

LISTENING GUIDES AS COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES: TEXTUAL AND FORMAL STRATEGIES IN *LES DISPARITIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the notion of the listening guide, considering it not as an external device accompanying a work, but as an operator integrated into the very form of the sonic experience. It is based on *Les Disparitions (ambiantes et acousmatiques)*, a project taking the form of a listening session with spatialized sound, organized around the idea of sound disappearance within the context of field recording. The project articulates two complementary modes of listening guidance. The first relies on a text-based guide synchronized with the music and delivered to the audience via their mobile phones, momentarily orienting auditory attention. The second is embedded within the sonic form itself, where the progressive exposure and subsequent disappearance of a *target sound* bring about a transformation in listening modes. Based on a research protocol grounded in listening interviews, this article shows how these strategies of disappearance foster a transition from causal listening toward a mode of listening oriented toward the sonic properties themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

A listening guide generally refers to a set of materials intended to support the understanding of a work. It can take various forms—texts, program notes, interviews, contextual information—and brings together heterogeneous elements made available to the listener in order to illuminate their experience. Musicologist Nicolas Donin emphasizes the dual function of the listening guide, which constitutes both “information about the work and a training of the ear,” adding that “the term information must therefore be understood in a strong sense: listening guides give form to the attentive listening they prescribe” [1]. Through familiarity with these elements, listening can be transformed: attention shifts, concentrates, or is oriented toward specific dimensions of the work, thereby reinforcing the appreciation of its aesthetic or formal qualities.

In most cases, however, the listening guide is consulted outside the work itself. It prepares, shapes, and extends the concert experience through a consultation that usually takes place beforehand. By considering the listening guide as an orienting device for attention, this article presents

an artistic form that integrates the listening guide into the very conception of the work, making it synchronous with the sonic unfolding. In other words, the listening guide acts in real time on the listener’s attention and becomes an integral part of the listening situation.

This proposal is explored through two complementary modes of guidance. The first, explicit, takes the form of a text-based guide distributed to the audience via their mobile phones and synchronized with the sonic unfolding, acting directly on auditory attention. The second, implicit, relies on a formal organization of sound that progressively orients attention and functions as a listening guide.

These two dimensions converge in a hybrid form, distributed between text and sound: *Les Disparitions (ambiantes et acousmatiques)*¹. The project takes the form of an hour-long listening session of multichannel field recordings diffused through an acousmonium. The piece is presented as a collection of nine movements staging the disappearance of a sonic environment or of a *target sound* within an environment. Initially exposed, the sound is gradually eroded, masked, erased, or even forgotten. The piece was commissioned by the Archipel Festival (Geneva) and premiered in April 2025.

In this article, I present the modalities of these two forms of guidance, the levels at which they operate, and the ways in which they transform the listener’s attention.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Les Disparitions is a project grounded in the practice of field recording, a practice that “is now commonly encountered both as a distinct artistic practice and as a component of experimental music and sound art” [2]. *Les Disparitions* is structured around a central notion: disappearance. This notion should be understood as the erasure or masking of a sound source—the starting point of the disappearance process—within a sonic environment, or as the progressive alteration of the sonic environment itself. Whether it is a punctual sound source or a more global sonic environment, the sound destined to disappear is referred to here as the *target sound*.

Different strategies are employed to implement these disappearances. The dominant strategy is distancing: the *target sound* is recorded from the closest to the most distant position, according to a process of either continuous or discrete (organized in steps) distancing. This distancing results in a progressive loss of energy and precision in the

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¹ The Disappearances (ambient and acousmatic).

No.	Target sound	Strategy	Recording technique
1	Canal lock	Discrete distancing (7 steps)	Hexaphonic (star configuration)
2	Waves on a pebble beach	Discrete distancing (6 steps)	Hexaphonic (linear array)
3	Highway	Discrete distancing (6 steps)	Hexaphonic (star configuration)
4	Vent opening in an urban street	Attentional diversion through the progressive emergence of the surrounding sonic environment	Ambisonic + microphone on the vent opening
5	Church bells	Attentional diversion	Hexaphonic (star configuration) + cardioid microphone
6	Cello playing a repeated pattern	Continuous distancing	Hexaphonic (star configuration)
7	Clarinet playing a sustained tone	Continuous distancing and masking	Hexaphonic (star configuration)
8	Crowd noise from a stadium during a sports event	Discrete distancing (6 steps) and masking	Ambisonic
9	Wind noise in a pine forest	Attentional diversion through verbal description of sounds absent from the recording	Hexaphonic (star configuration)

Table 1. List of the nine movements in *Les Disparitions*.

target sound, leading to its perceptual disappearance.

A second strategy is based on masking: the *target sound* becomes covered or buried by another environmental sound. This process may be combined with distancing, as the *target sound* progressively recedes and eventually becomes masked by a new sound.

A third strategy involves attentional diversion. In this case, the *target sound* does not necessarily disappear from the sonic environment itself, but the listener's awareness of its presence—and the orientation of attention toward it—gradually fades as other sonic or textual events capture attention. The listener only becomes aware of the disappearance of the *target sound* after it has already occurred.

The disappearances are produced without the use of mixing or equalization. The perceptual transformations rely exclusively on choices of sound recording, editing, and temporal organization of the recorded materials. Each disappearance is produced using a multi-microphone recording setup enabling spatialized reproduction. Two main techniques are employed: ambisonic recording and hexaphonic recording using six microphones arranged in a star or line configuration.

For each recording session, sound levels are measured and subsequently reproduced during diffusion, so that playback levels remain as close as possible to the original recording situation.

The project currently consists of nine movements, summarized in Table 1, which indicates for each movement, a *target sound*, a disappearance strategy, and a specific recording technique.

The nine movements have been presented in the form of a collective listening session with diffusion over an acousmonium. The acousmonium used for the performance consisted of a heterogeneous and spatially distributed loudspeaker system, combining studio monitors, sound reinforcement speakers, and unconventional sources (horns, piezo elements). Loudspeakers were deployed across multiple spatial layers—including the stage, around and be-

hind the audience, as well as at elevated positions (balcony, catwalk, and ceiling)—forming an immersive and multidirectional diffusion environment. The piece was presented in multichannel playback without live interpretation (in the sense of the GRM tradition), with spatial balances and levels pre-calibrated during rehearsals.

3. TEXTUAL GUIDANCE

Textual guidance is based on a communication system in which a server sends text messages to the audience's mobile phones, ensuring synchronized display during the listening session.

Before the beginning of the piece, audience members are invited to connect to a web page via their mobile phones. They are informed that, during the session, information about the sound recordings will be displayed on their screens. In order to prevent spectators from keeping their eyes fixed on their phones while waiting for the next message, a light signal indicates when text appears. This signal takes the form of a slow and gradual transformation of light—perceptible yet non-intrusive—which functions as an attentional operator designed to preserve continuity of listening. By indicating precisely when to look at the screen, it relieves the listener from the need to monitor their device continuously, allowing them to remain primarily engaged in listening.

Other communication channels were initially considered, such as a pre-recorded voice superimposed on the sound recordings (as in *Presque Rien No. 2 ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* by Luc Ferrari), or a projection on a screen placed at the center of the stage. These options were ultimately rejected. In the first case, the superposition of an additional sonic element would introduce an excessive disturbance to the listening process. In the second case, the presence of a single screen toward which all gazes converge risks turning the listening session into a film screening, producing a form of externalization of listening.

The use of the mobile phone instead allows for an individ-

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Title	B	B	B			B	B	B	
Target sound	B	B	B	D	D	B	B	B	D
Localization	B	B	B	D	D	B	B	B	D
Dating	B	B	B		D	B	B	B	
Strategy	B	B	B			B	B	B	
Extra contextualization				D	D				
Interrogative register			B				A		
Explicit listening instructions							B		
Description of the phenomena			B	D	D		A		D
Explicit presence of the narrator			B						D

Table 2. List of the different guidance modes in the nine movements in *Les Disparitions*. Text is read before listening (B), during listening (D), after listening (A) to the corresponding movement.

ualized address, fostering a more intimate mode of listening. In this respect, it is reminiscent of *An Hour for Piano* by Tom Johnson, a solo piano work accompanied by a written text silently read by the audience during performance, describing in the first person the performer’s actions and the temporal structure of the piece, with the stated aim of “increasing your ability to concentrate on the piece, and not to distract from it”².

The textual content displayed on the audience’s phones consists of sentences, short text sequences, or isolated words, whose appearance is precisely controlled in time. Display parameters—duration, character appearance rate, fades—are integrated into the composition and allow for a gradual dissemination of the text. Some texts appear just before the listening of a movement (approximately 70% of the text), functioning as a title; others appear during listening (approximately 25%), others appear after the listening of a movement (approximately 5%). Text segments that were not presented during listening (i.e., before or after) not only conveyed information but also contributed to structuring the overall form, creating an alternation between focused listening and moments of pause or release between movements. The text segments presented during listening introduced a multimodal experience combining reading and listening.

The textual guidance encompasses several types of utterances. Some messages function as titles (“Toward background noise,” “Exogenous sounds”) and offer a general description of the disappearance process. They may be associated with localization and dating information (“Haute-Savoie, 2024”, “Recorded on Boulevard Carl Vogt in Geneva”). At times, explicit information about the disappearance strategy is provided (“Strategy: 6 steps,” “the microphone moves away on a conveyor belt”). Other messages provide contextualization by precisely situating the recording (“At the corner of Patru Street, there is a vent opening at the sidewalk level. Standing above it, one can distinctly hear the sound of a machine”). The text may also adopt an interrogative register, sometimes very direct (“Was this the case for you?” or “If you had to rate the degree of similarity between the final stage of the waves and that of the

lock, what would your answer be?”), or propose explicit listening instructions (“If you keep your attention focused on the sound of the clarinet, can you identify the moment when you stop hearing it?”). One also finds descriptive formulations of the sonic phenomenon as it unfolds (“It is a tenuous sound, it blends into the landscape and then disappears,” “Both modulate, stop, then resume”), as well as the explicit presence of a first-person “I”, establishing a relationship of trust and familiarity with the listener (“I suppose you would say that the similarity is rather high,” “The recording I made that day is longer”). The guidance modes are summarized in Table 2.

The movements based on distancing strategies (1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) rely on textual information delivered prior to listening, whereas movements based on attentional diversion (4, 5, 9) use textual guidance during listening. This difference can be explained by the degree of perceptual clarity of the process at work. In the case of distancing, the process is highly explicit: the *target sound* is recorded at increasing distances until it eventually disappears. In contrast, attentional diversion requires more subtle intervention; in order to successfully redirect attention away from the *target sound*, auditory attention is guided through suggestions delivered during listening.

The text delivered via mobile phone presents the recording context and outlines the process employed for each disappearance. This information allows the listener to form a clearer understanding of both the form of each movement and the overall structure of the piece. By addressing these formal questions in advance, the listener can devote fuller attention to the sonic properties of the disappearances. Questions, listening instructions, and descriptive formulations orient the listener’s attention toward specific sonic qualities, propose attentional postures that might not be adopted spontaneously, and foster a reflexive stance toward one’s own listening. In this sense, the textual guide can be understood as fostering what Barry Truax calls listening-in-readiness: an intermediate mode of listening in which attention is not fully focused on sound, yet remains available to receive and evaluate potentially significant information. Rather than directing attention toward the identification of sources, the guide helps maintain a state of attentive openness to the evolving sonic environment [3].

² Program notes by Tom Johnson.

4. DISAPPEARANCE STRATEGIES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR AUDITORY ATTENTION

In this section, I suggest that the very form of the movements composing *Les Disparitions* functions as a listening guide. In what follows, we focus more specifically on the movements that employ strategies of discrete distancing. By first exposing the target sound in the clarity of its source, the piece engages what is perhaps the most spontaneous listening attitude: causal listening, oriented toward the search for cues pointing to the originating event. By then progressively distancing it until the source becomes unrecognizable, it creates the conditions to loosen the perceptual link described by Michel Chion—the link that instinctively ties the ear to the material origin of sound—and to invite the listener to focus on the morphological properties of the sound object itself, independently of its provenance [4]. This process tends toward a transition from one mode of listening to another, echoing Schaeffer's distinction between causal and reduced listening [5]. It should be noted that for each movement employing distancing, the nature of the source is given in the title. Thus, rather than avoiding causal listening, the piece deliberately establishes it as a starting point, in order to observe its possible transformation over time.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted an experiment based on a series of listening interviews, focusing on the third movement of *Les Disparitions*. The experimental protocol presented below does not aim to evaluate the work as such, but rather to investigate one specific compositional intuition emerging from it: the hypothesis that progressive distancing may reorient listening from causal identification toward attention to sonic properties.

4.1 Presentation of the third movement of *Les Disparitions*

During the listening session, this movement is presented to the audience using the following text:

In the Background Noise 3
Target sound: Highway
Strategy: 6 steps
Haute-Savoie, 2024

This disappearance takes the form of six successive sound recordings (labeled *highway1* to *highway6* in the experiment), separated by five seconds of silence. All recordings were made on the same day, October 29, 2024. The first recording (*highway1*) was made on a bridge over the highway, approximately five meters above the roadway. The measured sound level at this point was 82 dBA.

Subsequent recordings were made while progressively moving away from the highway, following a protocol in which the average sound level of each step decreases by approximately 6 to 10 dBA relative to the previous one, reaching 42 dBA for the final recording (*highway6*).

The first recording presents clearly individuated sonic entities (vehicles), characterized by rapid dynamic envelopes (marked crescendos and decrescendos) and associated with fast spatial movements. The final recording, by contrast,

presents a noisy sonic texture with no perceptible individuality, minimal spectral or dynamic variation, and no marked spatial movement. The intermediate recordings form a gradual transition between these two perceptual regimes, shifting from a listening mode based on individuated sources to a perception of sound as a global material. It is important to note that although the six recordings all document the same highway, their sonic qualities differ markedly in terms of level, dynamics, spectral content, and spatial movement.

4.2 Methodology

Twelve participants (listed as P1, P2, P3 ... P12) took part in individual listening sessions. The profiles of the participants are listed in Table 3. This relatively small sample should be understood within the framework of an exploratory, qualitative approach. The aim was not to establish generalizable results about listening behavior, but rather to document and analyze tendencies observed within a specific listening context. Moreover, given the participants' familiarity with sound practices, their responses may reflect forms of listening shaped by prior experience. The observations presented here should therefore be considered as situated and indicative, rather than representative of listening in general.

The entire experiment was conducted through headphones using a binaural rendering of the recordings. At the beginning of each experiment, the listener was informed that they would hear a highway recording. The session began with listening to the final stage (*highway6*). This listening was followed by an « explication interview » focusing on the listening experience [6].

Participants were then informed that they would hear a sequence composed of six recordings of a highway, from the closest to the most distant. Although this prior information may orient participants toward a specific referent, it was intentionally provided in order to reproduce the conditions of the concert situation, in which the source is explicitly identified. They then listened to the entire sequence (*highway1* to *highway6*) without interruption, exactly as in the concert situation, with the exception that listening took place through headphones rather than through an acousmionium.

Finally, an explication interview was conducted sequence by sequence: for each recording, a short excerpt was replayed, and the participant was asked to describe precisely what they had perceived during that listening.

The primary objective of this experiment was to determine whether the listening experience of the final stage (*highway6*) within the full sequence differs from that of the same recording heard in isolation, in other words, whether listening to the disappearance process informs and transforms the final listening experience.

4.3 Analysis of listening interviews

When listening to *highway6* heard in isolation (i.e., without prior exposure to *highway1* through *highway5*), participants primarily described an experience oriented toward identifying the sound source. For instance, P1 attempted

Participant	Profile	Use field recordings in their own practice	Age	Gender
P1	Ethnomusicology student	Yes	47	F
P2	Composer	Yes	49	M
P3	Bachelor of Arts student	No	26	F
P4	Sound designer	Yes	30	M
P5	Improviser	Yes	57	M
P6	Electroacoustic music student	Yes	25	M
P7	Bachelor of Arts student	No	22	F
P8	Bachelor of Arts student	No	22	F
P9	Bachelor of Arts student	No	20	M
P10	Electroacoustic music student	Yes	34	M
P11	Music composition student	No	30	M
P12	Electroacoustic music student	No	29	M

Table 3. Participant profiles and relationship to field recording practices.

to situate the recording by imagining their own position, the time of day, the quality of the light, or the location of the person making the recording.

Although the highway is very distant and often perceived as a diffuse mass or background noise, listening remains largely causal. Listeners seek to verify the nature of the sound, often doubting its origin. Some wonder whether the sound might be fabricated or artificially produced (“I wondered whether it might be a reproduction, or a synthetic recreation of a sonic environment” (P12)), while others hesitate between different possible sources, such as the sea or a waterfall (“you wonder where things come from—whether it’s nature, whether it’s cars,” (P9)).

Listening to *highway1* is described as a clear immersion into the highway itself: “here, we are really inside it” (P12). Each vehicle is perceived as an individual entity (“you can hear each car producing a different sound” (P12)), with particular attention paid to movement and spatial dynamics: “what caught my attention was the movement, the feeling that things are arriving and then leaving” (P6). This listening is sometimes experienced as overwhelming or stressful with participants describing a sense of physical danger or discomfort: “It was stressful. There is something a bit dangerous that physically stresses me, I want to step back” (P11).

The sequences *highway2*, *highway3* and *highway4* mark a gradual transition from the perception of individuated sonic entities toward a more global apprehension of the source. Participants describe how “the cars started to blend together” (P11), how “the entities begin to merge, without disappearing completely” (P12), or how “one starts to discern individual sounds less clearly; everything is more blended into a kind of constant murmur” (P7). During this phase, the sound increasingly takes the form of a continuous mass rather than a succession of distinct events.

Finally, when listening to *highway5* and *highway6*, the sound is primarily perceived through its sonic properties rather than its causal origin, and may even be interpreted in terms of musical genre (*highway5*, for instance, being described as a “drone” by P2). Although the sonic material of *highway6* heard within the full sequence (*highway1*

through *highway6*) is identical to that of *highway6* heard in isolation, the perceptual experience is markedly transformed. Interviews show that listening largely shifts away from questions of origin toward a focus on the sonic material itself. Some participants explicitly refer to “sonic matter” and note the disappearance of cars as perceptual objects (P5). Several listeners describe the sound as an ambiguous, almost autonomous sonic object, detached from its referential source: “I’m more in my ears than in the projection of an imagined place” (P7).

This listening trajectory—by progressively stabilizing the nature of the source—enables listeners to devote greater attention to the sound’s intrinsic properties. For some participants, this heightened state of attention, induced by the protocol itself, becomes explicitly conscious. Comparing their listening experiences of *highway6* heard in isolation to *highway6* heard within the full sequence, P12 noted that they “became more absorbed, focusing on the sound itself rather than anything else—really on the sonic material” in the latter case.

Several explanations could account for this shift, including habituation, prolonged exposure, or the progressive abstraction of the sonic material. However, explanations based solely on habituation or prolonged exposure can be questioned, since—even though the source remains the same (a highway)—the acoustic properties of the recordings vary significantly from one sequence to another. While the present protocol does not allow these hypotheses to be fully disentangled, several elements suggest that the formal trajectory itself plays a structuring role.

This analysis suggests a tendency toward a reorientation of listening, moving away from a strictly causal mode toward a more informed listening posture. Rather than a unidirectional shift, the listening process appears to involve a dynamic oscillation between modes, with listeners occasionally returning to source identification, albeit less persistently than in the initial stages. Over time, attention becomes increasingly oriented toward the sonic properties of the sound itself.

5. CONCLUSION

This article proposes considering the listening guide as an operator integrated into the work itself. Taking *Les Disparitions (ambiantes et acousmatiques)* as an example, it shows how the combination of synchronous textual guidance delivered via mobile phones and an implicit form of guidance embedded in the sonic form contributes to shaping auditory attention and, consequently, transforming the listening experience. In other words, and more generally, we observed that “(...) the information listeners receive before hearing a piece of music can significantly alter their experience; this information can not only bias their evaluation but, more interestingly, prompt them to adopt specific listening behaviors, ultimately leading to different aesthetic qualities being ascribed to the music heard” [7].

By integrating contextual elements and proposing specific listening modalities, the project outlines an approach to field recording that moves away from both naturalism and contemplative listening. Instead, it embraces the compositional dimension of the practice and invites a reflexive attitude toward listening. Far from revealing unheard sounds, *Les Disparitions* encourages a reconsideration of how we listen to everyday sounds and our sonic environment.

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