

Listening Memories

In July 2022, I spent a week in Southampton, working with movement artist Gabriel Galvez. Together, we led a series of workshops with elders who usually participate in Gabriel's 'Dance for Parkinsons' and movement classes for older people. Our sessions explored the relationship between sound, memory and gesture. The sessions invited elders into the gardens outside community centres to practice listening techniques. We listened to birds, traffic, wind rustling leaves. We listened again via headphones, noticing the change in amplitude and detail, and the filtering and selecting of sounds our ears naturally do for us. These experiences with listening triggered memories of sounds for some - and as we unpacked these stories, we began to explore gestures and movement in response. Recordings of these stories triggered by sound were edited into an audio collage, which was shared during our 'listening cinema' at John Hansard Gallery.

- Hannah Kemp-Welch

Colour key:



Blue text in brackets “[...]” are the sounds experienced or recalled by the participants (identified as Listeners) as they speak. Their descriptions match the exact sound present in the audio recording as it occurs. Occasionally, the descriptions are introduced with a few seconds delay from when the sound becomes first audible.



Pink text in brackets “[...]” is an additional sound description added by the captioner.

00:00:01

[outdoor background fuzz; birds chirp faintly on a distant branch]

00:00:12

[plastic chair squeaks]

[Listener 1 - mid-range, softer voice tone with slight grain]

I can hear you sitting down.

[Hannah - higher-range voice tone, quick, with emphasis]

Does everything seem much louder?

[Listener 2 - lower mid-range, slightly deeper voice tone]

[Pigeon]. [coos]

[Listener 3 - lower-range voice tone with distinct grainy depth]

[Dog barking] in the distance.

[Listener 4 - warm, higher-range voice tone with soft grain]

An [airplane] is getting closer. --

-- And a [pigeon far away].

[pigeon coos]

[bird wings flutter rapidly in the distance]

[Hannah, curiously]

Did you hear the wings?

[Listener 1, tentatively]

It's this **[noise in the background]**. It just sounds **[like waves down at the seaside]**.

[Hannah - in a friendly, curious tone]

Could be the **[wind in the trees or the leaves rustling]**. Do you think?

[Listener 1, with certainty]

No. It's more dense than that.

[Listener 4, suggestively]

It's the **[traffic]**, isn't it?

[Listener 1]

I think it's probably the traffic. But through here... in my head, it's like being at the seaside.

[Listener 3]

Yea.

[Listener 4, wonderingly]

The **[airplane is coming again]** **[rumbling distantly]** or is it a different one?

[Hannah, invitingly]

Alright, when you are ready, we'll slowly make our way back inside.

[chairs squeak, footsteps squelch]

[Listener 1, laughingly]

Oh, it seems so quiet after that. **[everyone chuckles]**

00:02:15

[footsteps move steadily on a wooden floor; outdoor noise fades into an ambient indoor space]

[cheerful birdsong]

The sounds in this section change resonance. It is the beginning of the listeners imagining and remembering sounds from their lives, and the soundscape becomes a combination of non-diegetic elements running alongside diegetic sounds and voices.

[Listener 5 - mid-range, lilting and warm voice tone]

[Humorously] You know, my husband, he knows all about birds, and he goes outside, and he can whistle, and there's a **[blackbird]** every day. **[whistle]**
And in the morning, sometimes the blackbird is, you know, making its noise.

And he would go out, and I said, '*your girlfriend's calling you*', then he goes and whistles, and then they answer one another. **[everyone laughs, enthusiastically]**
He's so good on birds. That makes a lot of difference, and he knows all about that.

[blackbird whistles suddenly]

[Listener 5, with excitement]

Oh, it's calling! **[Everyone bursts out laughing, room fills with excitement]**
Your friend is calling you!

[People in the room, excitedly]

You see! You see!

[pigeon coos, distantly]

[Listener 4 - lower mid-range voice tone with mature softness]

Got a talent in the pigeon world. **[Everybody laughs cheerfully]**

[Listener 6 - mid-range voice tone with a slightly higher pitch, speaking in a playful but informative manner]

The **[pigeons]** near me go **[coo-o, coo-o]**. They do that four times, then they wait a bit, and then they do it again. And then after that, they only do it three times every time. I've counted them. **[Room fills with cheerful laughter]**

[Listener 7 - mid-range voice tone, with a slight soft grain]

And I stopped putting bird seed out because all of the lovely little birds couldn't get a look in when the pigeons found a way of climbing the tree and getting into the bird feeder. And the poor little ones and my little Robin, that I love, couldn't get anywhere near it because of the pigeons.

[pigeon coos distantly, ongoing]

[Listener 5]

[In jest] I think they're chickens in disguise because they're so big. [Everyone laughs]

[Voices overlap in lively conversation]

Yeah.

They are huge!

[Listener 5, with humorous frustration]

These pigeons, they walk around our garden like chickens.

[Voices overlap in lively conversation]

Yeah. Yeah.

[Indistinct]

[Listener 7, with concern]

And the tiny little birds they can't get anywhere near, so nobody's got nothing now.

[pigeon coos, distantly]

[Listener 5]

Mind you, you shouldn't be feeding birds this time of year, should you? Because there's enough around for them to feed off of. It's in the winter you feed them more.

[hums of agreement]

[Listener 6, inquiringly]

And spring as well.

[Listener 5]

Yea, from autumn around to spring.

[Listener 7 - in a soft, inquiring voice tone]

So, you're not supposed to feed them?

[Listener 5]

Well, it's up to the person, but they say they don't really need you to feed them because there is enough around for them to feed off of. You know, from the ground and from the trees.

[Fondly] We've got a **[water feature]**, and that is lovely. We sit in the garden and hear it just **[trickling]** all of the time. So that is quite a nice thing to sit and just listen to that.

[Listener 6]

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I love that.

[Listener 8 - mid-range, feathery voice tone, speaking in a slightly slower pace]

I have got an indoor one, but it is too smooth a run of water, so you don't actually hear the water running, which is disappointing.

[water continues to trickle gently]

[Listener 5]

When I first got married, I moved out into a village on a farm, and at the back of us were the watercress beds, —

[Listener 8, admiringly]

Oh, that's gorgeous.

[Listener 5]

-- and that's all you could hear was the **[water trickling]**. Like the stream where they had done all the watercress.

[Listener 8]

Oh, that's nice.

[Listener 5, speaking somewhat seriously but humorously]

Mind you, it got on your nerves sometimes because it's a constant.

[single chuckle]

[Listener 8]

[Jokingly] Isn't it all those things that, in the end, you just didn't hear? **[laughs]**

[Listener 5]

[With a smile] I don't want to hear right this minute, you know. **[chuckles]**

But that's why we've got a water feature because it reminds us of where we used to live.

[trickling water stops]

00:05:22

[Listener 6 - mid-range, lilting voice tone]

Well, I was brought up in the war. And yeah, the sirens... the **[sirens that went on]**.

[wailing]

And I always sort of remember going off to the air raid shelter with my doll in my arms, wondering if there's anything else I need to see to save if our house got bombed, you know. **[laughs nervously]**

[faint, military plane rumbles, pushing the air densely, moving closer and further, louder and quieter]

I've never forgotten any of that. Umm.. and then one that frightened me most... when there was an awful lot of gun battle going on in the sky— was actually one that our side won, and it was near the end of the war. So that was not quite so frightening when I found that out... **[soft chuckle]**

But I mean, I was in a quiet area— We weren't ... I wasn't in London. I was only in Bournemouth. It wasn't...umm... you know, it wasn't a badly affected... but we still had our air raids, and we still had to get up in the middle of the night and go to the air raid shelters... **[laughs nervously]**

Yes, it was a weird experience.

[Listener 5]

And the **[planes going over]**.

[Listener 6]

Yes.

[Listener 5, heartily]

Being dragged into the shelter, and the planes go through.

[old military plane rumbles & whirs, ongoing]

All that noise! It was so noisy, the planes that were going over.

[Listener 6]

Yes. Yes.

[Listener 5]

Cos I lived... So that was in Portsmouth. It was right in our --

[rumbling plane noise subsides]

[Listener 6 with disbelief]

Oh, gosh! **[Indistinct]**

[quiet gasps in the room]

[Listener 5]

-- way.

Because my mum come from Portsmouth, so they were bombed out quite a few times.

[Listener 6 with disbelief]

Okay. Wow.

[Listener 5]

Then we moved to Fair Oak and... but it was obviously... the planes were going across to like Coventry, London and all that sort of thing. **[Warmly]** Yeah... so I'm with you there. And that's what I remember, being dragged down in the shelter, in the garden.

[laughs softly]

And I was little, so... I...

[Listener 6]

And lots of cups of tea.

[Listener 5, with a slight, bright humour]

Cups of teas! **[Everyone laughs]**

All my aunties up with cups of teas and still **[knitting]**. **[needles tap, ongoing]**

[soft, sympathetic laughter fills the room]

[Listener 6]

And singing songs. **[laughs]**

[Listener 5, warmly]

So, yeah, they used to sit and knit, cos sometimes you could be there for hours. They used to take their knitting down there. They use wooden needles.

[Listener 6]

Yeah. **[Indistinct]**.

[tapping stops]

00:07:19

[Listener 6, with gentle humour]

I was going to start to say, I worked in a typing pool for two years, and **[the sound of about 20 or 30 typewriters]** going off is something else **[laughs]**.

[Listener 1]

I remember that as well. The **[old manual typewriters]**. **[click-clack & ping, ongoing]**

[Listener 6, laughingly]

Indeed, sit up in bed typewriters. **[chuckles softly]**

[Listener 1]

I can't believe that I used those because I think I started on one of those when I first started working and ended up on a computer.

You know, and think over that period, of say forty years, how technology had moved on and how it has gone from a very noisy environment with these manual typewriters, and they were noisy, weren't they? **[typewriter's click-clack subsides]**

To practically silent with my computer.

00:08:03

[Listener 9 - low-range, brittle voice tone, speaking in a slower pace]

When I think of **[sound]**, I think **[of the bat]**. **[chirping & clicking frantically, coming through a little fuzzy & distorted]**

Now, a bat's got no eyes, and it just goes by sound. And it is able to navigate itself throughout the world just listening to things and er... the concept of er... concentrating on the sound against all other... **[background clanking]**

It's really been an... an outstanding time for me I've never really done it before.

[chirping and clicking of the bat slowly fades into a distant sustained rumbling]

00:08:51

[Listener 10 - mid-range, warm and smooth voice tone]

When I was a child in Northumberland, and then... and I used to have to go to bed, you know, at about 7 o'clock, and it was still light outside, the curtains were closed, and the window was open.

And I could hear and smell my daddy's **[lawnmower]** as he **[cut the grass]**. **[rumbling distantly]**

00:09:18

[rumbling lawnmower slowly subsides]

[Listener 11 - low-range, gentle voice tone with a soft grain, and a hint of nostalgia]

Used to hear **[church bells]** **[resonate, ongoing]** in a very idyllic way, across the river and the meadows.

And, umm... I found it a bit of a mystery compared with any other music that I knew.

And, umm... yeah... and we went to church every Sunday morning, and in that sense it was quite important. Just the sound, it is more of an overall... It goes into an overall impression of this idyllic countryside that was also near an American airbase, so there were like, you know, kind of, cows and church bells and then suddenly **[WHIIIIIIIR]**, and it goes through the sound barrier. An absolute crash and everything trembles and shakes, which makes you slightly alarmed. **[distant church bells continue]**

[Excitedly] But when you're a kid living in the countryside, it is actually quite EXCITING!

[chuckles softly]

My Mum would... mum would... bring back memories of my mum, of being in London when it was being bombed so... Which terrified her. Horrible.

[Listener 12, mid-range, soft voice tone]

Hmm.. association...

[Listener 11]

Yes, and carried on always being scared of thunder. But I... You know as a kid it's like... not a lot happened there and then every now and again you'd sort of... see geese flying, and an explosion. This rumble and everything would shake at that time. So, yeah...

[distant church bells continue resonating]

00:11:10

[church bells subside]

00:11:13

[Listener 3 - lower-range, deep voice tone]

All I can remember is that.... I was the eldest of six and everyone was talking--

[Everyone laughs cheerfully]

[Listener 5]

[Jokingly] Who was going to get that bread and jam first? **[Everyone laughs]**

00:11:30

In this section, the listeners are back outside, tuning in to the outdoor noises.

[outdoor nature noises; breeze sways the leaves, birds sing along]

[faint cough]

[Listener 13 - mid-range, slightly deeper voice tone]

I hear this [talking crow]. [caws]

[Hannah, softly]

Yeah, a crow.

[Listener 14, low-range, warm voice tone]

I think, I heard a [blackbird] [singing].

Alone.

[Imitates bird sounds, playfully] Do-do—do-do—do. [chuckles softly]

[With a smile] Can't do bird imitations [Indistinct].

And there was an airplane, [a long, high, distant airplane].

[Listener 15]

Yeah. Yeah.

[Listener 14]

[Rumbling]. [airplane]

[Listener 15 - deeper, mid-range, bright voice tone]

[Another bird going chak-chak, chak-chak]. It might be a magpie.

[siren wails on a distant road, sound travels in and out of audibility, slowly fading out]

00:12:14

[Listener 15, wonderingly]

I have my eyes closed, and with certain sounds, I saw, in my mind colours. The **[sound I made with my foot]** **[dragging and scratching]** was definitely like a brown colour that I visualised. And then the birds singing were... chirping away -- or whatever you'd like to term it as -- that was green and yellow.

[Listener 9]

Yeah, there was that **[siren that went off]**. **[wailing]**

[Voices overlap]

Oh, yeah.

[Listener 9 - low-range, brittle voice tone, speaking in a slower pace]

And then, I heard it in the distance, and it was getting further and further away. Until it eventually disappeared. So, it was mobile.

[bird chirps]

[Listener 14]

There was also a general kind of **[background fuzz of noise]**. And, it was just... that enhanced sound that you get, and maybe like when you close your eyes, it sounded a bit to me like the sea. **[hums of agreement]**

Umm... But I couldn't see the sea...

I could only hear like - - like there was a fog. And you knew the sea was there because it would be making a **[sea noise]**. It's, it's **[like when you put your ear to a shell]**.

[Voices overlap in engaging conversation]

Yea, yes.

[Listener 14]

[Curiously] And there's something sort of circulating, **[shhh...swishing around, watery sound]**.

[Warmly] Grew up in Devon, quite close to the sea. I always liked going back to the sea.

[gentle breeze blows]

[distant crow caws; water continues to swish & sway]

Travelling on a Cinar boat from Southampton across the Atlantic in 1962.

A little 7... 8 year old.

And that sound... sort of surrounding **[laughs softly]**.

You're in the middle of it, and it's all around. Umm...You. Whether it's wind in the rigging, or waves crashing, or... and yeah... This sound evokes a lot of memories for me.

00:14:35

[swishing watery noise subsides]

00:14:39

[distant siren wails moving further and further away]

[Listener 9]

I am finding that now we have been here for a while that, I am more aware of the sounds around me than I was when I first came here.

[wailing siren subsides]

[Listener 14]

Tuning in.

[Listener 9]

Yes.