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The Sound Seasons

Blagovesta Momchedjikova

Abstract

These pieces explore the seasons of sound in a city caught in the global pandemic.

I. Spring/Summer 2020

Indoor Noises

East Flatbush, Brooklyn. Stuck inside: work, eat, sleep. Repeat. Day after day, week after week...Staying indoors and working from home during the pandemic has made us super aware of both the familiar and the new noises around us. Some of the new sounds are the noises from exercising indoors: the oppressive thud of a fitness machine plugged into a living room instead of a gym or of dedicated sneakers hitting the hardwood floor instead of the park alley. In Bed Stuy, a friend suspects her upstairs neighbor practices skateboarding indoors; in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, another friend reports his upstairs neighbor trotting endlessly in high heels during the night. In Park Slope, another friend shares that the upstairs neighbor's kid times his wild jumps to match "perfectly" with her conference calls for work. In East Flatbush, we can't quite easily identify the noises coming from upstairs: we imagine the upstairs neighbors dragging a cello back and forth along their living room floor for fun or locking an exotic animal in a cage and its banging against the enclosure, wanting to be set free, or both.

Living on the ground floor, though troubled by the strange new noises, I seem to have it easy for once: I can choose to Zumba instead of Zoom in a heartbeat as I am the perpetual downstairs neighbor whose noises no one can complain about.

Spring 2020, Brooklyn, New York

Firecrackers vs Helicopters

The soundscape of Brooklyn, New York in the pandemic summer of 2020 was marked by two distinctly rough and disturbing sounds: of helicopters and of firecrackers. The helicopter sounds were there as a sign of policing Brooklyn, which was wild or perhaps euphoric with protests: it was the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement and people were sick and tired of staying home: they were out in the streets, masks on, gathering and dancing, and making their voices heard. The helicopter sounds were persistent and relentless: neighbors kept posting and discussing on Facebook where the helicopters were, why they were there, what was really happening on the ground, how no one could get a wink of sleep or rest in between the marches and protests...Were the helicopters tasked with exhausting those who took to the streets further? Helicopters circling above and around (and let's be clear, these are NYPD helicopters) sound "danger" to those on the ground: they anticipate danger. Many

street protests were peaceful but the helicopters prepared everyone near and far for trouble, even when there was no trouble in sight: they would circle above without a break. Who pays for all the fuel?

The helicopters captured the fear: the fear of the protesting masses, of movement on the ground, of community work, of citizens who have had it, of people who were too sick of senseless murders, of those who couldn't flinch in the eye of the virus. The helicopters produced an auditory assault; they were the tool of sound terrorism that was supposed to make everyone afraid, to make everyone fearful of people getting together, and to anticipate danger where danger did not really exist. The sound attack of the helicopters was the only way for the NYPD to feel in control over a situation that they had long lost control over, or never could control in the first place (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. "Protesters react to a low flying helicopter during a march on May 30, 2020, in Brooklyn." Photo: SETH WENIG/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK. *The Gothamist*, June 23, 2020. To surveil and intimidate protesters, helicopters flew as low as 500 feet. A helicopter costs about \$10 million; fuel and other expenses – about \$1,600 per hour. Between May 29-June 16, 2020 four NYPD helicopters monitored protests for a total of 186 hours. <https://gothamist.com/news/how-low-did-those-nypd-helicopters-go-recent-protests>.

But the residents of Brooklyn had their way of resisting. By sound as well. In Prospect Lefferts Gardens, an expensive neighborhood with fancy white new developments and old wealth, and East Flatbush, a more affordable area with housing developments for Caribbean immigrants,

night after night, firecrackers would go off, one after the other, or many at once, on and on, all night long. They sounded like gunshots, except, who was so rich to have so much ammunition? If you listened long enough, you could identify the general direction where they were coming from. At home, we were guessing, this must be from a block away, from the building between Rogers and Bedford. Or, this must be two blocks away, from the buildings on Clarkson. Sure enough, when we walked around these areas in the morning, we would see the now empty packages of firecrackers, oh, so many of them, next to empty bottles of Hennessy. Why so many firecrackers? Where did they buy them? Perhaps they ordered them on Amazon? Boxes and boxes of firecrackers. All made in China. How much money was spent on these firecrackers? They were the response of residents crazed from the pandemic, staying inside for too long, people who could not do what they like to do and when they like to do it and who they like to do it with. It was their way to mark their territory by perhaps celebratory perhaps aggressive sound, saying, we are still here, and we don't care if we disturb everyone, we are alive, and we choose to crack these firecrackers because yes, it is illegal, but yes, we can do it. And we can keep doing it (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. "Fireworks explode on a group of NYPD officers during a clash with George Floyd protesters." Photo: UPI. *The New York Post*, June 15, 2020. Fueled by the desire to challenge authority, illegal fireworks punctured the urban soundscapes. Between June 1-June 14, 2020, there were 849 fireworks complaints on 311; in 2019, only 21. <https://nypost.com/2020/06/15/illegal-fireworks-complaints-in-nyc-soar-under-lockdown/>

Summer 2020, Brooklyn, New York

II. Fall 2020/Winter 2021

Going Out

Flip-flop,
click-clack,
shljapa-shljapa...
heels to Havaianas,
Havaianas to cement...
going down
three flights of stairs.

Fall 2020, Sofia, Bulgaria

January 27th

The connection
breaks up
She
breaks up
It is hard
to make out
the words
the terrible
words
that hang
above
physical
distances
and bring
quiet
and tears
and disbelief
and rage
We lost
Stavri
Today

Winter 2021, Brooklyn, New York

III. Winter/Spring 2021

For the Love of Music (and Tavio)

This winter, ice skating in Prospect Park, Brooklyn was the only organized outdoor public activity one could safely engage in, regularly, masked. To that end, ice skating at the Lakeside rink took on a different meaning: a way to socialize while enjoying what one could not enjoy anywhere else in public: listening to the music being played at the rink. Music at the ice skating rink thus became not the backdrop to an activity, which it normally is, but the stage. Over the years, music at the ice skating rink has been, simply put, a contested terrain, often a point of conflict, derision, and ultimately, indifference, among us who go to the ice skating rink often. We have insulted the music service and the sterile and safe songs that it provides skaters with, both in passing and decidedly, multiple times and in various ways; many of us have engaged in personal efforts to try and get a different music service and provide different playlists, in order to improve upon the sound experience while skating; and many have simply given up on the music at the rink, bringing their own sounds: headphones and song choices: the skate guards who are at the rink all day long often resolve to this measure; a measure, which makes you an observer, someone buried in your own world of music and thought. Being an observer has its benefits: it allows you to reflect, to meditate, or just to be in control of the vibe you want to get. But this winter, at the ice skating rink, we could not be observers through our own music: we had been observers for too long during the pandemic, cooped up indoors, unable to talk to each other, touch each other, have fun without screens, like we normally do. We had listened to our own music choices for just too long. It was time to turn the tables on the music we could experience communally at Lakeside.

The sound revolution that we were plotting acquired a quick, and quite unexpected, resolution, in the face of Tavio, one of the assistant managers at the rink. Luckily for us, Tavio has a great taste in music. Also luckily for us, Tavio would often ice skate after work, during the last public session at the rink, on Saturday nights, from 7-9pm. And, luckily for us further still, Tavio could hook up his own Spotify playlist to the sound system. Those two hours on Saturday night became our happiest hours of the week: my friend Susu and I would engage in planning our Saturday night ice skating days ahead: how are we getting to the rink and back, shall we bring apple cider or hot chocolate, do we need our gloves or not, let's invite other friends to come share the joy with us! And joy it was: Jason Derulo's *Love Not War*, Michael Kiwanaka's *Solid Ground*, Nina

Simone's Feeling Good, Baaba Maal's African Woman, Buju Banton's I Wanna Be Loved, Arrow's O'La Socca, Dave Brubeck's Take Five, Horace Silver's Cape Verdean Blues, CNCO's Reggeaton Lento, Enrique Iglesias and Gente De Zona's Bailando, Becky G's Muchacha, Don Omar's Danza Kuduro, Rachid Taha, La Rayah, John Coltrane's, My Favorite Things, Eric Clapton's You Look Wonderful Tonight...

...We were not only ice skating, we were dancing: the spirits were high, everyone was talking to everyone...new friendships were formed, old friendships were rekindled...our conversations were filled with fun: despite the masks, we could hear each other talk, laugh, sing. No one dared take a break from the rink: the energy had us all roped in: what if we missed the best song?! We anticipated each song with the excitement of a kid in a toy store, at awe with each selection. Everyone: regulars and newcomers, current and former workers, welcomed this new but exciting character to every conversation: the good music! The good music helped create a great mood, which we all shared together. We were all ice skating but more than that, we were actively building togetherness, against the loneliness and the fears and the uncertainties. This was the party we had longed for, for a whole pandemic year, where music did its best: brought us all together, to enjoy each other's company, and create a community. On Saturday nights, from 7 to 9 pm, everyone belonged (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. LeFrak Center at Lakeside, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. January 2021. Photographer: Khaly Durst.

A Note of Thanks: A special shout-out to Tavio Fenton, assistant manager but also Saturday night music master, and all those others who worked tirelessly all week long, different shifts, at the Lakeside rink, to make our experiences there worthwhile: Mike, the main manager, the other assistant manager Grisela, the skate guards Khaly, Ronaldo, Cavan, Andre, Alestair, Ben, the skate rentals people: Shawn, Kaliym, Jarvis, and the welcoming host, Tien. Thank you, Khaly, for the image! Thank you, Susu, for sharing so many Saturday ice-skating evenings with me!

Winter/Spring 2021, Brooklyn, New York

the sound of a bad decision

is in your friend's
silent,
stern
stare.

Spring 2021, Brooklyn, New York

IV. Summer/Fall 2021

Beach

A gulp of
freshly
squeezed
watermelon
juice
twirls around
an ice
cube as
it crashes
against
your teeth
and deafens
for a brief
second
the life
guard's
whistle
blasting
the stray
sharks
away
on Far
Rockaway
Beach.

A Note of Thanks: This one goes out to my friend Neven, who made me appreciate the beach like never before! It was so much fun to discover and gulp the watermelon juice together with you!

Summer 2021, Far Rockaway, Queens, New York

Outdoor Concerts

When I saw *Summer of Soul (...Or When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* (2021), the music documentary based on the forgotten 50-year-old raw footage from the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival held in Mark Morris Park in Harlem, NYC, which was just recently produced by Questlove (Fig. 4), I was filled up with memories of those great summer concerts in the parks of New York City that have been lost to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although D. A. Pennebaker's famous music documentary *Woodstock Diaries* (1994) about the same summer of 1969, aka, the Summer of Love, too shows an impressive lineup of unforgettable talent, it does so in the context of upstate New York (as well as free love and the hippie movement). *Summer of Soul*, however, showcases black music genius in the context of urban America.

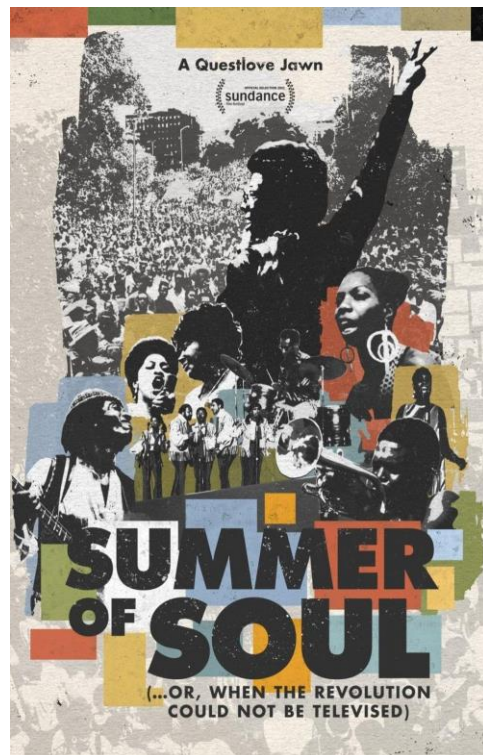


Fig. 4. *Summer Of Soul (...Or, When The Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*, 2021. Dir. by Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson.

<https://www.stereogum.com/2145420/summer-of-soul-questlove-documentary-trailer/news/>

In *Summer of Soul*, you see the buildings surrounding the Harlem park, you hear stories of people taking this street or that avenue to get to the festival, you learn how the cameraman had to position himself in order to be able to shoot the performers in natural light, you see neighbors

dancing next to each other, you feel the oppressive summer heat of the city and the respite that the city park offers, and you admire black urban fashion and hair style at their finest. Gladys Knight and the Pips, Steve Wonder, Sly and the Family Stone, Nina Simone, 5th Dimension, Mongo Santamaria, Mahalia Jackson, and many, many other performers, influencing each other, on the stage and off, fusing styles and trends, sharing culture, passion, excellence, resistance, over 6 summer weekends...in the hub of New York, like the peak of the Harlem Renaissance revived.

There is something special about outdoor summer concerts in New York City: be it through Central Park's Summerstage, Prospect Park's Bandshell, Battery Park's Castle Clinton, Lincoln Center Outdoors, or any other park with summer music programming. They are about people having fun in a much cherished open green space in the city, in the presence of good music; they are about people meeting and bonding with people while relaxing and having fun; they are about free entertainment in the mecca of capitalism; they are about humanizing all the concrete of the city with joyful dancing and softening the straight lines of urban architecture with the curves of unpredictable human movement and sound; they are about letting go of the strict city structure and expectations; they are about welcoming the unexpected in an otherwise very predictable environment...

...But the pandemic left us with just memories of these concerts...

I remember Baaba Maal at Summerstage in Central Park, in 2001, and the rain that came down at the end of the concert and what a relief it brought from the heat, and how someone we hardly knew helped my friend and her two little kids and myself get into a yellow cab to downtown.

I remember Taj Mahal at Castle Clinton down in Battery Park also in 2001, and how close I was to the musicians and how happy everyone was and how the breeze from the water gave the music an airy sound.

I remember Manu Chao, at Summerstage in Central Park, also in 2001, where I danced under the trees just beyond the Summerstage partitions, with a friend I had made prior, from Barcelona. I wondered which direction of Manhattan I was facing: East or West, and what restaurants lay beyond the park so we could go get a bite after the concert was over.

I remember Orchestra Baobab, at Summerstage in Central Park, in 2002, and how I kept thinking that I do not have to give it my all in the dancing because I would dance to their music again very soon, as they were next playing Joe's Pub downtown.

I remember Sonny Rollins, at Lincoln Center Outdoors, in 2004, and how I could not believe that great open air concert venue right at the heart of Lincoln Center, and how we had to sit in chairs and just listen to the music.

I remember Youssou N'Dour, at Celebrate Brooklyn at the Prospect Park Bandshell, in 2017, and how we went for Greek food on Prospect Park West and Prospect Avenue, south of the movie theater circle, but by the time we got back to the park, the line snaking along the entrance to the Bandshell was yes, gone, but that meant that the outdoor enclosure to the concert was at capacity, and so we had to watch the concert from the bike lane loop, and dance to the music there.

I remember wishing to attend Salif Keita's concert, at Celebrate Brooklyn in the Prospect Park Bandshell, in 2019, but having just lost my father, I was home in Europe with my mom. My dear friend Jorge called me from the concert and recorded some of the songs, sending them to me via Whatsapp.

When the pandemic started, we were afraid to go to parks, let alone to participate in large public gatherings. Festivals, concerts, big events: they were cancelled. But people need music and music brings people together. In Italy, people sang in unison from their balconies. In Brooklyn, New York, stoop and porch concerts started popping up in the summer of 2020, and would continue to do so for over a year and a half, most notably, the 5pm Porch Jazz Concerts in Ditmas Park, the brain child of jazz musician Roy Nathanson; the free youth music program led by Catalonian jazz pianist and New York City public school music teacher Albert Marquès and Gabe Nathanson (Fig. 5); and the Sunday Afternoon Jazz Impromptu in Carroll Gardens organized by drummer/vocalist Willie Martinez (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Albert Marquès, Catalanian jazz musician and Director of the Music Program at the Institute for Collaborative Education, New York, at 5pm Porch Jazz Concerts, Brooklyn, New York. Summer 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/albert.marques.jazz>.



Fig. 6. Saxophonist Jay Rodriguez performing at Willie Martinez' Sunday Afternoon Jazz Impromptu at 2pm, in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, New York. September 26, 2021. Photograph: Blagovesta Momchedjikova.

Together with these-small scale, neighborhood concerts, large-scale concerts took place as well, such as Craig Harris and The Nation of Imagination performing “Breathe” on May 25, 2021 (Fig. 7), for the anniversary of George Floyd’s murder at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, where viewers found respite from the forever busy and noisy Flatbush Ave and Eastern Parkway.



Fig. 7. Craig Harris and the Nation of Imagination performing “Breathe” at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, New York, on May 25, 2021.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/brooklynbotanicgarden/albums/72157719273937789/with/51204837538/>.

Or the series of concerts under the auspices of Freedom First/Justice for Keith Lamar, dedicated to wrongfully convicted death row prisoner (in solitary confinement for almost three decades) in the state of Ohio, Keith Lamar, organized by New York City public school history teacher, Wali White and jazz pianist Albert Marquès, at Grand Army Plaza (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). In the midst of wild circular traffic and scorching sun, a call for justice in the form of jazz compositions ensued, followed by a live call from Keith Lamar himself, from prison.



Fig. 8. Wali White, a history teacher at the Institute for Collaborative Education, New York, and main organizer at Freedom First III: A Jazz Tribute to Keith Lamar. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York, June, 2021. <https://facebook.com/freedomfirstjazz/>.



Fig. 9. Saxophonist Jerry Wilkie at Freedom First III: A Jazz Tribute to Keith Lamar. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York, June, 2021. <https://facebook.com/freedomfirstjazz/>.

Then, there were the outdoor dance classes, which in many ways, took on the air of celebration and comradeship that concerts are famous for: at Lilka Mimbella's Zumba class, which I took religiously all summer long, we gathered by the 15th Street Prospect Park Entrance (Fig. 10). As we danced to joyful music, people walked their dogs, flirted, jogged, tried to figure out the Citibike rentals, ate ice cream from Ample Hills Creamery, hurried to see a movie at Nitehawk Prospect Park. Random walkers stopped to watch the Zumba class, cheered us on, or even joined the class,

contributing to the fun energy. But the parks could not accommodate all the demand: various streets opened up to activities including live concerts and dance classes, such as the salsa lessons at the Black Horse Pub (part of New York City's Open Streets program) and the Myrtle Avenue Plaza Saturday morning workouts (part of the Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership initiative) (Fig. 11).



Fig. 10. Lilka Mimbella's Outdoor Zumba class, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, Summer 2021. Photograph: Blagovesta Momchedjikova.



Fig. 11. Myrtle Avenue Plaza Saturday morning workout: Afro Axe with Lilka Mimbella. Photograph: Blagovesta Momchedjikova.

By August, we could attend full-blown concerts, with proof of vaccination, as I did, with my friend Neven, in Bryant Park, for Craig Harris' Nocturnal Nubian Ball: A Tribute to Sun Ra, where 97-year old Marshall Allen joined a troupe of talented musicians and singers, for an Afro-futuristic experience. And in September, the last concert of Celebrate Brooklyn took place, where, in exchange not for a ticket but for a photo ID and proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test, you got to listen to the amazing Lady Blackbird who opened for Trombone Shorty (Fig. 12) and the crowd went wild ... Slowly, we are starting to create new memories of summer concerts in the city.



Fig. 12. Lady Blackbird at Celebrate Brooklyn, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. Sept. 18, 2021. Photo: Blagovesta Momchedjikova.

...I am next preparing to watch *Under the Volcano* (2021)—a documentary about Air Studios, a famous music studio lost to a hurricane and then buried beneath a volcano in the Caribbean Island of Montserrat — where famous artists and bands — the Police, Dire Straits, Elton John, Steve Wonder, to name just a few — went to create some of their most famous albums and hits, under the watchful eye of legendary music producer Sir. George Martin (Fig. 13).

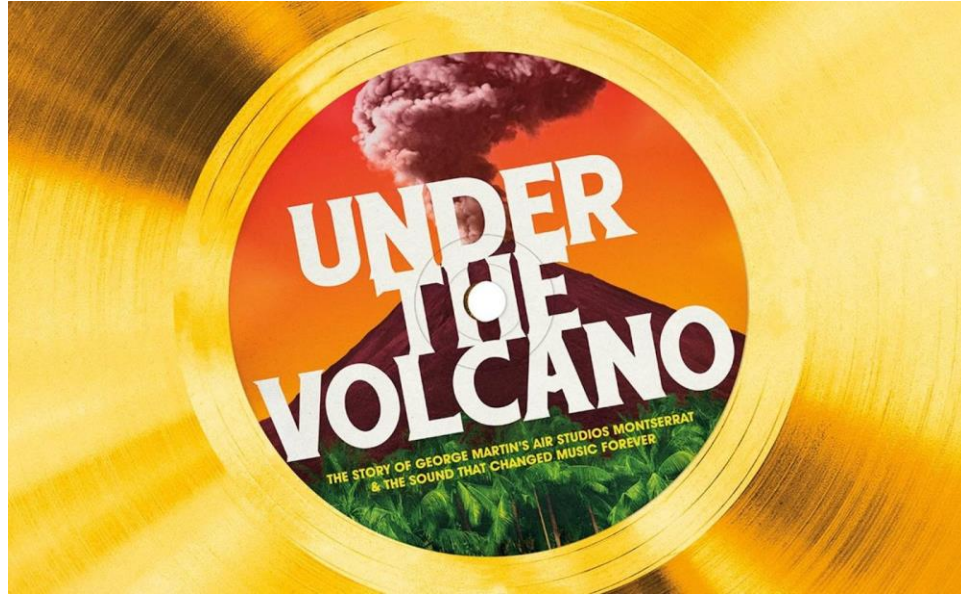


Fig. 13. *Under the Volcano*. Documentary. 2021. Credit: NBC/Universal.

<https://www.nme.com/news/music/new-documentary-to-explore-george-martin-studio-under-the-volcano-2997354>

I wonder, is glorious creation always bound to some kind of disaster, sooner or later?

Has the global pandemic unleashed creativity unknown to us thus far? Do we hear sounds differently now?

Summer/Fall, 2021, Brooklyn, New York

Acknowledgements

After a few months of pandemic fear and cabin fever, in the summer of 2020, my colleague and friend Michelle Dent (NYC, USA) came up with an idea. She gathered eight of us — Claudia Brazzale (London, UK), Javier Gonzalez (Mexico City, Mexico), Jason King (NYC, USA), Jo Novelli (Johnstown, USA), Toni Sant (Manchester, UK), MJ Thompson (Montreal, CA), any myself (NYC, USA) — all former colleagues from the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University — for a Saturday writing salon over zoom, to counter the pandemic blues. Most of the fragments on sound that you will read here were developed during or as a result of those Saturday writing salons. I am so grateful for the opportunity to have worked closely with my dear colleagues during the lockdown; it gave me the special feeling of freedom that so lacked from our daily existence.

Dedication

I dedicate “The Sound Seasons” to two people who I lost, one just before the pandemic, one during the pandemic. The first one is my dad, Prof. Dr. Mihail Blagoev Momchedjikov (1939-2019), an enviable sound and video engineer, who lectured and wrote about sound but was also able to fix the sound of anything he touched: a record player, a gramophone, a transistor radio, a DVD player, a TV, a cassette player, a computer, a car radio, a portable player. He introduced me to a lot of music and the importance of organizing one’s music. Indeed, he developed in me the urge to have a music collection. How I wish I could share this piece with him...The second one is my dear friend Stavri Karamfilov (1957-2021), whose voice, musicality, and laughter, I miss terribly. I still can’t believe both of these men are gone.

About the author

Blagovesta Momchedjikova is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Expository Writing Program at New York University, New York, USA, where she teaches classes on writing, art, and the city. She loves to hear the city speak. She thinks that the pandemic unlocked new possibilities for communicating through sound. Email: bmm202@nyu.edu.