Burton reflecting on his boyhood desire to become a miner, often function like voiceovers in documentary films and serve to evoke a particular version of history (often nostalgically so) which is then given a contemporary slant through the instrumental surround of guitar-driven electronica. Much of the impact of the work lies in the larger connections sketched through this collision between contemporary music (together with its implied contemporary audience) and historical voices. Despite their (mostly) anonymous character, these archival voices call listeners into a form of relationship predicated on storying.

31   In contrast, the Armenian American composer/documentarian Mary Kouyoumdjian (b. 1983) works outward from a much more intimate starting point: the sounds and speech of friends, family, and other interlocutors. The practice began as an explicit attempt to tell herself into the world through recounting the stories of people whose stories intersected with her own – a way to understand her own history refracted through music. Kouyoumdjian's documentary style interweaves fragments of speech with acoustic, electronic and prerecorded sounds, and deploys the sonic, technological and performative resources of contemporary music in order to faithfully communicate the words and experiences of her interviewees.[46] It is a form of musical storytelling in

which the composer is prominently positioned as at once the story-taker and the story-teller: the creative agent bringing a wider community of listeners into relation.

32 The necessity of articulating personal stories means that the vocal recordings in Kouyoumdjian's compositions are often minimally processed, but it does not mean that the resulting narratives are straightforward. In fact, listening to the archival materials in her works often entails a sense of temporal and experiential disjuncture. For example, one of her first major works, *Bombs of Beirut* (2014), is a collage of spoken fragments about the experiences of her family and family friends before, during, and after the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990).[47] Voices are cut together and split apart, layered, bleeding into and out of one another in a buzzy haze of experience. These textual fragments are interwoven within a lightly textured string quartet combining electronic distortion and extended techniques with simple, folk-like melodic fragments, while the central dramatic point is a four-minute-long recording of an aerial barrage recorded in Beirut in the late 1970s that first rends the musical fabric before being slowly drawn back by the strings. The piece's titular framing and the overall punctuation by the central recording presents a clear temporal structure, but this narrative is troubled by the fragmented and often indistinct vocal interjections. In particular, as a listener, the juxtaposition of voices and themes means it is often difficult to determine *when* we are, a dislocation that is enacted through sound.

33 Kouyoumdjian has produced a number of other works that tell and retell stories in a similar way: *2 Suitcases* (2010/2017), *This Should Feel like Home* (2013), and *They Would Only Walk* (2022) consider the experience of exile and forced migration; *Aghavni* (2008) and *Silent Cranes* (2015) the generational effects of the Armenian genocide. Some of these efforts are more self-consciously historical than others. The most salient example of this is *They Will Take My Island* (2020), a documentary film made by Atom Egoyan reimagining the life and work of the Armenian American painter Arshile Gorky (1904–1948). As is typical in Kouyoumdjian's work, the sound design for *They Will Take My Island* layers together composed music for strings (played in the 2021 premiere by the JACK and Silvana quartets), fragments of recorded interviews with key figures in the curation of Gorky's memory, and samples of audio taken from Egoyan's other films *Ararat* and *A Portrait of Arshile*.[48] In a curious moment of doubling, Kouyoumdjian's own voice appears as part of the sound design. What is surprising in the context of a documentary is that there are no evocations of the music or sounds from Gorky's lifetime except as diegetic sound in film excerpts. Instead, the sound design is dramatic and brooding, often drifting into dreamy, or even sentimental, moods, without becoming unmoored from the present. When heard in combination with the visual admixture of archival photos and footage, the temporal disjunctions of the sound point to the mediation of the composer and to the promise for an unmediated experience that intensifies our understanding.[49] The lack of genuinely historical sounds becomes a sonic reflection of what Saskia Spender suggests is the situation of all of the archive's audiences when faced with its gaps: 'we have to make do with whatever fragments have attached themselves to the work'.[50]

34 In some respects, these pieces are analogous to other works of art that engage with pre-existing material: they re-present and preserve archival material in a new form as well as disseminate it to a wider audience, but they do so specifically through the medium of vocal recordings that cut across other sensory information and splice distinct experiences. Thus they '[attest] to the past and to the continuing presence of the past'.

[51] Given that Kouyoumdjian in her role as composer and documentarian collaboratively generates the raw 'archival' sonic material before using it, we might characterise her work not so much as the compositional use of pre-existing archival material but as collecting material for a new and ever-expanding musical archive. However, unlike the early twentieth-century sonic archives she does not do so in order to collect, or even to broadcast knowledge about historical events; rather, her work is self-consciously a form of listening to, telling, and re-telling stories in ways that both extend and preserve them for others. From this perspective, we could see her works as musical versions of critical fabulation that seek out gaps within our collective historical archives and creatively imagine what might have been. The result is that for the listener, Kouyoumdjian's works contain a rush of voices from elsewhere pressing upon the ear in a demand for attention that simultaneously calls the listener into a relationship through sound and causes the gaps in the archive to begin to speak.

Conclusion: Filling in the gaps

35   The fragility and incompleteness of archives inevitably shadows historical knowledge. Yet, just as this evidentiary partiality draws out the interpretative capacities of historians, anthropologists, and other scholars, it is not in spite, but rather because of such incompleteness that archives have proven to be productive and generative places for artists to work. This raises undeniable questions of access to and control of knowledge, of fidelity and interpretation of both past and present, and of the bounds of creativity. Nonetheless, an approach to archives that acknowledges their mereological character as a benefit rather than a drawback would go some way to deepening understanding of how archives of sound stand in relation to musical composition and performance.[52] In short, archival sounds and voices have been crucial to re-presenting the past through musical composition in ways that render the past and its records newly present. Whilst the historian and the musical artist approach the archive for different reasons and using different intellectual and creative apparatus, their respective outputs and uses of archival material overlap in significant ways through storytelling and critical fabulation. To recognise this is not to suggest that there is nothing to the historical archive but the narratives and stories we make out of it in the present; rather, it is to affirm the ways in which the archive/s affords multiple kinds of knowledge making that are at once historical, critical, and creative. In the telling and retelling of stories from within and beyond the archive, artists who work with the archive and its sounds help to illuminate the fullness of the world alongside the persistent gaps in its records.

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NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

2. Carolyn Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust', *American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1159–80. As many have noted, there is considerable conceptual fuzziness over the distinctions between archives, libraries, collections, and other terminology, but here I gloss these as archives.

3. Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', trans. Judith Inggs, in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19.

4. Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 9–63; Ian Cobain, *The History Thieves* (Cambridge: The Granta Press, 2016); Caroline Birdsall and Viktoria Tkaczyk, 'Listening to the Archive: Sound Data in the Humanities', *Technology and Culture* 60, no. 2 Supplement (April 2019): S1–S13.

5. Cheryl Simon, 'Introduction: Following the Archival Turn', *Visual Resources* 18, no. 2 (2002): 101–7.

6. Irving Velody, 'The Archive and the Human Sciences: Notes Towards a Theory of the Archive', *History of the Human Sciences* 11, no. 2 (November 1998): 1–16.

7. Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', 20.

8. Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever', 1165.

9. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1–14; Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

10. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 64.

11. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); 'Memory and Forgetting', in *Questioning Ethics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), 9.

12. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 1.

13. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 2.

14. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11.

15. See, *inter alia*, Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), and Beverley Southgate, *What is History For?* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

16. The quotation comes in the *Envoi* to Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

17. Neil Gaiman, 'How Stories Last', *The Long Now Seminar*, 9 June 2015, https://longnow.org/seminars/02015/jun/09/how-stories-last/#:~:text="'Once%20upon%20a%20time%2C,truth%20at%20the%20same%20time.   All   weblinks accessed 11 October 2024.

18. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

19. Ian Cross, 'Is Music the Most Important Thing We Ever Did? Music, Development and Evolution', in *Music, Mind and Science*, ed. Suk Won Yi (Seoul, Korea: Seoul National University Press, 1999), 10–39.

20. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 179.

21. See John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110–45.

22. Thomas A. Edison, 'The Perfected Phonograph', *The North American Review* 146, no. 379 (1888): 649.

23. See Library of Congress American Folklife Center, https://www.loc.gov/research-centers/american-folklife-center/about-this-research-center/; British Library Sound Archive, https://sounds.bl.uk; Wesleyan University and Alexander Street, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/.

24. Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Andrew N. Weintraub, 'The Audible Future: Reimagining the Role of Sound Archives and Sound Repatriation in Uganda', *Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 207.

25. You can also listen to Basinski's work via Bandcamp: https://williambasinski.bandcamp.com/album/the-disintegration-loops.

26. William Basinski, interview by Emilie Friedlander, 'Interview: William Basinski', *The Fader*, 11 September 2012, http://www.thefader.com/2012/09/11/interview-william-basinski/.

27. James G. Mansell, 'Hearing With: Researching the Histories of Sonic Encounter', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, ed. Michael Bull and Marcel Cobussen (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 93–114.

28. Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub, 'The Audible Future', 207–8.

29. Britta Lange, 'Archival Silences as Historical Sources', *SoundEffects* 7, no. 3 (2017): 48–9.

30. You can listen to the albums via Bandcamp: https://thecaretaker.bandcamp.com/album/everywhere-at-the-end-of-time.

31. Meaghan Garvey, 'What Happens When TikTok Looks to the Avant Garde for a Challenge?', National Public Radio, 22 October 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/10/22/926607585/tiktok-the-caretaker-challenge-avant-garde.

32. See https://youtu.be/sM5hlrkaPSo.

33. Andrew Ryce, 'The Caretaker – Everywhere at the End of Time (Stage Six)', *RA*, 12 April 2019, https://ra.co/reviews/23649#.

34. Mark Fisher, liner notes to The Caretaker, *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*, V/Vm Test Record Label VVMTCD25, 2005.

35. Andy Linehan, 'Saving Our Sounds', *The British Council Blog*, 30 January 2023, https://music.britishcouncil.org/news-and-features/2023-01-30/british-library-saving-our-sounds; see the critique of digitisation as applied to libraries in Robert Darnton's *The Case for Books: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009). At the time of writing, some vulnerabilities of digitisation have been particularly visible in the ransomware attack conducted against the British Library in October 2023, which severed access to digital collections and permanently damaged key infrastructure for supporting digital functionality – including playing digitised audio and video resources. Fortunately, secure copies of those digital collections were preserved, though as I suggest above, a recording without the means of playback is silenced indeed.

36. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Ariana Phillips-Hutton, 'Performing the South African Archive in *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony*', *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 187–209.

37. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for introducing me to Scott's work. See Paul Craenen et al., 'Roundtable: The Artist-Researcher Inside Out: Strategies, Methodologies, Refractions', *European Drama and Performance Studies* 2, no. 19 (2022): 97–108; and Eva Moreda Rodríguez and Iva Stanović, *Early Sound Recordings: Academic Research and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2023) for more detail on these and other processes.

38. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *Challenging Performance: Classical Music Performance Norms and How to Escape Them*, version 2.16 (23.viii.23), ch. 20, https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-20/.

39. For a discussion of archival snapshots see Richard Beaudoin and Andrew Kania, 'A Musical Photograph?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 1 (2012): 115–27.

40. Gavin Bryars, notes for *The Sinking of the Titanic*, https://gavinbryars.com/work_composition/the-sinking-of-the-titanic/.

41. It is notable, too, that Bryars chooses one interpretation of the tune played by the band, which is the hymn tune 'Autumn'; other historical interpretations have suggested the hymn 'Nearer My God, to Thee' or the waltz 'Songe d'Automne'.

42. The work is indeterminate in instrumentation, but possibilities listed on Bryars' website include stereo tapes, string ensemble, percussion, low brass, brass quartet, bass clarinet, cassette tapes of speech, keyboard, 35 mm slides, visible sound effects, music box. The intelligibility (or lack thereof) of any recordings is heavily dependent on the performance space and any recording technology, as shown by a comparison of the original version as recorded by Brian Eno in 1975 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oVMRADOq5s), the 1990 performance at the Chateau D'Eau in Bourges, where the sounds are heavily distorted by the water tower's reverberation (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csdz41KxvDI), and the crispness of a 2017 performance by the Trinity Laban orchestra in a modern concert hall (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545PHouEToQ).

43. Bill Nichols, 'Foreword', *Music and Sound in Documentary Films*, ed. Holly Rogers (London: Routledge, 2014), xi.

44. As John Picker points out, the phonograph was initially intended to record and play speech for Edison's 'Library of Voices'. John Picker, 'Aural Anxieties and the Advent of Modernity', in *The Victorian World*, ed. Martin Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2012), 611–15. See also Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 110–46.

45. Public Service Broadcasting, 'Biography', https://publicservicebroadcasting.net/#bio.

46. Elsewhere, I have written about this practice as 'ethnographic' composition; composer Panos Amelides discusses a similar creative process under the heading of 'acousmatic storytelling'. See Ariana Phillips-Hutton, 'Remediating Relationships: Collaborative Storytelling and Conflict', in *Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation*, by Fiona Magowan et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 96–119; Panos Amelides, 'Acousmatic Storytelling', *Organised Sound* 21, no. 3 (2016): 213–21. For more on the use of archival testimony in music, see Phillips-Hutton, 'Performing the South African Archive' and 'Sonic Witnesses: Music, Testimony, and Truth in Post-Conflict Societies', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Special Issue on Music and Conflict, eds. Fiorella Montero-Díaz and Abigail Wood, 30, no. 2 (2021): 266–82.

47. See https://youtu.be/pNegch1_dyU.

48. For more, see Kouyoumdjian's website: https://www.marykouyoumdjian.com.

49. An example of what David Bolter and Richard Grusin term the 'double logic' of remediation: *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5.

50. Kouyoumdjian and Egoyan, *They Will Take My Island*, video of 2021 premiere, 25'05"–25'11", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NndMSB_99r8.

51. Annette Wievorka uses this phrase to characterise the role of witnesses more broadly. See Annette Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.

52. Mereology is the study of part-whole relations; it has primarily been studied in relation to ontology, metaphysics, and logic. Here I am using it to counteract a conception of gaps in the archive as empty, but rather to signal that interactions between the parts we have (archives) and the parts we don't (gaps) that contribute to a whole.

ABSTRACTS

For more than fifty years the archive has been viewed as a site of power and its critique. Within the drive for *archivability*, the technological dependence, and consequent vulnerability to loss and decay, of sound archives render them problematic. Yet, the very same fragility has also made sound archives a site of intensive creative production as artists and musicians re-work sonic materials into new shapes and stories that transcend the material constraints of the archive itself. In this contribution, I examine listening to various examples of creative 'documentary' musical practice as opening the way to a deeper consideration of the multiple relations between archival sound, artist, and listener. By exploring the contingent, and ultimately ephemeral, relations on which a musical work depends, we can better understand how listening in the archival gaps informs creative processes as well as illuminate emergent meaning in these artistic uses of sonic remnants.

Depuis plus de cinquante ans, les archives sont considérées comme un lieu de pouvoir mais aussi de critique de celui-ci. Dans le contexte d'une quête d'*archivabilité*, la dépendance technologique et la vulnérabilité liées à la disparition et à la dégradation qui en découle rendent les archives sonores particulièrement fragiles. Pourtant, cette fragilité a également fait des archives sonores un lieu de production créative importante; les artistes et les musiciens retravaillent les matériaux sonores pour leur insuffler de nouvelles formes et de nouveaux récits qui transcendent les contraintes matérielles de l'archive elle-même. Dans cet article, j'examine l'écoute de divers exemples de pratiques musicales « documentaires » qui ouvrent la voie à un examen plus approfondi des relations multiples entre le son enregistré, l'artiste et la personne qui écoute. En explorant les relations contingentes et éphémères dont dépend une œuvre musicale, nous pouvons mieux comprendre comment l'écoute des archives informe les processus créatifs et mettre ainsi en lumière le sens qui émerge de ces utilisations artistiques des traces sonores.

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AUTHOR

ARIANA PHILLIPS-HUTTON

Ariana Phillips-Hutton is Lecturer in Global Critical and Cultural Study of Music at the University of Leeds. Her research ranges broadly across the philosophy, performance, and politics of contemporary art and popular musics, with a focus on musical ethics and music's relationship to violence and conflict transformation. Recent articles can be found in *Twentieth-Century Music*, *Journal of the Royal Musicological Association*, and *Journal of Musicology*; she is author of *Music Transforming Conflict* (CUP, 2020) and *Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation* (Bloomsbury, 2023), and the co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy* (OUP, 2020).