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What does ASMR sound like? Composing the Proxemic Intimate Zone in Contemporary Music.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the viral circulation of the acronym ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) has brought a new sensation and audiovisual genre to the attention of the internet-connected world. This phenomenon has attracted the interest of contemporary music composers, who have begun using the term ASMR as a shorthand for a broader theoretical category that involves the assemblage of a specific sound quality, its *aisthesis*, and a range of compositional, performance, and recording techniques through which they are manipulated. Based on interviews with eight living composers (Carola Bauckholt, Chaya Czernowin, Andrew Harlan, Ole Hübner, Neo Hülcker, Allan Gravgaard Madsen, Morten Riis, and Charlie Sdraulig), I argue that the term ASMR is used as a shorthand to invoke the ‘intimate zone’. As one of the four zones of human interaction formalised by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his theory of proxemics, the intimate zone emerges from the ways in which space, the sensorium, and one’s sense of self mould each other. After deconstructing the nature of ASMR as an autonomous galvanic response, and combining the framework of proxemics with that of ‘cultural techniques’, I articulate the ways in which the composers use the term ASMR to speak about features of past contemporary art music as well as their current work. I then describe the strategies employed in their compositions to engage the intimate zone and divide them into two main categories. The first involves calibrating the perceived proximity of the audience to the sound object, while the second involves manipulating the space in which this interaction occurs.

Keywords: Proxemics, Intimacy, ASMR, Affect, Microphone, Mediation

Introduction

On 31 May 2018, *The New Yorker* uploaded a video to its YouTube channel titled ‘How ASMR Became an Internet Phenomenon’,ⁱ featuring the image of a blonde young woman beckoning towards a microphone with her index finger. A day later, that video reappeared on the Facebook profile of composer Chaya Czernowin with the comment: ‘I find this extremely interesting. I think I listen for this in my work. Maybe I have some form of ASMR’ (see Figure 1).ⁱⁱ A year after that, Czernowin labelled three sections of her 2019 opera *Heart Chamber* as ‘ASMR episodes’, describing the sounds within them as ‘quiet and extremely intimate breathing and small microscopic noises which are very evocative of minute movements of the mouth or body’.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 1. Screenshot from Chaya Czernowin’s personal Facebook page, 1 June 2018

ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, an acronym coined by user Jennifer Allen (2010) in response to the popular thread ‘weird sensation feels good’ initiated in 2007 on the health blog steadyhealth.com.^{iv} The acronym describes the physical effect produced by a certain category of stimuli: ‘a tingling, static like sensation [...] said to be paired with a feeling of intense relaxation’, according to cognitive neuroscientists Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis

(2015, 2). But if ‘ASMR’ is supposed to name an autonomous galvanic response, how can one ‘listen for’ it, as Czernowin suggests?

While the thread began with a detailed description of the ‘weird sensation’ and its ‘triggers’, as more people gathered around it to contribute their experiences, it quickly became a habit to reference audiovisual material from movies, TV shows, and hyperlinked content from YouTube (then only four years old) as examples of triggering stimuli. One of the earliest examples came from an anonymous user referenced the scene in which actress Lhakpa Tsamchoe measures Brad Pitt’s body to tailor him a suit in the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*. As the camera moves close up to Tsamchoe and Pitt’s bodies, we leave the urban turmoil, detectable only through distant background noises, and become immersed in the intimacy of a room resonating with soft sounds—the rubbing of the clothes’ fabric, light footsteps on what seems to be a wooden floor, the sliding sound of the measuring tape across the tips of Tsamchoe’s fingers—and the sensuousness of half-whispered words, of which we can catch ‘every inflection’, as the user describes. Other users contributed different audiovisual examples, all characterised by a similarly intimate atmosphere, both visually and aurally.^v

The acronym ASMR soon became a banner under which the newly formed community could leave steadyhealth.com and gather on Facebook (2010), Wikipedia (2011), and other platforms that allowed users to upload audiovisual material meant to trigger it.^{vi} YouTube, in particular, became the main warehouse of this brand-new genre. As linguists have noted, acronyms that ‘have been around for a while [...] enter the language as ordinary words’, and ‘the original source words are usually forgotten’ (Burrige and Bergs 2016, 36). The same, I suggest, is true for the acronym ASMR. What once strictly indicated a bodily sensation soon began to gesture toward a whole genre of audiovisual content meant to trigger it, as well as the sense of intimacy, warmth, and relaxation often associated with its consumption. This shift in meaning is currently acknowledged in the ‘Revision history’ section of the Wikipedia entry for ASMR. In earlier versions of the page, ASMR was described solely as a ‘physical sensation’. But by now, as I write this article (August 2021), the page acknowledges its social dimension as an audiovisual genre.^{vii}

The transition of ASMR from a sensation to an audiovisual genre has had consequences for the genre of contemporary music. In this article, I argue that thanks to its viral impact, the term ASMR has filtered into contemporary music circles as a shorthand for a broader theoretical category that involves the assemblage of a specific sound quality, its *aisthesis*, and a range of

compositional, performance, and recording techniques through which they are manipulated.^{viii} Through interviews conducted during the summer of 2021, as well as analysis of scores and other online documents, I survey eight composers from different generations who have all made use of the term to describe certain defining features present in their compositions. These include Carola Bauckholt (b. 1959), Chaya Czernowin (b. 1957), Andrew Harlan (b. 1995), Ole Hübner (b. 1993), Neo Hülcker (b. 1987), Allan Gravgaard Madsen (b. 1984) Morten Riis (b. 1980), and Charlie Sdraulig (b. 1985), all of whom work in Europe and North America. I have also interviewed computer music designers Lukas Nowok (b. 1993) and Carlo Laurenzi (b. 1973), with whom Czernowin collaborates. While investigating the role of the ASMR audiovisual genre within contemporary music circles from a social perspective, I also make a music-theoretical intervention, by proposing that within contemporary music circles ASMR constitutes a shorthand for the ‘intimate zone’.

The intimate zone is one of the four zones of human interaction theorised by Edward T. Hall ([1966] 1990) within the framework of ‘proxemics’, i.e. the ways in which humans create and perceive space as a non-verbal elaboration of culture. Hall’s four proxemic zones— ‘intimate’, ‘personal’, ‘social’, and ‘public’—are defined not by the number of centimetres within which the interaction takes place, but emerge from the ways in which the environment, the sensorium, and one’s sense of self mould each other. He explains that our awareness of the intimate zone emerges when ‘the presence of the other person is unmistakable and may at times be overwhelming because of the greatly stepped-up sensory inputs. Sight (often distorted), olfaction, heat from the other person’s body, sound, smell, and feel of the breath all combine to signal unmistakable involvement with another body’ (116). But the same event, at the same measurable distance, may be experienced as more or less invasive depending on one’s perception of boundaries. A person might locate those boundaries at the most superficial layer of the body—the skin—and so feel that skin contact should be avoided unless there is a direct invitation. On the contrary, for another, the body might be perceived as just a ‘shell’ (158), and physical contact may not be perceived as engaging the intimate zone. The spoken word, however, might be capable of making that breach.

While the category of proxemics has already been cursorily applied to the analysis of the mediated voice in film music (Maasø 2008; Liang 2016; Coulthard 2016) and sound art (Hanssen 2010; Ploeger 2011), as well as in relation to recording techniques (Moore, Schmidt, and Dockwray 2009; Dockwray 2017), I lay the groundwork for a more expansive musical theorisation

of proxemics as it connects to contemporary music. First, I correct one of Hall's drawbacks: his tendency to revert to cultural essentialism in articulating how people from different cultural backgrounds relate to these zones. By highlighting how the intimate zone is the product of a complex assemblage of individual, cultural, and environmental factors, all constantly interacting and in flux, I disrupt any implication of a pure and stable cultural origin of that zone. Second, I propose that by drawing analogies between their music and the ASMR genre, the composers interviewed do not aim to create standard ASMR-inducing audiovisuals, but rather invoke the existence of a 'cultural technique' (Siegert 2014; 2020) that allows them to engage the intimate zone through sonic means. By invoking the framework of 'cultural techniques' in combination with proxemics, I shift the focus from ontological questions about the body, mind, sensorium, and its surrounding environment, and instead accent the techniques and technologies that each time articulate and stabilise the distinctions between these entities in the first place. Through an assemblage of various techniques and technologies, both ASMR content creators and the interviewed composers establish basic spatial relations, such as the 'distinction between inside and outside' (Siegert 2013, 60)—i.e. one's sense of self *versus* the Other *versus* the space in which this interaction takes place—thereby stabilising one's sense of proxemic boundaries through primarily sonic means.

Changing Perspective: from 'Autonomous Response' to Cultural Techniques of the Intimate Zone

To better understand ASMR as a cultural phenomenon in relation to contemporary musical practice, it will first be necessary to briefly deconstruct how it is currently portrayed as a biological response external to any social and historical context. In retracing how this discourse gained currency, actor-network theory—and the work of Bruno Latour (2005) specifically—will guide my investigation. The alliance between scientific and vernacular narratives that posit ASMR as a biological response began early on, as a close inspection of the Wikipedia history of the entry 'ASMR' reveals. Despite the New-Age ring to the locution 'meridian response', the discourse surrounding the acronym was forced to become increasingly objective and clinical over time in order to stand up to Wikipedia's standards of review. As Allen explained in an interview, that necessitated the exclusion of any discomfiting acronyms 'tied to sexual or taboo activity', such as

AIO or ‘Attention Induced Orgasm’.^{ix} It also required developing a discursive bridge with scientific literature. Since 2015, in fact, a growing corpus of peer-reviewed articles in the fields of psychology, neuropsychology, and cognition that hypothesises ASMR as a syndrome of neurodiverse brains has begun to filter into vernacular discourse (Ahuja 2013; Barratt and Davis 2015; Fredborg, Clark, and Smith 2017; Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen 2017; Fredborg, Clark, and Smith 2017; Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen 2017; Lochte et al. 2018; Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen 2019a; Roberts, Beath, and Boag 2019; Smith, Fredborg, and Kornelsen 2019b). A symbiotic feedback loop has developed between the two communities, both of which construe ASMR as an ‘affect’ in the sense put forth by Brian Massumi—i.e. as a ‘purely autonomic reaction’ of one’s body (1995, 85).

But as recent critiques of the turn to affect have highlighted, we can understand affect as a corporeal reaction that ‘eludes form, cognition, and meaning [...] only by adopting a highly idealised or metaphysical picture of the mind as completely separate from the body and brain to which it freely directs its intentions and decisions’ (Leys 2011, 450–455).^x To understand ASMR as a cultural technique of the intimate zone requires relocating the perception of characteristic ASMR-inducing audiovisuals—and even the galvanic automatic response that for some might follow—in the cultural and historical dimension of the subject, understood here as the ‘mind–body union’ (Grant 2020, 22). To talk about the ‘intimate zone’ or ‘intimacy’ is first and foremost to invoke a category of spatial relation—for its etymology, shared by most Indo-European languages, refers to the inmost, innermost, the deepest—that entertains a strong bond with the affective sphere. In everyday speech we mainly use the word ‘intimacy’ figuratively to indicate a specific affect. Its spatial meaning, however, endures in the background.^{xi} From this nexus between space and affect follows the basic premise of proxemics: that the distance between the self and the surrounding environment is not simply a physical measurable given, but the result of constant negotiations between a subject and their environment. Sound can mediate these negotiations as part of what Cornelia Fales defines the acoustic world, i.e. ‘the physical environment where sound as acoustic signal is produced and dispersed’, and the perceived world, i.e. ‘the subjective, sonic world created by listeners as a result of their translation of signals from the acoustic world’ (2002, 61).

If we consider sound in the acoustic world, we have to acknowledge the technological mediation through which ASMR-inducing content engages with the intimate zone. Whatever the

actual nature of the unknown sensation that ‘feels good’ that someone wrote about in 2009, it has been constantly overwritten by increasingly standardised audiovisual content and the discourse that surrounds it, shaping the ways in which we—as people of the Internet age—conceive and experience the meanings of the acronym ASMR. Technological mediation, in particular, has been a constitutive part of the ASMR phenomenon from the very beginning, and for this reason, ASMR-inducing content should not be considered a mere ‘reproduction’ of an off-line reality. A media-critical perspective must acknowledge the fact that, since the beginnings of ASMR, the triggers were audiovisuals, i.e. artefacts mediated by recording and amplification processes.

Consider one of the most well-known examples mentioned in the ‘weird sensation feels good’ thread on steadyhealth.com: Bob Ross’s TV show, *The Joy of Painting*.^{xii} Each of his recordings brings to the foreground details that would barely have been perceptible close-up and in person, by relying on specific microphonic affordances and recording techniques known as ‘close miking’. We hear the textures of every single bristle of Bob Ross’ brush gently stroking the canvas, the knife smacking the palette, the friction of the breath that passes between the tongue and the teeth when, for instance, he pronounces the ‘st’ of ‘just right’. In each case, the close miking of almost imperceptible sounds is combined with slow movements, and the absence of louder or quicker sounds that might interrupt them. Moreover, when listeners of Bob Ross tune in to reruns of his show on their computer, rather than on television, the shared experience of a living room is transformed into an individual private viewing, enhanced by the tactile experience of sonic vibrations passing directly through headphones.

At the same time, considering sound within the perceived world means acknowledging the role that the subject’s bodily and cognitive affordances (Gibson 1979) play in the emergence of the intimate zone. To stress the ‘constitutive technicity’ (Abbate and Gallope 2020) of the subject in co-producing the perceived world, I suggest that we think of the *subject as a microphone*, transducing sound through the affordances of more or less vibrating, and more or less receptive, membranes. Our degree of vibration and receptivity as microphones is always affected by our own stories and positionality. It involves cultural, psychological, physiological constraints, and is in constant flux. Therefore, even if some bodily reactions might seem autonomous (i.e., by bypassing our consciousness), each stimulus engages with our prior history of proxemic experiences and therefore involves much more than just biological factors. By transducing vibrations, the subject participates in the making of such an event, and in that making its boundaries are made.

Contemporary Music Meets ASMR

Each of the composers I interviewed took a different route to recognising the musical potential in ASMR-inducing content. One year after learning about ASMR from *The New Yorker*, Chaya Czernowin scored three ‘ASMR sections’ in her opera *Heart Chamber*. Carola Bauckholt decided to incorporate an actual ASMR audio sample called ‘rabbit eating watermelon ASMR’ in her work *Implicit Knowledge* (2019-20) after stumbling upon it on YouTube.^{xiii} Andrew Harlan recognised the ‘musical potential’ of ASMR-inducing content through the work of experimental composer Felicia Atkinson, who adopts what critics have described as an ASMR-like vocality.^{xiv} Since then he has explicitly likened his work *HYPHA* (2019) to the ASMR genre in his concert notes.^{xv} Neo Hülcker was first among the interviewed composers to reference ASMR explicitly in their composition *ASMR *contemporary music ensemble** (2015).^{xvi} As I learned during our interview, it was through an encounter with Hülcker’s piece that Ole Hübner first thought about the connections between ASMR and music.^{xvii} Today, Hübner refers explicitly to ASMRtists (i.e. content creator of ASMR audiovisuals) as the source for their ‘Klangrecherchestrategien’, or strategies for researching sound.^{xviii} Allan Gravgaard Madsen and Morten Riis became interested in the ASMR genre during the Covid19 pandemic while looking for alternatives to the live concert format. Their research led them to create *Close to You* (2020), described on their website as a ‘collection’ of ‘music experiences created directly for an online and digital platform’ with the Freiburg-based Ensemble Recherche.^{xix} The case of Charlie Sdraulig is unusual, as internet users came to recognise his music as ASMR-inducing content, after a performance of pianist Zubin Kanga of his piece *collector* (2014-15) was posted on the Reddit ‘ASMR’ page and tagged as ‘unintentional ASMR’ by user ‘u/Stilaz’.^{xx} Since then, Sdraulig wrote to me, he has referenced ASMR in his program notes in order to communicate his objectives to people who ‘weren’t in contemporary music circles’, but ‘shared an open-mindedness’ to embracing ‘quotidian objects and instruments that afford an expanded array of sonic possibilities’.^{xxi}

The case of Sdraulig became less exceptional, however, in light of a recurrent observation among the composers I surveyed. Most of them admitted to also hearing the sonic and affective qualities they recognise in ASMR in their own past music, or in passages of works such as Salvatore Sciarrino’s *L’Opera per Flauto* (1990), Helmuth Lachenmann’s *Guero* (1970), ...auf...

(2005-06) by Mark Andre, *Branches* (1976) by John Cage, and the experimental work of Pauline Oliveros. To understand what makes these passages specifically ASMR-like involves asking what the interviewed composers ‘listen for’ in ASMR, as well as what they ‘listen for’ in their own musical tradition in light of the ASMR genre. While I have argued so far that they ‘listen for’ the intimate zone, I now want to highlight those compositional practices that, like ASMR-inducing audiovisuals, have the potential to engage the intimate zone. Drawing these connections will also help us recognise what facilitated the encounter between two genres—YouTube-based ASMR and contemporary art music—that appear so distant in terms of social and institutional milieu. To this end, I suggest we listen anew to that strain of the avant-garde that, breaking from the principles of serialism, contributed to the dismantling of boundaries between music and sound, composer and public, performer and listener.

The post-war tendency to the ‘emancipation of noise’ (Varèse 1966) incentivised by new techniques of sound manipulation (including extended techniques, *musique concrète*, and electronic music), diverted composers away from working exclusively with musical tones that were stable in terms of pitch, timbre, and amplitude. Within these kinds of compositional experiences, we start to see the development of instrumental techniques that are not optimised for the projection of a sustained pitch in space. The specific sounds I am referring to, characterised by inharmonic spectra, can be defined as ‘unstable’—that is, as sounds whose internal development is hard to control in performance. Take, for example, several of the extended techniques for string instruments that Lachenmann developed for his *musique concrète instrumentale*: the use of ‘a light bow drawn relatively fast over the fingerboard’ while the left hand ‘dampens the open strings and thus limits their vibration’, or the use of the bow on the mute which, by acting ‘as an extension of the bridge, [...] tends to darken the sound, as well as making it more reverberant’ (Alberman 2005, 42–43). The microstructural nuances these techniques produce are often barely audible without close listening or amplification. The power of amplification in transforming these acoustic microevents into perceptible sounds was observed already by the *musique concrète* pioneer Pierre Schaeffer, who wrote that a microphone ‘can be positioned in such a way that the inner proportions of sound will be redefined’, as it is ‘capable of capturing a whole world of details that as a rule elude our listening’ or that ‘are usually ignored’ ([1966] 2017, 55).

The possibility of bringing to the foreground such microstructures—through performative and ‘audible techniques’ (Sterne 2003, 137), as well as amplification technologies—is equatable to

the ‘visual’ impression of exploring ‘complex sound within a microscopic realm’, in Bauckholt’s words. It is precisely this exploration of the microscopic dimension of sound that she retrospectively recognises as common to contemporary music and the ASMR genre.^{xxii} As she writes, ‘I was interested in the microscopic view of sounds [...] long before ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) made it popular’.^{xxiii} That exploration constitutes new spatial-affective relationships between the sound, its source, and the listener. For, as she put it during our interview, by ‘seeing all of these details you come so close that you are inside of the sound. And it sounds “intimate” because intimacy is to be close to something. The spatial and the emotional level are connected, at least for me.’^{xxiv} Her last statement summarises, perhaps unintentionally, one of the basic premises of proxemics.

For Hübner and Harlan, these intimate relations with sound are also explicitly coupled with an intimate relation to the sources of those sounds: the instruments. Working with new instruments, *objects trouvés*, or extended techniques that are neither part of a standard palette of timbre known within the classical orchestra, nor in many cases abstractable as pitches, has pushed composers from the post-war period (e.g. Luigi Non, Mauricio Kagel, Pauline Oliveros) through today to work in close contact with the producing source. Hübner asserts that ‘the reception mode elicited by ASMR’ has to do with the ‘creative mode’ they experience while composing music, ‘spending hours with the instruments, just playing around’ on their own, and creating an intimate bond with these objects. ‘The desire, maybe’, they assert, ‘is to share something of this moment of finding, searching, inventing, of being surprised’.^{xxv} The impulse to recreate in a concert hall what they had experienced in the silence of their own room recently made them to consider providing the audience with headphones that would pick up feed directly from a microphone on stage, and thus transmit the nuances of the sounds they achieve through extended techniques directly to the listener’s ear. Harlan has similarly connected ASMR with the listening mode that is characteristic of his creative process: ‘The first time I deployed an ASMR strategy was in relation to this piece *Trawl* (2016) for double bass and electric bass. As I am myself a bassist and had at disposition the instrument to experiment with, I was perceiving this closeness to it while composing and I wanted to recreate the same for the listener’.^{xxvi}

With a better understanding of how these composers hear music as ASMR-like, and ASMR-inducing content as musical, we can now turn our attention to what the polysemic term ASMR does for them. For Bauckholt and Riis, the ASMR genre has given composers the

opportunity to connect with millions of people who had no prior experience of contemporary music, familiarizing them with the world of noises. ‘It’s like a miracle that suddenly all people listen to that’ Bauckholt asserts; it ‘opens’ and ‘sensitises the ear of a wide public’ that ‘enjoys’ and ‘feels very connected to noises’. Similarly, for Riis, the ASMR genre engages a wider public in modes of listening focused on sensations (‘being in the world’), and abandons the semantic level of listening (‘decoding the world’). ASMR audiovisuals focus on ‘tiny details’ within a space so as to ‘draw listeners’ attention to their body and perception’. And while ‘its timbral qualities, the experimental use of the microphone’, are not new, he explains, it ‘names and popularises this specific aesthetic’.^{xxvii} What is nevertheless distinctive about ASMR is the accessibility of the internet, as well as the mass availability of microphones and cameras, which have granted people the ability to participate in ASMR culture not only as listeners, but also as producers.^{xxviii} Thus, Riis suggests, the ASMR community may have managed to achieve the utopian dream of blurring the distinctions between composer, performer, and listener—a dream, he adds, shared by John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, Pauline Oliveros, and Cornelius Cardew, but nevertheless previously foreclosed to contemporary Western art music by its heavy institutionalisation.

For Czernowin, instead, the encounter with ASMR content has led her to recognise which aspects of her work could be grouped together and identified as a distinctive compositional category. This was true, she explained, despite having already worked with musical elements analogous to those of the ASMR, mentioning as an example her orchestral piece *The Quiet* (2010). Articulating in words a practice, even a long-time practice, thus allows her to reflect on and communicate it as a distinct category, as other interviewed composers similarly noted.^{xxix}

In the next two sections, I aim to answer the question: How does the intimate zone sound? I retrace the specific strategies that the composers I interviewed deploy in their recent works connected to the ASMR genre. I have divided their strategies into two macro-categories. The first involves the manipulation of the sense of proximity between a subject and an object, while the second involves manipulation of the surrounding space in which the encounter takes place. While the limelight will fall on the network of mediators that are under the control of the composers, it is worth stressing that none of these strategies produce universal effects on any given subject. Rather, they install affordances that are codefined with an ideal range of assumed abilities, often calibrated by the composers based on their own listening experience. Familiarity with ASMR-inducing content moreover produces in the listening subject a shared ‘habitus of listening’, that is,

‘an embodied pattern of action and reaction [...]; a *tendency*’ to respond in a certain way (Becker 2010, 130). Thus, subjects who encounter these ASMR-like sounds might employ specific audile techniques (like focusing on small sounds which would normally be discarded as background noise) and generate affective responses (such as a sense of openness, trust, and relaxation) that are shaped by a growingly standardised discourse around ASMR-inducing audiovisuals.

Strategy 1: Manipulation of the subject’s proximity to the object

In this first macro-category, I group together a set of strategies that are deployed to create the perception of a spatial-affective sense of proximity. While I have tried to articulate these different strategies as independent categories, many of them obviously work in networks. I also show that while composers mostly focus on the manipulation of the acoustic signal, the sound event might participate in the redefinition of the sensorium by engaging and blurring the boundaries between multiple senses: scale, touch, proprioception, vision.

Sound-Source Scale Indices

Sound-source scale indices summon a sense of the size of the sound source. After her encounter with the YouTube clip ‘rabbit eating watermelon ASMR’, Bauckholt tried to record herself eating watermelon as fast as possible and sped up the sample. The sound however did not satisfy her, as the perceived scale of the sound source—her mouth—was too ‘big’. I propose that we understand the sound she was looking for as a ‘small sound’. Small sounds are those that ‘even when they are loud or heard from close by, conjure small sources’. They endure a ‘weight image’ that signals that the ‘strength of the[ir] cause’ is smaller ‘in relation to our own scale’ (Chion 2015, 7-8). Since in everyday life, sounds that index a sound source smaller than our own scale are generally audible only when the source is close to our body, they customarily index physical proximity as well. The amplified crush of the watermelon against the rabbit’s teeth, for example, is perceived loudly and clearly, but maintains a slight weight-image due to the ‘sound’s agility or ability to shift rapidly in its details’ (8).

This effect of perceived ‘agility’ can also be observed as a result of the process of granulation that Lukas Nowok, the sound designer for *Heart Chamber*, used to create a line of ‘combs’ featured in the first ‘ASMR episode’ (see Figure 2). By selecting segments from close-

miked recordings of plucked comb teeth, regulating their densities per second, and randomizing their entrances, Nowok created a distinctive and constantly moving ('agile') texture, comprising microevents whose density throughout time is regulated in accordance with Czernowin's notation.

Figure 2. *Heart Chamber* by Chaya Czernowin (measures 141-152). Copyright © 2019 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors Company, sole U.S. and Canadian agent for Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany

Haptic Indices

Haptic indices conjure a haptic perception of the sound source, similar to the effect of touching or being touched by it. Sounds with high 'materializing sound indices' (Chion 1994, 114) create haptic impressions by saturating the ear with information pertaining to the materiality of the objects involved in its production. They are produced by various techniques deployed here in the pieces under consideration that bring forward the 'grain of the instrument' (Accornero 2021, 23), such as mediated processes of sound granulation (as in Nowok's line of combs), or extended techniques typical of *musique concrète instrumentale* that expose the mechanical sources of sonic production (Osborn 2014). The connection between the granularity of the sound and its haptic mode of apprehension was previously noted by Pierre Schaeffer, who remarked how the grain of 'sound matter reminds us of the grain of a textile or a mineral' ([1966] 2017, 437).

Haptic indices can also result from another quality apprehended through touch: temperature. What is known as the 'proximity effect' grants the sound a 'warmer', 'intimate' aesthetic that is characteristic of vocal techniques such as crooning (McCracken 2015, 280). This effect is due to an increase in the low frequency response that results from close-miking techniques through directional microphones with cardioid or figure-8 polar patterns. As most of the composers resorted to amplifying small sounds in order to render them audible in concert settings, it is worth noting that amplification apparatuses not only serve the telephonic function of bringing sound events that occurred metres (or hours) away up close, but also distort the sound by enhancing the perceived sense of 'warmth' and 'intimacy' associated with it. This effect, for example, was exploited by Madsen and Riis while recording *Close to You* on AKG C414 microphones set on a monodirectional pattern. I suggest that the sensation of intimacy and 'warmth' that is attributed to

the proximity effect is possibly due to the blurred hearing and vibrotactile threshold that humans experience with low frequencies (30-90 Hz ca)—a threshold that is more cultural than biological, as Robert Fink (2018) has shown in detail.

Another consequence of close miking is the so-called ‘high frequency response’. Close miking responds particularly well to directional waves of high frequency that would otherwise be absorbed and deflected in a room, providing the listener with brighter and richly detailed sounds that suggest proximity and hyperreal sharpness. In vernacular jargon, these are known as ‘crispy sounds’. Even when we listen to close-miked sounds at a comfortable decibel level in order to avoid ear fatigue, we hear enhanced mid-range frequencies on account of a psychoacoustic effect known as the Fletcher-Munson curve (Neuhoff et al. 2011, 46–8), as well as the low and high frequencies enhanced by close miking. In *HYPHA*, Harlan processed his close-miked field recordings with the sound design software ‘Sound Particles’, which, among other features, allows the operator to modify high frequency response in order to simulate distance (through attenuation) and proximity (through boosting).^{xxx}

Kinaesthetic Indices

As Chion reminds us, sounds with a high materialising sound index summon not only the materiality of the objects involved but the quality of the motion that produces the sound. For sake of distinction, I call these *kinaesthetic indices*. Sounds described as ASMR-like were identified by the interviewed composers as indexical of what I would describe as a careful, luxuriant kinesis: careful in the manner every single action is handled, luxuriant in their non-teleological unfolding in time. In *ASMR *contemporary music ensemble**, for instance, Hülcker requests that the singer adopts an ‘ASMRy’ quality of voice. In our interview, Hülcker explained to me that the adjective indicates the ways in which the sound emission—and thus the objects and movements that produce it—should be handled. It should be airy in order to delay the perceived point of attack of the voice, allowing it to present itself to perception in a smooth, gentle manner. ‘Slowness and care’, they remark, convey the sense of handling a ‘fragile, breakable’ object. Similarly, in describing the intimate sounds entrusted to the pianist in the first of her three ASMR ‘episodes’, Czernowin lists as a distinctive element a ‘very light, caressing movement’ that the pianist is asked to perform.

Another example appears in *Trauma und Zwischenraum 3* (2021), in which Hübner compares the kinaesthetic quality of a semi-improvised passage to ASMR content. The

percussionist, according to the performance notes, is invited to ‘carefully rustle and “strum” the spines of a miked cactus (by plucking, stroking, touching, etc.), creating fine and relatively dense ASMR-like textures’.^{xxxix} The density of ASMR-like textures reconnects us, once again, to the unfolding microscopic variations of complex sounds, which this type of luxuriant kinesis invite us to linger on.

Bauckholt provides a different perspective on this kinaesthetic quality. As part of her compositional practice she asks what ‘a sound needs in a given moment’ in order ‘not to be killed’. Her answer is to carefully consider the ‘space it needs to vibrate’, suggesting that, for example, ‘too much information does not leave it enough space to breathe’. With this explanation, we can see that what risks being ‘killed’, and what needs ‘space to vibrate’, is not ‘sound’ as an external object but as a specific perceptual mode. Similarly, for Riis, *Close to You* ‘is about slowness and about creating increased awareness of how we can feel present in ourselves’.^{xxxix} What both Bauckholt and Riis seem to suggest is that this ratio of acoustic information in time allows the listener to luxuriate in the sensation of their apperception unfolding.

Live Connection with the Sound Source

Bauckholt points to another factor that is easily taken for granted: the sense of intimacy we experience when listening to sounds unmediated by amplification. In order to restore that kind of intimacy for the electronic elements of her work, such as sample 3 (‘rabbit eating watermelon’), she integrates them within instrumental textures (see Figure 3). Shortly after the sample 3 has started, the percussionist is asked to use a ‘wooden nail brush (*ppp*) and a sharp brush (*mf*) in the small area behind the hoop of the timpani [...] scraping inside out’ to ‘imitate the chewing of sample 3’. In this way the sound of the sample and the live percussion are fused affording the listener an opportunity to establish an intimate connection with the percussion, which appears as the sound source.

Figure 3. *Implicit Knowledge* by Carola Bauckholt (measures 69-73). Copyright © 2020 by Henry Litolf’s Verlag. Permission by C.F. Peters Corporation. All rights reserved.

Hübner, instead, imagines a concert setting in which each member of the public is given headphones, distracting their attention from the visual awareness of a concert hall setting and

enabling them to feel both alone and close to the sound source. In a similar spirit, Sdraulig plans an ‘ASMR-like tour’ through his piece *enfold* (2019-20), in which the pianist Gwen Rouger shares headphones with an audience of one while exploring the ‘idiosyncratic creaks and resonances specific to the instrument in front of her’.^{xxxiii}

Strategy 2: Manipulation of the Surrounding Space

In these case studies, space is understood as both physical and perceived. Its manipulation is particularly important, as its coordinates afford a limited range of modes of interaction between subject and object, ultimately affecting the sound event. As Jonathan Sterne reminds us, ‘all sounds need a medium’, and thus the ‘acoustic [and perceptual] space can never be empty or neutral’ (Sterne 2015, 114). To return to the media-theoretical framework I have embraced, space is here understood not as a given datum that pre-exists the sound event, but as something whose contours are granted by what I call the cultural techniques of the intimate zone.

External Space Indices

To index external spaces, the interviewed composers have mainly worked with the manipulation of reverberation which ‘depends on a prior separation of sound from space’ and ‘represents a particularly explicit and conscious attempt both to represent sonic space and to manipulate it’ (Sterne 2015, 112-13). Indeed, most of the techniques for the manipulation of virtual space used in the works here surveyed involve the creation of a small surrounding space—or even a lack of space—to ensure the sounds contained in it will feel extremely close.

Carlo Laurenzi describes close miking marbles on a series of wooden surfaces in order to compose one of the electronic lines featured in the first ‘ASMR episode’ of *Heart Chamber*. For this passage he also exploited what is known as the Haas effect.^{xxxiv} Close miking ensured that the collateral reflections of the room would be overwritten by the direct sound, distorting our perception of the Initial Time Delay Gap (ITDG) and providing the ‘subjective impression’ of ‘its sounding as though the room were small [which] is one definition of intimacy’ (Beranek 2004). Madsen and Riis, on the other hand, overcame the issues arising in the live setting of the concert hall by composing *Close to You* as an online audiovisual medium only, and recommending their audience wears headphones when listening to the video performance. Headphones preserve a sense of proximity to the object that the experience through a loudspeaker would attenuate, but it also

allows for better manipulation of the perceived surrounding space. The video begins with slow, silent hand gestures in front of the camera, leaving space for our attention to tune in to what Riis called the ‘timbral quality’ of the room where the recording happened. The timbral quality of the room was obtained by layering a recording of the room with the silent performers inside it, and another of the same room but without performers—both captured by two mono cardioid microphones AKG 414 placed in stereo. ‘Space within space’ is the term audio engineers use to identify recordings with multiple spatial signatures like this one (Sterne 2015, 115). The goal of this technique, Riis explains, is to ‘help humans remember the room in which they are situated’. The track presenting the timbral quality of the room fades away before the beginning of the first audible sound; the sound of the performer’s hand stroking his arm is picked up by close miking, transforming the perceived space into something much smaller that encloses the listener.

Nowok describes another way of manipulating the space surrounding the audience, which he calls a ‘sound bubble’. In various parts of *Heart Chamber*, Czernowin decided to use a Sennheiser SZI 1015 W sound projector which, through 3D-sensing technology, locates the position of audience members and sends ultrasonic waves to create a ‘sound bubble’ around them, much like the headphones prescribed to the audience of *Close to You*.^{xxxv} Following Czernowin’s notated instructions, an operator was responsible for pointing the sound projector at single members of the audience in order to provide them with this augmented stimulus for a few moments of the opera.

Internal Space Indices

The first ASMR episode of *Heart Chamber* (see Figure 2) reveals another strategy for creating not only a lack of surrounding space, but indexing a space internal to our body. After the first few inputs of the ruler on the tuning pegs, emerging in *piano* from silence, and the sparse pitched (F#) impulse of the electric guitar and kalimba, a sense of space is constituted by the ‘h’ sound emitted by the contralto, the voice, and the double bass fused together. Czernowin’s notation asks the contralto and the voices to emit the sound of a ‘h’, not through exhalation as normally happens in speech, but inhalation. If an ‘h’ emitted through exhalation indexes the oral cavity, the inhaled ‘h’ instead indexes the space contained within the throat and the lower part of the respiratory system. In other words, it brings the chest cavity into awareness.

Degree of audience mobility

Notwithstanding the growing popularity of the ASMR genre and its association with pleasure and relaxation, engaging the intimate zone may produce distressing effects for some listeners. As already testified by misophonic reactions to ASMR content (McErlean and Banissy 2018), we may experience the typical sounds featured in ASMR-inducing content as uncomfortable, or even dangerous. Harlan also recognises that the sense of closeness indexed by the sounds within *HYPHA* could be ‘overwhelming’ and create a sense of ‘discomfort’ if the audience is trapped in assigned concert hall seats. For this reason, he idealises a performance within a room in which the audience is free to move around, enabling them to self-regulate their distance to the sound source.

Conclusions

The virality of the term ASMR on social media brought not only a ‘new sensation’ to the attention of an internet-connected world, but a new audiovisual genre designed to trigger it. Drawing on recent critiques of the turn to affect, I have highlighted that what is at stake with the ASMR genre is the production of the ‘intimate zone’ in both its spatial and affective terms. I also suggest that the intimate zone should not be thought of as a static, measurable given, but as relational. It is in such relationality that the polysemic potential of the term ASMR arises. In contemporary music circles, for instance, composers use ASMR to indicate a specific sonic quality, its *aisthesis*, or a range of compositional strategies. It is through the friction of the subject with external objects, mediated by sound, that the symbolic process of articulating and stabilising the boundaries of the intimate zone is reinstated. The intimate zone is ultimately the area in which what counts as ‘inside’ of us and what counts as ‘outside’ of us is constituted.

Ultimately, the symbolic work involved in the making of this distinction is, as I have suggested, a cultural technique of the intimate zone. In its material configurations, this technique involves subjects, with their bodily and cognitive affordances, as much as objects, the acoustic signal, and the network of technologies that have shaped it. This statement, however, must always be read with the caveat provided by media theories of cultural techniques: that subject and object are not static, ontologically fixed categories, but mediators that participate each time in the articulation and stabilisation of their distinction.

Appealing to the listening habitus that the ASMR audiovisual genre generates, the composers interviewed here create modes of engaging the audience's intimate zone. They do so by manipulating musical parameters, new media, performance and recording techniques, and the rules of the concert hall set-up. Through their scores and conversations with performers and sound designers, they are developing vernacular practices and categories that are directed, under the umbrella of the ASMR, toward engaging the intimate zone. In this article, I have only just begun to highlight what the intimate zone 'sounds like' by observing the technological and technical processes that might shape the connections between our space, kinesis, and affect.

The nonverbal codes of proxemics generally pass unnoticed in daily life, but recent events have made us newly aware of their importance. Social distancing rules and their effects on mental health, changes to global mobility and the friction of different proxemic cultural codes that comes with it, and the advent of artificial realities invite us to reconsider proxemics, and the role that music might play in it. By participating in the cultural techniques that instantiate the proxemic dimension, music studies might find a new role in responding to the challenges of the present times—to the turbulence not only of the outside social world, but the inner one as well.

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ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxjfyBEll7Q>.

ⁱⁱ Czernowin's Facebook page was hacked during summer 2021, and so the original post cannot be retrieved. The screenshot was taken by the author of this article soon after its posting.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://chayaczernowin.com/heart-chamber>.

^{iv} <https://www.steadyhealth.com/topics/weird-sensation-feels-good>. The thread continues on <https://www.steadyhealth.com/topics/weird-sensation-feels-good-part-2>.

^v Many audiovisuals examples followed, all characterised by a similar intimate atmosphere, both visually and aurally. Users claim they are triggered by TV evangelists telling stories from the Bible, art TV shows like 'Take Hart' and 'Art Attack', or cooking shows. The first hyperlinked YouTube video features someone memorizing the orientation of a Rubik's cube and solving it, followed by make-up tutorials and other DIY YouTube contents. Among these hyperlinked videos, the only one still available was uploaded by Youtuber Eily311, in which she demonstrates eyebrow threading: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVmbHB2p4WM>.

^{vi} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ASMRGroup/>.

^{vii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASMR>. For a survey of ASMR as audiovisual genre see Gallagher (2016) and Harper (2020).

viii I make use of the archaic spelling *aisthesis* in order to highlight the Greek root of the word, meaning ‘sensation’ or ‘perception’, and differentiate it from the philosophy of art promoted by Alexander Baumgarten. The latter, through Immanuel Kant, became synonymous with the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (Rehding 2021).

ix <https://asmruniversity.com/2016/10/24/podcast-history-asmr-jennifer-allen-interview-part-1/>

x For an excellent review of the current literature on affect theory and its relation to music discourse see Grant (2020).

xi Etymologically, the word ‘intimate’ comes from the Latin *intimus* ‘inmost, deepest, profound.’ (adj.) It has first and foremost a ‘spatial’ connotation. However, it is also often used ‘figuratively’ in reference to ‘inmost thoughts or feelings’. See Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online, s.v. ‘intimate, adj. and n.’, last modified September 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98506>.

xii <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAEQD0ULngi67rwmhrkNjMZKvyCRqDV4>

xiii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0td9Z8C4jNU>.

xiv <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59mvdv/felicia-atkinson-hand-in-hand-interview-free-radicals>.

xv <https://cnmat.berkeley.edu/news/hypha>.

xvi Both Hübner and Hülcker use the nonbinary pronouns they/them.

xvii Personal communication (26 August, 2021).

xviii https://musik21niedersachsen.de/wp-content/uploads/pm2_Musik21-Festival2021_Realitaeten.pdf.

xix <https://458.dk/close-to-you/>.

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https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/comments/54uqah/this_weird_contemporary_piano_piece_with_hardly/?ref=share&rf_source=link

xxi Personal communication (28 August, 2021).

xxii I say ‘in hindsight’ because I am not assuming that there was any deliberate intention on the part of composers to break from serialism and stable tones.

xxiii The comment appears in the program notes to the premiere at Donaueschinger Musiktage of her piece *Implicit Knowledge*: <https://docplayer.org/197045060-Donau-donaueschinger-musiktage-eschin-ger-musiktage.html>.

xxiv Personal communication (30 August, 2021).

xxv Personal communication (31 August, 2021).

xxvi Personal communication (12 September, 2021).

xxvii Personal communication (25 August, 2021).

xxviii Riis asserts ‘The basic technology of the microphone hasn’t changed. The biggest difference is that everyone has access to these recording and amplifying gears, there’s a sort of democratization of the accessibility of these media’. His perspective connects to Attali’s ideas about how new ways of making music, which he calls ‘composition’, can help us escape the regime of mere reproduction (1985, 133).

xxix Personal communication (September 1, 2021).

xxx <https://soundparticles.com/>.

xxxi Whether or not this was an intentional homage to John Cage’s *Branches*, this passage points towards how one might re-interpret compositional passages from the historical avant-garde in light of the ASMR genre.

xxxii ‘Det handler om langsommelighed og om at skabe øget opmærksomhed på hvordan vi kan føle os tilstede i os selv’. <https://458.dk/asmr-musik/>.

xxxiii <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKmlxW5IXeg>.

xxxiv Personal communication (6 September, 2021).

xxxv Personal communication (10 September, 2021).

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