

Filament Essays

**beyond object sleeps infinite sound**

Victoria Pham  
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*The earth has its music for those who will listen;*

*Its bright variations forever abound.*

*With all of the wonders that God has bequeathed us,*

*There's nothing that thrills like the magic of sound.*

- Reginald, *The Magic of Sound*, 1955

When I arrived at the Australian Museum in 2015, I was given the occupation every young archaeologist could have desired; writing the labels. Over the next twelve months, I was prescribed the labels for the Museum's sound collection; a total of three thousand one hundred and sixty-eight objects. It was made clear through translating the sometimes-illegible handwriting of researchers before that I was discouraged from labelling any musical object as an instrument. The official category in the database was 'sound-producing object.'

The reasoning for this system of classification was that we were encouraged not to make a judgement as to whether or not an object's function was musical. For example, perhaps a round sheet of metal was not a cymbal for use in a European orchestra, but for heralding an emergency? The system was structured to stop researchers from relying upon knowledge that came from no other place than our own cultural assumptions. The attempt towards a broader acknowledgement of the diversity of sound practices was commendable, but I found that my mind often strayed. What if all noises could be musical?

Sound is one of those magical experiences that cannot be contained to form nor function (Holmes 1955). Percussion is perhaps the most profound example of how musicality can emerge from all around. Percussion, as well as the human voice, have long been speculated to be the first forms of music-making (Morley 2014). This is because almost anything can be percussed. In the hands of a skilled percussionist, there are sounds and rhythm to be unlocked upon any surface or material. All bodies and objects are capable of being noisy (Marino 2020; Devenish 2021, p. 3). A large pot is not intended to be used as a drum, however, ask any curious child with a stick and suddenly an object has transcended its formal function and its label. By limiting ourselves to certain connotations of instruments and their function (i.e. a snare drum for military bands, an ancient Dong Son Drum for calling rain for rice), we fail to acknowledge the multiplicity and malleability of sound itself. In fact, a harmless and seemingly ceremonial Dong Son Drum could be used for battle (Nguyen & Pham 2020), a snare drum for Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty Suite, or conversely, a cannon used for grand percussive effect. So then, what is an instrument? If all bodies held the possibility of musical material, why as musicians must we tie ourselves to what we have taxonomized as an instrument of music?

Outside of a museum's archive, music is alive. It is something that blossoms and continuously evolves beyond static objects locked in cabinets. The physicality of a musician's

performance transcends the technical mastery over their instrument. Music involves gestures to an audience - improvised, spontaneous or choreographed - and unscored moments of noisy physical exertion. Music is a bodily expression, and so, from the body arises music. If we listen carefully, our bodies make music as if in a polyphonic quilt with other objects and sonic materials around us. More now than ever, we have been encouraged to consider sound as music. Electronic and popular music samples everything from Sydney pedestrian lights signalling green (Eilish & Eilish, 2019) through to film scores that combine field-recordings and sound design with traditional scores (Zimmer & Bartlett & Hemphill, 2021). If we listen deeply, there is music to be heard all around us.

My insistence to seek music beyond the parameters of our cultural expectations – a concert hall, a gig in your local pub or Sunday Mass – and into a chorus of birds or rhythmic breathing of the fellow audience members beside you does not mean that anything goes. Instead, divorcing the label of instrument from an infinite selection of possible sound-producing objects liberates us. Rather than rooting our understanding of musical organisation through instruments, unlocking sonic possibilities of each “non-musical-body” offers a performance and experience of sound without limits.

Consider this as a work cycles through your ears and body and as you collectively witness spectacular performers before you. Perhaps, we are all bodies in a room making music together.

## References

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## Author Biography

Spanning art, technology and science, Victoria Pham is an Australian artist, evolutionary biologist, writer and composer. She is based between Paris and Sydney. Originally trained as an archaeologist, she is a current PhD candidate in Biological Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, St John's College.

Victoria is represented by the [Australian Music Centre](#) as an Associate Artist where a collection of her scores are available. She is the Artistic Director of [FABLE ARTS](#), lead artist in the [RE:SOUNDING](#) project with James Nguyen, co-lead artist in the collective SONANT BODIES with James Hazel, and host and producer of podcast series [DECLASSIFY](#). She has written essays and reviews for an array of publications such as Runway Journal, MeMO Review and Decolonial Hacker.

Her works have been performed, exhibited and commissioned across Australia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France. She has been commissioned by and exhibited in a number of galleries and ensembles such as the TATE Britain, the Sydney Opera House, Australian Contemporary Centre for Art (ACCA), [Art Gallery of New South Wales](#), [Arts House Melbourne](#), [the Anna Schwartz Gallery](#), [the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra](#) and [Campbelltown Arts Centre](#), amongst others. She has featured as a lead artist in international art festivals, including VIVID (2015-16), TINA (2018), Tilde: New Sounds (2019), BLEED (2020) and ANTIDOTE (2022), amongst others.

As an evolutionary biologist and archaeologist, her specialisation is in bioacoustics, the evolution of sound-signalling and acoustic mapping technologies. Victoria has worked with several international museums and institutions such as the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, and has conducted solo fieldwork around the world.

Her artistic practice is driven by explorations into the sonic connections across nature; practices of decolonisation and listening deeply. The hallmark of her interdisciplinary practice is her belief that a partnership with Nature is fundamental, and that Nature is a collaborator to her design, research and sound-based work. Victoria continues to pursue her work in biodesign through research into bioacoustics and mycology which inform the cross-form approaches that structure her creative process.

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