

# Sounding Fragilities

## An Anthology

edited by Irene Lehmann and Pia Palme

This book was printed and published within the framework of the Artistic Research Project *On the fragility of sounds* PEEK FWF AR 537 hosted by the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, with funding from the FWF Austrian Science Fund, the Mariann Stegmann Foundation, and from the Land Steiermark.

ON THE  
FRAGILITY  
OF SOUNDS

Mariann Stegmann  
Foundation

ZfG  
Zentrum für  
Genderforschung  
kunst  
uni  
graz

 Das Land  
Steiermark  
→ Wissenschaft und Forschung

FWF Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

© 2022 editors and authors  
All rights reserved by the publisher  
Wolke Verlag, Hofheim  
Printed in Germany  
Typesetting in Simoncini Garamond  
Cover design: Friedwalt Donner, Alonissos  
Copy editing: Molly McDolan, Liz Stolls, Kate Howlett-Jones  
Photograph front page: David Višnjić. Soprano Juliet Fraser in *WECHSELWIRKUNG*,  
Wien modern, Vienna 2020.

ISBN 978-3-95593-129-2

[www.wolke-verlag.de](http://www.wolke-verlag.de)

# Contents

## I. Preliminaries

- An anthology as polyphony. An introduction . . . . . 9  
*Pia Palme*
- Fragile soundings. A collection of compositions as case studies . . . . . 21  
*Pia Palme*
- Fragmented fragilities. An introduction . . . . . 25  
*Irene Lehmann*
- Three fragilities. Introduction to the contributions . . . . . 33  
*Irene Lehmann*

## II. Fragile communities

- Composing futures. Activism and ecology in contemporary music . . . . . 41  
*Pia Palme*
- On the fragilities of music theatre. A conversation . . . . . 61  
*Elisabeth Schimana, Susanne Kogler, Pia Palme, Irene Lehmann*
- How feminism matters. An exploration of listening . . . . . 85  
*Christina Fischer-Lessiak*
- Listening is a browser. On the fragility of listening online. . . . . 101  
*Margarethe Maierhofer-Lischka*
- Regarding listening. On the theatricality of experimental  
listening situations. . . . . 115  
*Irene Lehmann*
- Hannah Arendt and the ‘fragility of sounds.’  
Aesthetics and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . . . 133  
*Susanne Kogler*
- An infinite echo-system: Reflecting on the ‘fragility of sounds’ . . . . . 147  
*Suwani Suri*

### **III. Fragile materialities**

The silent draw . . . . .	171
<i>Flora Könemann</i>	
The voice that touches also has a skin. Exploring the exercise of vocal touch . . . . .	177
<i>Veza Fernández</i>	
<i>ELP</i> —a choreographic research project . . . . .	187
<i>Paola Bianchi</i>	
Rifts in time. Distortion, possession and ventriloquism in my operatic works . . . . .	201
<i>Liza Lim</i>	
The development of <i>Brittle</i> . On the delicacies of minerals . . . . .	211
<i>Electric Indigo</i>	

### **IV. Fragile collaborative processes**

On the epistemic potential of (live) electronic music. Essay-in-progress . . . . .	219
<i>Germán Toro Pérez</i>	
髮 (Hair) variations—variation of sensibility. . . . .	233
<i>Chikako Morishita</i>	
In the thick of it. Further reflections on the mess and the magic of collaborative partnerships . . . . .	239
<i>Juliet Fraser</i>	
Undefined spaces. In pursuit of imprecision in instrumental technique . . . . .	261
<i>Molly McDolan</i>	
On the interaction of composition and musicology. . . . .	271
<i>Malik Sharif</i>	
‘A dialogue between two fragilities.’ A conversation. . . . .	289
<i>Chaya Czernowin, Pia Palme</i>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b> . . . . .	301
<b>Notes on contributors</b> . . . . .	305

# An anthology as polyphony

## An introduction

Pia Palme

*Sounding Fragilities* invites the reader to submerge themselves in a polyphony of articulations and findings as it reviews interactions surrounding present-day composition and music theatre.<sup>1</sup> With the intention of cultivating literacy, the anthology brings together authors from a wide range of disciplines and different cultural backgrounds. As artists or researchers in art or science, some work independently, others are employed in various institutional contexts. Occasionally, they oscillate between disciplines and are familiar with mixed working situations. The artists among them mainly practice disciplines that are in some way connected to contemporary music theatre or opera.<sup>2</sup> These disciplines include composition and/or performance of new, experimental, improvised, or electronic music, sound art, performative arts, dance and choreography, dramaturgy, performance art, and, last but not least, literature and writing. Some artists work in multidisciplinary ways, and the same unprejudiced approach can be found with the scientific researchers in this book: their contributions cross boundaries between disciplines. Some researchers are also artists, and vice versa.

The writing formats mirror the authors' diversity, ranging from essays, research studies, experimental reflections, poetic or artistic presentations and personal scribbles, to conversations and interviews. The themes and questions that arise from the composition, performance, staging, and reception of music theatre today are manifold; the contributions look further into the way the core terrains interact with the current political and cultural contexts, taking into consideration aspects of feminism and diversity, economic and ecological discussions, digitalisation and the pandemic crisis. What draws these various positions and practices together into an anthology is the common theme of articulation through soundings and voicings in word-based formats.

The book project is anchored to a large-scale programme in artistic research conducted at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (KUG), *On the fragility of sounds* (2019–2022), a PEEK programme of the FWF Austrian Science Fund, operated through the university's Centre of Gender Research. Under the direction of the composer, performer, and artistic researcher Pia Palme and assisted by co-researcher and musicologist Christina Fischer-Lessiak, the programme investigated contemporary music theatre and the compositional process. Several

---

1 The pronouns they/them are used when referring to people.

2 In the following, the terms *opera* and *music theatre* are used as synonyms.

productions and premieres of musical (theatre) pieces within the framework of this unique programme provided case studies and opportunities for investigation and experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, the theatre and performance researcher Irene Lehmann joined the team with the aim of shifting a focus of research towards the processes of writing, articulating, and contextualising knowledge—and to publish this book. Already in 2019, Lehmann had started an association with *On the fragility of sounds* as researcher and advisor, mainly on questions related to theatre practices and theatre studies. Aiming at a wider audience, the two editors guided their book project *Sounding Fragilities* in several directions. First and foremost, the artistic process is given ample recognition and space; in particular, the composers' practices, foregrounding their ideas and activities. Secondly, the editors found it important to nourish a vibrant mycelium of knowledge by encouraging interactions between practices and disciplines. Furthermore, a significant number of female\* contributors was invited to participate, as well as diverse artists from different cultures. Palme and Lehmann believe these works and visions are urgently needed to advance development as without them, the fields of art and research around music theatre would suffer from 'a lack of intellect, a lack of vision, and a lack of imagination,' instead of 'being informed by the world.'<sup>4</sup> Finally, the relatively young discipline of artistic research takes a fundamental position in the overall conception of the anthology project.

Let us return to the idea of the book as polyphony: as a composition technique, polyphony is much valued in musical cultures across the world. Polyphony combines parts of equal compositional importance, which move independently and often follow their own timing—one might say, they operate in a 'democratic' and non-hierarchical way. Sounding together, the parts become a 'whole'. The auditory experience of the 'whole' is *solely* available through *listening*. It is a narrative that happens in dimensions beyond the visual and cannot be seen in the score.

To be more precise, every listener (re-)composes unique versions of 'whole', in their individual processes of perception.<sup>5</sup> It is our intention as editors of this anthology that the reader's journey through the book becomes a journey of listen-

---

3 The website [www.fragilityofsounds.org](http://www.fragilityofsounds.org) gives a comprehensive documentation and overview of the activities, presentations, publications, music contributions, collaborations and partners.

4 These words were used by the artists Mendi and Keith Obadike in November 2021, when they declined an honorary mention for the Giga-Hertz Award for Electronic Music of the ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe because of what they saw as grave issues regarding diversity among the jury. Read about the incident and find their statements under [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10226562134897260&id=1162860843](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10226562134897260&id=1162860843) (accessed 1 December 2021).

5 This is the perspective of neuroscience and recent research in cognitive science (Kandel 2012; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016).

ing, and that individual readings will contribute to a multi-voiced literacy around music theatre.

### *Sounding fragilities*

Pairing *fragilities* with *sounding*, the book's title traces essential lines of a complex discourse. Living beings are open and permeable as they constantly interact with their surroundings: the term *fragility* resonates with interdependence and interactivity. We are intrinsically vulnerable and fragile, yet this is also how we can communicate, live, reproduce, or decompose: nothing on earth exists in isolation. (Odum 1971; Keller & Golley, 2000; Capra & Luisi 2014). On such a fundamental level, *fragilities* refer to our co-dependent biological and ecological situation. This situation influences composition and theatre production: we inter-relate as human beings in art making. *Fragility* characterises communities and cultures—and that includes various conceptions of identity or gender. In the plural *fragilities*, aspects of feminism, inclusion, diversity, and political practices converge, reaching into the artistic process and music theatre.

*Sounding* addresses the totality of acoustic phenomena—the sonosphere.<sup>6</sup> *Sounding* relates to the production and propagation of sound waves and to those who actively produce sound or perform music. It refers to the many instruments and technologies which humans can use in their musical practices. *Sounding* evokes hearing, perception and touch. It refers to the body resonating and sounding, to our voices and to language sounding out towards others. It relates to the editors' intention to facilitate the articulation of ideas and discourse around music theatre. *Sounding* also refers to the inner dimensions: to the 'inner' voices that sound within the spaces of our minds, and further to human activities such as writing, reading, thinking, and reflecting. The auditory quality of these processes has been described by linguists and phenomenologists alike (Ihde 2007). In this way, *sounding* is about literacy, music, theatre, and culture—and that includes our personal, intimate inner spaces as individuals.

According to the cognitive scientist and experimental psychologist Albert S. Bregman, 'the auditory world is like the visual world be if all objects were very, very transparent and glowed in sputters and starts by their own light, as well as reflecting the light of their neighbours' (Bregman 1990, p. 37). All auditory phenomena interact with their respective environments in multiple ways; reflections, echoes, masking, and interferences all influence human perception. Soundings are as fragile as living entities: they constantly communicate with each other and with their surroundings.

---

6 This term was introduced by Pauline Oliveros (2011).