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## Beyond Sound

Christine Stewart-Nunez

South Dakota State University, [christine.stewart@sdstate.edu](mailto:christine.stewart@sdstate.edu)

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Christine Stewart-Nuñez  
**BEYOND SOUND**

A staccato downbeat—the hand-drum’s thump—kept time as the *saz* player’s fingers plucked a dizzy harmony full of quick turns. Sound skipped on my skin. The clarinet’s lilting melody whirled past our table as my colleagues and I nibbled typical Turkish dessert: melons, berries, oranges. Stay for coffee, conversation, dancing, the music teased. But we paid our bill, said *güle güle*, and walked across the boulevard near Istanbul’s Blue Mosque. The sun had pulled its veil across the Sultanahmet neighborhood and winter’s darkness eclipsed the baths and bazaars.

It may have been my full belly of lamb kabob, sautéed eggplant, lentil soup, and pita, but more likely it was the heightened awareness I had developed living in a foreign place that compelled me to receive and catalogue more consciously the sounds of my new environment: catcalls from Marlboro-smoking men on the corner, screeches of minibuses, the new blends of consonants and vowels strung along the necklace of speech.

This meta-layer, this readiness to hear, made the night feel sensuous. Windows seemed like transparent skin; the let-down drapes swept across like a woman’s hair. Streets yawned empty. I could almost hear the *swish swish* of Istanbulites inside their homes where fathers kissed their infants goodnight, where old women walked barefoot across wooden floors, where newlyweds brushed shoulders. Then the mosque’s lights switched on. I paused, imagining the muezzin raising his eyes for the first lines of the *adhan*.

The invitation to hear more deeply may arrive in an envelope of sound. It comes in clean paper, its white edges crisp. No stamp, no return address. A mystery. As I slide my fingernails under the open corner, a sample of noise—a humming refrigerator, a popping heater, a honking car—erases expectations. Then, a swelling of stillness. And this prepares me to listen.

I had heard the Call to Prayer before. Two hours into my first deep sleep since my plane touched down in Istanbul, Allah’s name trumpeted me awake. Every day for two years, the Call urged me out of bed. It invited me to slip on sweatpants and sandals and walk down the street to buy fresh bread. In Tarsus, the muezzins sang off-key, but five times a day their chanting pulled me out of the currents of teaching, cooking, and reading for a moment of centering.

This night, however, I heard the Call standing right outside the mosque. The sound system crackled. There was a slight pause before a singular, unadorned baritone burst forth:

Al—LAHHHHHHHHHH. The first syllable, Al, clipped like a pole-vaulter's jump. The LAHHHHHHHH, the soar through the air—clear, tuned, persuasive.

The sound cleaved to me. Two syllables stripped away the barriers of language and custom and history that made me an outsider. The black sky and its array of stars remained. My body's edges seemed to loosen as if part of me wanted to move with the sound. I caught my breath. When sound ushers me into realization, I feel called not to belief, but to connection.

The day following a thirty-hour labor that ended in C-section, I listened to a Nebraska blizzard batter St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Wind whistled across the parking lot and slammed into windows. Even though bright fluorescent lights and the glow of televisions reminded me of the presence of other patients, I felt singular. I was adrift in the fuzz of sleep deprivation and the blur of hormone overload when I heard Holden's alarm-clock cry, the wail of a newborn confused by light, air, hunger. His lungs measured his breathy siren out at regular intervals, as if an accordion's bellows playing the same note over and over: waaaaah (breath) waaaaah (breath) waaaaah (breath).

In this room of plastic cabinets and metal furniture, sound travels best. That sound moves best through matter is odd to me because sound appears invisible; like wind, I can only see its interactions with other things: the tips of spruce, an American flag, a woman's winter scarf. But the denser the matter—a bed or a building or a body—the closer the molecules exist; with particles bonded together, sound is transferred almost immediately from one to the next. The eardrums actually *feel* a sound's vibration, so sound only *seems* intangible.

When Holden cried that night, my body responded to a visceral, unnameable truth that altered my consciousness. With his cry, my milk let down. Thin liquid streamed from my tingling nipples. My heart quickened. Urgency overwhelmed me not because my body was working in new ways, or because my soaked, cotton gown embarrassed me, or because I was shocked by Holden's urgency, but because clear tubes (post-surgery fluids) strapped me to the bed. I couldn't get to him.

In the two or three minutes it took for the nurse to arrive, loosen his swaddling, and hand him to me, his cry remade a familiar world—with me at its center—into another. When Holden latched onto my nipple and I heard the *shoost shoost* of milk, the room's white walls, hard-edged rectangles, and steel bed blurred. In that space just beyond my skin, Holden and I were anchored. Connected. Evolution over millennia developed the call and response of chemical reactions, but at the time, I couldn't put words to the symphony of hormones. I couldn't

make meaning yet. Skin to skin, we waited for the snow to cease and for the wind to slow. Then we slept.

After I toured the Atomic Bomb Museum in Hiroshima, Japan with its staggering statistics and stark depictions of horror, after I visited the Memorial Mound with its thousands of unclaimed, cremated dead, after I walked past the river and its ghosts of burning corpses, after I listened to groups of somber children queued up singing songs in the park, I stood before the Peace Bell. The dome-shaped belfry represents the world, its metal skin a map with no national boundaries.

When sound invites me to hear deeply, sometimes I name this moment immediately, as if the sound breaks up into letters and floats into my consciousness. Other times it takes years to do so, the moment's meaning elusive. Some invitations open only when my brain, by understanding context and history, gives them weight.

I raised the clapper, whispered my intention for a peaceful world, and let go. The clapper contacted the bell. A note near to the lowest piano key emanated. Just below it, a sound like static, a hum under the deep bass tone. In my ear, the vibrations from the single, rich note moved through the hammer, anvil, and stapes to the snail-shaped cochlea where cells absorbed it. So close to the bell, I felt the rippling waves push against and through my skin. It seemed like a paradox—how this deep, physical hearing urged connection with the world beyond me.

When auditory nerve fibers picked up the triggered electrical signals and carried them to my brain, I named the sound. Knowledge gave significance to that name. And so the bell's sound could no longer be just sound because now this sound carried the flash of light, fire on the skin, crumbled buildings and beings, leukemia, genes corrupted for generations.

The waves rippled beyond me. I was present to the sound and the sound released me into silence.

I cultivate these sound invitations by accepting opportunities to travel or to stand on new ground. Still, I wonder how many I've missed. Too often I shroud myself in expectations. Distractions can stop up my ears like cotton swabs. Poignant moments rise from memory, a silent montage of missed sounds. At Auschwitz, I wore headphones to hear the tour guide's commentary of the concentration camp; I didn't know that Kate, my student who had taken me by the arm, was crying until I saw her tears. In Siena, Italy, the maze of cobbled streets dizzied me; perhaps I missed the bells ringing out as a wedding party burst forth from the church into the piazza. I watched wind carrying clouds over the green pastures of Ireland, but I don't recall the sound of the ever-present rain. I remember Holden's first laugh—a cascade

of giggles as we played “catch” with his squishy ball—but not the moment he said his first word. In his baby book, I inscribed “Mama, Da, ball,” but I have no memory of where or when he uttered those words.

Perhaps I’ve missed hundreds of opportunities to lose the feeling of self for a moment and connect with another person, another pursuit, another phenomenon. Without sound, a layer is lost, a dimension absent. Without sound, there are no vibrations on my skin, nothing activating the bones in my ear. I can only wonder about how sound would’ve opened up the experience.

The train resting on the platform in Stryków, a village in southern Poland, sounded like a sigh. Perhaps it was my exhale, the auditory mix of exhaustion and the relief of arrival. The air smelled warm, moist, as if fog could materialize at any moment. Our hosts met our small contingent of students and professors at the station and stowed our bags in their cars, but we chose to walk through the village.

I noticed the subtle sounds of life as we passed the empty, two-room station. A brown chicken pecked its way around the yard. Colors buzzed: homes and stores crackled tangerine, buttercup, ochre, and lime; blossoms rang out in crimson, cornflower blue, violet. The bright green of grass, trees, and shrubs became the melody of spring. Even the children who attended classes in the long, white school chimed in with their butterfly and flower cutouts taped to windows. As I trekked up the narrow, steep fork of the main road, I felt the turn to storm: bright colors to a gray palette of sky, warm air to cool breeze, the smell of dusty air to the smell of rain. At the Catholic church perched on the hilltop, sound intensified, the priest’s chants and congregation’s response broadcast from inside. With distinct syllables muffled by the audio system, I couldn’t understand if they used Latin or Polish, but I recognized the prayers’ rhythms. The priest began by landing on a note and holding it—the sound of an open hand—a note into which he inserted a succession of clipped consonants. The congregation repeated the refrain.

This time, however, the chanting converged with another sound, and the envelope—the invitation—arrived. It pushed me further into the moment, crystallizing that second of time. The deep bass rumble of thunder rolled across the sky, across the mountains blurred by distant rain, across the clusters of trees, across the thin slices of pasture, across the cemetery tombs. The tympani of thunder collided; I heard a crack of lightning right above my head. This crash of sounds fused past memories of the times I had prayed in Mass with the storm. It sealed them in my memory with the image of the charcoal-colored clouds stampeding toward me like buffalo, the air chilling my skin as it pushed past me like a flood of ghosts.

The moment before it began to rain, before our clothes became stuck to our skin, before we began to run down the gravel road, before we began to shriek in delight, I felt my body's membranes give a little. I felt lighter, looser, like walking out to the first thaw of snow after five long winter months. And then the clouds opened.

Beyond sound weaves mosque, milk, sky, stars, the touch of the living and the touch of the dead.

Beyond sound fuses vibration and reflection and paper.

"Mama, I love the movie theatre of my life," Holden, now a kindergartener, says. He scoops up a forkful of spaghetti, sauce dripping onto the side of green beans. And he hums, a robust hum, somewhere between "yum, yum, yum" and a chant. I tease out this sound, holding it in my ear. As I breathe his song into my body, I jot down his words and the tenor of his sound.