Active Imaginative Reading . . . and Listening

READING CAN BE A MULTISENSORY experience, an active imaginative one during which we synthesize multidimensional, endogenous environments in which memory trajectories form and are inscribed, making personal times with histories, nows and futures. Plentiful invitations for rich explorations await the reader of this LMJ issue. And, profoundly so, this one challenges us to listen hard—listen to sounds, yes, and also listen to challenging ideas and points of view. As we confront the multilayered forces of change in our current environments, open imaginative reading and listening become important sources of hope and guidance for actions directed at positive evolution.

We can imagine ourselves taking on the listening roles of Amazon creatures in Luca Forcucci’s field recordings. Notably, Forcucci’s process includes allowing time for nature to absorb human presence in its midst before recording and invokes deep listening as a fundamental skill. In addition to hearing these captured soundscapes, imagine if we could develop the listening skills of the animals making those sounds while they adapt to the changing forces in their environments. Might this help us understand our own environments better and address the sound pollution surrounding us that damps our hearing? From this perspective, Forcucci also heightens our awareness of how presentation spaces interact with music creation.

The universe of gesture, wherein the origins of language might lie, and where music and dance are undifferentiated and inseparable, is brought to light in Daniel Portelli’s investigations of gestural line and shape in multimodal compositional practice. Portelli explores the transformation of these shapes and how to record and present them as means for generating meaning in multimodal scores.

Marco Buongiorno Nardelli’s work on generalized networks is one from which the imagination can spring. This article provides an excellent tutorial on network theory, using commonly understood musical materials. The topic of networks and networking is one of enormous breadth and importance today. It is easy to imagine how a huge range of differentiated entities in perception and conception can be placed at the nodes of such networks in generalized spaces. The tools that may emerge from this realm of music theory can be generalized and applied to endlessly expanding arrays of artistic interactions and human understandings.

Though the connections may not be overtly explicit, I am intrigued to speculate on subjects emerging in three papers that involve the dichotomous meanings of subjective and objective, endogenous and exogenous, conceptual and perceptual, sensory and cognitive, continuous and discrete, and in-time versus outside-time. Nora Engebretsen's paper brings a new approach to timbre in musical analysis that acknowledges both its perceptual and acoustical bases as fundamental. Engebretsen doesn't directly address the idea of semantics in music but does discuss the conveyance of musical meaning through timbre. This work brings new insights to ways of thinking about timbre and how we internalize its values, beyond scalable acoustic parameters. The notion of perceptual scaling is also forefront in Evelyn Ficarra’s work on time scaling. Through the use of time-lapse techniques—common in visual media, less common in composition, somewhat more known in sound art—they investigate large-scale manipulations of temporal material and how they may be perceived and experienced. A third article by Mark Reybrouck suggests putting all this under a lens of musical experience in a process of ongoing knowledge construction.

Several articles concentrate on offering useful new tools. One is a low-cost beat-making, loop-sequencing instrument built with an easy-to-use form factor developed by Andrew R. Brown and John R. Ferguson. (I had the pleasure of trying out this device recently.) Michael Rhoades’s work on holography and holophony brings new techniques to the rapidly evolving field of multidimensional sound diffusion, resonant holophones in multimedia spaces. Rita Torres offers new approaches to composing with resonant guitar multphonics. Claudio Panariello’s adaptive sound arrays that can react to environmental perturbations, Michael McKnight’s highly developed Extended Reality (XR) techniques for telling stories to multiple listeners and Taylor Brook’s software for cocomposing all add to our collective toolkit, enhancing the agency of now all-important developments in collaborative music and multi-arts realizations. Finally, Neal Spowage’s engaging, sound-making totems remind us about the importance of what I will refer to as organic corporeality in electronic music performance. Spowage also emphasizes the importance of ritual.

More soundscape investigations can be found in this LMJ’s special section. Here, they are arranged so as to stimulate reimagining the role of sound as evidence in moral acts that expose the status quo in our environments. Morten
Søndergaard illuminates this point of view in his introduction. Some authors teach about listening points of view, such as Stephanie Loveless’s discussion of tactical, feminist sound-walking. Janna Holmstedt attunes us to interspecies listening, regarding the body as a shared surface with its surroundings. Laura Beloff lets us know something about what we don’t know, as evidenced by sounds emanating from the world of plants. Louise Mackenzie brings us into the world of biological sonification and visualization to unpack looking and listening through layers of technology that extend what we perceive to be the limits of human perception. Do we truly understand the realities of those limits and the full implications of magnifying them?

Tullis Rennie cracks open the traditional hierarchies separating creator and engager, especially important now as we navigate creative engagement through distanced collaboration. In the past, I have written about notions of listening as composition and listening as performance. Freya Zinovieff and Gabriela Aceves Sepulveda take this a step further by discussing listening as activism while investigating soundscapes that penetrate shells of geopolitics and legacies of historical colonialism. Marie Højlund and Morten Riis present sound art that exposes fragilities in life dynamics and the dangers of alienation and passivity as we balance our responses to global ecological crises using sound as evidence.

While reading through this LMJ issue, I can’t help but recall useful antecedent calls to action, such as The Music of the Environment series from the 1970s. Some contributors in this LMJ issue highlight anew the urgency of employing sound work, in synergy with science, aesthetics and philosophy, to world conditions rising to the level of emergencies.

With the Special Section as a bridge, we delve into the ear-stopping Audio Companion, Who The Hell Do You Think You Are? Curator Andy Meyerson has drawn together a provocative collection of sometimes in-your-face music that lays out a buffet of concepts that, perhaps, should be in-your-face in this time. Meyerson states this Audio Companion presents “some of the most vital creators of new experimental music on the west coast.”

Let’s address that word, experimental. What is experimental music today? This collection broadens, or perhaps dismantles, any presumptions about experimental. The American experimental music tradition, as most commonly thought of in histories thus far written, is not particularly culturally diverse. It was extraordinarily innovative, of course; but experimental music now more and more reveals an astonishingly wide field of creation. But should we be astonished? Perhaps we have just not been listening widely enough, or have not been aware enough of the atmospheres in which we cloak ourselves. This Audio Companion is unique in LMJ’s history, a welcome tool for exposing and revealing our predispositions.

Much of the music in this collection was created for the curator’s ensemble, The Living Earth Show, and a number of pieces are part of a project called AFFIRMATIVE ACTION. Some ear-opening notions in this music include: voice processing and looping, ambient textures, fuzzy harmony, shared harmonic/cultural space, Black music, healing, radical diversity, psychedelic experience, acoustic phenomenon at the center of narrative, sonic meditation on rebirth and renewal, water usage and access rights, a proposition for imagining when we are already gone, sympathy and empathy in direct conflict, Krip-Hop, indeterminate repetition and dictatorship, putting performers in uncomfortable positions, decolonizing musical language, expression of rage, and the question: “What makes a performance special?” The best thing to do in response is to listen, listen hard and listen imaginatively.

What is the music we make in our time now? Dave Wilson’s article opens the surface of a subject worth volumes of thought around what he terms “the multiple legacies of improvisative musicality.” This is a time of delicacy in positions and complex sensitivities around originality, appropriation, collaboration, traditions, community, memory, history, legacy and the viability of collectives and communities. While engaging the astonishing specter of depersonalized, violent misogyny in Olivia Louvel’s The Whole Inside, with its multilayered voices and visual imagery, we could come to think that artists might possess some of the best means to help us process, while not ignoring, the existence of abhorrent realities. I suggest approaching each of the insightful contributions to this issue of LMJ with an attitude of truly open exploration and self-critique. Much is to be learned, much is to be discovered and infinite music is to be imagined. Through active imaginative reading and listening, each of these contributions can become a springboard for unanticipated insights and, perhaps, even means for positive change in our world.

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References and Notes
3 A series of publications from the World Soundscape Project of R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax (Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Centre of Canada Publications, 1970s). This is referenced by some authors.