

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Spiritualist Ear

Codee Spinner

Independent Researcher, DeBary, FL, USA
Email: cas316@pitt.edu

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, many heard the afterlife before they could see it. These clairaudient forays took place in the context of spiritualism, a religious movement that facilitated communication between the living and the dead. Although the senses were important to spiritualism, sound was especially crucial for developing cosmologies of the afterlife. Sound can have powerful affective effects, especially in the realm of religion. In the case of spiritualism, however, notions of sound are complicated because of the inclusion of clairaudient and acousmatic sounds. This article analyzes spiritualist soundscapes in terms of acoustemologies, using personal narratives and instructional materials to demonstrate how spiritualists developed a sense of space through sound. Not only does my analysis demonstrate the importance of sound to these spiritual communities, but it also shows that spiritualist conceptions of sound require a special understanding of the nature of sound.

Introduction

In 1850, a group of prominent men gathered in a New York City home to give audience to a group of young women. The women, accompanied by their mother, were the Fox sisters, preeminent mediums considered by many to be the founders of the Modern Spiritualist movement in the northeastern United States. The men had gathered to attend a séance hosted by the women with hopes of hearing the clambering of the spirits. To rely on the resulting reports and newspaper articles, they were not disappointed.¹ The parlor where the séance took place was apparently filled with the knocks of the spirit communications facilitated by the girls.

More than 70 years later, author and spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle gathered with a séance circle on the other coast of the country. Many of their preparations were similar to the séance held by the Fox sisters decades earlier. A primary difference, however, was the sounds that the spirits used to contact the living séance sitters. Although the 1850 séance had relied on simple raps and the silence of telekinetic communications, the séance attended by Doyle was filled with the disembodied and embodied voices of a host of different spirits.

As I will demonstrate, these two séances demonstrate the differences that occurred in spiritualist sound and acoustemologies from its early decades in the nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth. Modes of sonic and silent spiritual communication were described and codified in publications like J. C. F. Grumbine's 1911, *Clairaudience*, an instruction manual for hearing the dead. As Grumbine explained, the physical, material body of the living became the transmitter for incarnate spirits that were otherwise untethered to the earthly plane. Spiritual hearing, according to him, occurred through the mechanism of an "etheric ear," a type of hearing that tuned into the elevated vibrations of the spirit realm. Theories of spiritual sound and practices of spiritual hearing such as this predated the advent of spiritualism and developed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹See Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: Self-published, 1870), 64; Doctor Diotrephe, *The Knockings Exposed!* (New York: Self-published, 1850), 26–29.

Spiritualism, also known as modern spiritualism, came into being as a semi-organized set of metaphysical beliefs in the mid-nineteenth century in western New York state. Spiritualism is still practiced by many today, and practitioners believe in the continuity of the soul after death and the possibility of communication with spirits of the “dead.” It is important to note that spiritualists typically do not consider spirits who have left the earthly plane to be dead. Rather, they have simply moved to a different cosmological plane. Instead of saying a person has died, for example, the term “transitioned” might be used (i.e., a person transitioned into spirit).

The year 1848 is often cited as the beginning of the spiritualist religion.² Although preexisting theologies and spiritual practices laid a framework for the new religion, the catalyst occurred outside of Rochester in Hydesville, New York. That year two young sisters, Katie and Margaret Fox, who were between the ages of 11 and 14, began to hear mysterious acousmatic rappings in their family’s home. These sonic events came to be known as the “Rochester rappings.”³ Eventually the Fox family concluded that the disembodied sounds were the work of a spirit.⁴ It was not long before the girls developed their own system for communicating with the ghostly sounds.

The events of 1848 followed decades of mystical and metaphysical spiritual thought. Modern American spiritualism, as it emerged with the Fox sisters’ listening, found theoretical backing in the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), published just before the rappings were first heard.⁵ Davis’s first book, *The Principles of Nature*, was published in 1847 and was written while he was in a trance. Working as a farmhand in Poughkeepsie, New York, Davis witnessed a mesmerist’s demonstration of magnetic healing.⁶ Subsequently, Davis took up the practice, mixing mesmerist thought and procedure with the spiritual writings of Swedish philosopher and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).⁷ Swedenborg’s mystic visions included episodes of spiritual hearing and communications with angels, whom he conceived of as the spirits of humans who were once living.⁸

For many adherents of the religion that came to be known as spiritualism, the “Rochester rappings” marked a turning point in sacred time. The rappings signified the moment that the veil separating life on earth from the afterlife was torn, thus opening the way for others to communicate with spirits. Throughout the period of its popularity, spiritualism was considered a religion that fought against various forms of institutional power and oppression. Although many mainstream Christian religions saw divine power as properly vested in mostly male ordained priests or reverends and lay religious elders, the leader of individual spiritualist rituals was a medium who was not ordained. A medium was an ordinary lay person and could be any member of a family or household, but many were women, especially young women or girls like the Fox sisters.

²For a select number of examples that accept and critique the year 1848 as spiritualism’s starting point to various degrees, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 10; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 1:61–63; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 12; Mark A. Lause, *Free Spirits: Spiritualism, Republicanism, and Radicalism in the Civil War Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1; and Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 5–6.

³Dellon Marcus Dewey, *History of the Strange Sounds or Rappings Heard in Rochester and Western New York and Usually Called the Mysterious Noises!* (Rochester, NY: D.M. Dewey, 1850), 14; C. G. Pomeroy and D. S. Chase, “The Rochester Rappings,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 29, no. 25 (June 19, 1851): 197; and Charles W. Elliott, *Mysteries, or, Glimpses of the Supernatural: Containing Accounts of the Salem Witchcraft, the Cock-Lane Ghost, the Rochester Rappings, the Stratford Mysteries, Oracles, Astrology, Dreams, Demons, Ghosts, Spectres, etc.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852), 116–19.

⁴Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 32–33.

⁵Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 16–17.

⁶Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 19–20.

⁷Richard Smoley, “The Inner Journey of Emanuel Swedenborg,” in *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg’s Life, Work, and Impact*, eds. Jonathan S. Rose, et al. (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005), 22–26. Swedenborg became a theologian later in life after having visions of the spirit world and visiting heaven and hell.

⁸Jonathan S. Rose, “Swedenborg’s Garden of Theology: An Introduction to Swedenborg’s Published Theological Works” in *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg’s Life, Work, and Impact*, eds. Jonathan S. Rose, et al. (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005), 58–62; Eric Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 230.

Spiritualism was grounded in sensual experiences, yet few scholars have understood how sound influenced practitioners' experiences with spirit communication. Based on my archival research, it is apparent that sound was fundamental to these spiritual practices because much of the proceedings revolved around acoustemological spaces. Spiritualist methods of listening depended upon an understanding of earthly life and the afterlife as distinct, distant cosmological spheres that could be broached by vibrational frequencies creating either audible or inaudible sounds. What is distinct about these modes of listening and sounding is that communication between the living and deceased was a two-way street, and it was facilitated by sounds. Spiritualist listening tested the limits of sound and listening by insisting on the significance of clairaudient sounds.

As this listening practice suggests, spiritualist history demands a nuanced understanding of sound and its use in ritual spaces. Spiritual sounds and soundings produced knowledge of the world, what I call *Spiritualist acoustemologies*.⁹ This essay begins with a review of the influences of spiritualism and the acoustemologies associated with it, specifically the work of Swedenborg and Davis. Then, I theorize spiritualist methods of listening to the dead as acoustemologies. Spiritualist acoustemologies were based on a belief that spirits could produce either audible or inaudible sounds to communicate with the living. These sounds could include the knocking or rumbling of otherwise inanimate objects, the sounding of musical instruments, or disembodied human voices—all of which were considered to have a spiritual source. Spiritualist acoustemologies were demonstrated throughout séance spaces and are essential for understanding the role of sound within these rituals.

The analysis of spiritualist séances reveals important understandings of sound. Nineteenth-century spiritualist acoustemologies revolved around modes of sounding that are untraditional in the sense that they could be clairaudient, only to be heard internally by one individual. The acousmatic nature of some of the sounds—the voices and knocks heard to reverberate from thin air—also call into question understandings of the sonic and auditory. Spiritualists had a particular understanding of how these sounds transmitted truth and realities of the afterlife. Thus, spiritualist acoustemologies present an expanded view of sound and the ways audible and clairaudient sounds could influence spiritualist understandings of the living world and cosmological spheres of the afterlife. Not only can this expanded and nuanced form of acoustemology provide insight into the world and sound cultures of the nineteenth century, but it may also prove useful to other studies of communication between human and nonhuman, nonliving entities.

Harmonial Mysticism: A Prelude

In many histories, the Rochester rappings of 1848, in which the Fox sisters heard sounds mysteriously emanating throughout their home, marks the beginning of modern spiritualism. A material understanding of sound might explain the raps away as architectural creaks or high winds pressing upon the outer walls of the home. The raps were sometimes explained as the sonic result of the girls' cracking their toe joints against the resonant surfaces of table legs and walls. Although any of these explanations certainly could have caused such sounds, for my purposes the ethereal reasoning that spiritualists developed to explain the rappings are more important. For them, audible, acousmatic sounds—sounds that were heard with the auricular organ as the result of physical vibrations—were accompanied by a spiritual source.¹⁰

For the Fox family and later spiritualists, the disembodied raps and knocks experienced by the Fox sisters were explained as communication with a spirit residing in the home. They referred to the ghost as "Splitfoot," the spirit of a traveling salesman who had been murdered there.¹¹ The lore around the Fox home states that an investigation led to the uncovering of a skeleton in the home's basement along with the salesman's traveling trunk. The knocks that haunted the Fox sisters were thought to be

⁹This concept was initially introduced in the following publication: Codee Spinner, "(In)Audible Sound and Spiritualist Acoustemologies," in *Explorations in Music and Esotericism*, eds. Marjorie Roth and Leonard George (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2023).

¹⁰Brian Kane explores the concept of the acousmatic in more detail. See Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹This naming may have been meant to evoke the common conception that the Devil had cloven hooves.

intelligible forms of communicating, answering questions and, in the case of Splitfoot, supplying information regarding his death and final resting place. During séances, participants interpreted raps to signify specific letters, words, and numbers. Over time these acousmatic noises crystallized in the minds of spiritualists as the voices of sitters' loved ones, musical tones, and the voices of spirits singing.

Nineteenth-century spiritualist conceptions of sound paired experiential knowledge, like that gained through séance attendance, with theories developed during the previous centuries. These experiences were explained by writings gleaned from texts written before the Rochester rappings occurred, namely Emanuel Swedenborg's and Andrew Jackson Davis's treatises of the afterlife and its organization. Both men—Swedenborg, a Swedish mystic, and Davis, an American Unitarian minister—were known to enter trances that facilitated visions of the afterlife and its accompanying cosmology. The subsequent writings of both men were popular and much read by spiritualists of the nineteenth century.

Swedenborg (1688–1772) was an inventor and scientist who took to religion and spirituality later in his lifetime. His visions took him to the afterworld where he experienced its organizational levels of heaven and hell. As a result, he developed a cosmology and angelology based on these visions. Swedenborg's spiritual experiences are described as internal and inward facing. He heard angelic speech as an internal process devoid of physical sound, accompanied by “gentle vibrations’ upon his tongue.”¹² Swedenborg's angels had a finely tuned sense of hearing, able to know speakers' internal states based only on the sounds of their voice. Although he studied the five senses and how they operated in the spiritual realm, Swedenborg concluded that an earthly person's internal experience of any of these senses, such as hearing a hymn inside one's head, pointed to a spiritual source.¹³

Early Swedenborgians—members of the New Church—were concerned with presenting a respectable image to the public who remained skeptical of spirit and angelic communications. One method for developing an image of respectability was to introduce a system of rules for spirit communications (i.e., who could be contacted, who could contact spirits, and when).¹⁴ Although they tried their best to maintain control, New Church members could not manage the various offshoots and spiritual movements that popped up during the nineteenth century—including mesmerism and spiritualism—that drew inspiration and guidance from Swedenborg's writings and theology.

Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) emerged from the meeting point of various belief systems mingling at the mid-nineteenth century, particularly Swedenborgianism and mesmerism. Davis was known as a clairaudient who toured the northeastern United States beginning in the 1840s, giving lectures in trance while writing several books that would serve as a foundation for spiritualism over the next few years.¹⁵ His spiritual experiences were marked by an internal, spiritual hearing, and Swedenborg himself was one of the many spirit voices with whom Davis was able to communicate. This last point was particularly threatening for many members of the New Church who saw Swedenborg's presence in a nineteenth-century mystic as going against their teachings.¹⁶

Nevertheless, spiritualists inspired by Swedenborg's teachings focused more intently on spiritual sound, on making the inaudible audible. The discourse they developed around spiritual hearing—hearing the dead—revolved around retraining the ear to a new, enhanced way of listening. As Swedenborg biographer Gareth Wilkinson puts it “the ... ear has to die, and be born again, to exercise these delicate attentions.”¹⁷ A retuning of the ears was accompanied by theories and writings on spiritual sound and music of the spheres.¹⁸

¹²Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 202, 230.

¹³Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 215. Additionally, Swedenborgian legacies posed the difference between sight and hearing as rational and inquisitive vs. emotive and obedient. Furthermore, because of these distinctions, the eye was stereotyped as being inherently masculine while the ear was considered passive and feminine. Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 217.

¹⁴Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 228.

¹⁵Robert W. Delp, “Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism,” in *Pseudo-Science and Society in 19th-Century America*, ed. Arthur Wrobel (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 101–3.

¹⁶Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 229. Schmidt explains that by channeling Swedenborg, Davis was providing a mouthpiece and opportunity for Swedenborg to have to admit the errors in his revelations, thus diminishing his authority.

¹⁷Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 239.

¹⁸Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 238.

Davis's theories of spiritual sound were brought to a head with the Rochester rappings. Many in the area heard sounds they could not explain and writing such as Davis's offered a way of understanding. Davis's early writings predate the rappings by only a year, and, though Davis often disagreed with many spiritualist understandings, his writings were used to support the movement. Although Davis remained a major figure in spiritualism for the remainder of the century, ideas concerning sound continued to develop. Others began to hear what Davis purported to hear. Gradually, spiritualists developed their own methods of listening and tuning into the spiritual realm. Protocols for reaching the spirits and interpreting the resulting sounds soon followed.

Spiritualist Acoustemologies

Within a spiritualist acoustemology, the possibility of sound's spiritual source and—perhaps more importantly—the ability of sonic communications to take place across existential planes required a reliance on cohabitation.¹⁹ Sounds of both the living and dead could exist at the same intersection of space and time. As a result, within spiritualist listening cultures otherwise mundane sounds or acousmatic sounds held potential for spirit communications. Sounds that might be heard as random or insignificant to non-spiritualists took on specific and intentional meanings. The sounds of spirit voices and nonvocal sounds were treated as independent subjects, something that could be communicated with and understood as separate from any other living individual in the room. Like Andrew Jackson Davis hearing the sounds of a musical symphony while plowing farmland or like witnesses to the Rochester rappings, spiritualists heard the sounds of séances and the voices of mediums against a background of sonic manifestations that proved a life beyond the earthly realm, just across the thin veil separating them from the Summerland.²⁰

Ethnomusicologist and anthropologist Steven Feld's work on acoustemology is useful for understanding spiritualist acoustemologies as presented in séance spaces. Feld describes "acoustemology" as a way of knowing through sound.²¹ Acoustemology has considered environmental factors such as the sounds of flora and fauna, and the ways in which humans interact with and interpret these sounds. Acoustemology as Feld uses it supports knowledge of sound that is not restricted to the living but can be understood to create relationality between the living and dead. This is a major part of spiritualist acoustemologies.

Listening practices are learned and developed over time. In Feld's formulation, listening is reflexive and assigns agency to all sides of the sonic experience, particularly to those who have traditionally been thought to lack agency. In a similar manner, ordinary sounds heard by spiritualists in certain settings were granted agency. Although in a non-spiritualist setting an acousmatic sound like a rap or scratch might be explained away as the result of a mundane source, spiritualists heard these sounds as having a spiritual motivation. During an 1850 séance with the Fox sisters, for example, the Reverend Charles Hammond described a series of sonic phenomena. While attending a séance in the parlor of the Fox home, Hammond was taken into a separate sitting room with the sisters and their mother. Aside from other physical spirit manifestations and demonstrations, Hammond's description gave much attention to the sounds he heard. He recounted the sounds of a man sawing a wooden board, the buzzing of a spinning-wheel, whereas "the sound of a rocking cradle indicated maternal care for the infant's slumbers."²² Each of the sounds Hammond described was not particularly unusual, especially considering their domestic nature within the context of the Fox home. Nevertheless, the sounds were heard concurrently. The sounds' relation to one another, namely their varying degree of activity and the implication that many hands were needed to produce the sounds, pointed to their spiritual source for Hammond. Therefore, although each sound alone was

¹⁹Steven Feld, "Acoustemology," in *Keywords in Sound*, eds. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 15.

²⁰The Summerland is a term for the spiritualist afterlife.

²¹Feld, "Acoustemology," 12.

²²Dewey, *History of the Strange Sounds*, 31–32.

not necessarily extraordinary, the spiritualist context of their creation imbued them with a spiritual meaning. In this setting, sound did not happen accidentally but delivered specific messages. Spiritualists understood spiritual sounds to be one part of an active and dynamic communication between the living and dead. The process of acoustemology places agency in the figure of the spirits; spiritualists did the same.

Although this idea of spiritualist listening is deeply indebted to Feld's formulation of acoustemology, my theorization of spiritualist acoustemologies differs from Feld's in at least one major way. Feld specifies that acoustemology is meant to address audible sounds and the ways listening creates social relations.²³ Audibility in Feld's case is essential because sounds shared between agents are what constitute communication. In exploring spiritualist acoustemologies, however, it is necessary to expand this acoustemological understanding to accommodate practices of spiritual listening and clairaudience, listening practices that did not always rely on physical hearing. Although spiritual communications could be audible, such as the sounds of a medium channeling the spirit through their own voice or an affected voice, or the singing of a spiritualist hymn, a primary means for spiritualist communications often took place through inaudible sounds. These "inaudible" sounds were not heard through the traditional mechanism of the ear, but through a clairaudient sense.

The inaudible vibrations of clairaudient communications were sometimes identified as the source of music and musical instruction. C. Payson Longley was a spiritualist composer active during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Longley participated in spirit communications along with his wife, Mary Shelhamer Longley, who acted as medium. In some instances, Mrs. Longley channeled the spirit who sang songs for Mr. Longley to transcribe.²⁴ In the introduction to a published collection of Mr. Longley's songs, however, the songs are described as having come "singing through his brain."²⁵ This description implies that a portion of Longley's music may have been composed through clairaudient inspiration. In this case, rather than hearing the physical vibrations of sound, Longley would have experienced the sensation of mentally hearing music that was inaudible to others around him.

Spirit communication was frequently facilitated by the process of mediumship and clairaudience in which one spiritualist heard voices or sounds emanating from the spirit world. These events were inaudible to others and heard through the "inner ear," a spiritual auricular/oracular organ that was attuned to spirits residing on another plane of existence. Although spiritual sounds were not shareable with others—they did not produce physically audible vibrations that could be heard by anyone else—these moments were fundamental to spiritualist understandings of spiritual sound and a basis for their communal religiosity. The inaudible was abundant with potential.

In theorizing sounds that are inaudible to the average listener, or what might be understood as imagined sounds, I draw inspiration from Nina Sun Eidsheim. Eidsheim and Feld's conceptions of sound are similar in that both understand it as relational and not purely isolated to hearing but affected by a range of senses. Both focus on the materiality of sound as it is produced in and through the body, by the producer of sound, and by the listener. However, Eidsheim takes Feld's acoustemology to another level by complicating and deconstructing what sound and listening mean. Her understanding of sound goes beyond an exchange of intermaterial vibration by separating sound signals from auditory events. According to Eidsheim, "[s]ome auditory events that are not caused by a sound signal but by other actors could include auditory hallucinations, disease conditions (such as tinnitus), or sound experienced as the result of artificial stimulation of the acoustic nerve."²⁶ A person might hear a sound that is inaudible to another because the sound was not created by physical, sonic vibrations. To borrow from Eidsheim, the thick event of music or sound is comprised of more than just the sonic vibrations that produce an audible sound.

²³Feld, "Acoustemology," 12.

²⁴Mary Longley Shelhamer, *Teachings and Illustrations as they Emanate from the Spirit World* (Chicago: The Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1908), 37.

²⁵"To the Musical Public: Introduction to Vols. III and IV of Longley's Beautiful Songs," *Longley's Choice Collection of Beautiful Songs for Public Meetings and the Home* (Washington, DC: C. Payson Longley, 1899).

²⁶Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 176.

Several salient points are notable surrounding spiritualist acoustemologies. The first point that I would like to emphasize is its plurality. Spiritualism was based on a diverse set of beliefs and practices, ranging from the devoted to recreational practitioner. Each séance sitter might have a different conception of the workings of spiritual and sonic metaphysics. Interest in spiritualism might be motivated by grief, curiosity, or skepticism for the communications themselves and their attention to specific aspects of the acoustemology might vary accordingly. Moreover because of the personal nature of spiritualism as a whole, sound could be particularly powerful in assuring participants that their beliefs were justified—or conversely, a personalized sound that was misdirected might have the opposite effect of raising suspicion.

Skepticism did not necessarily equate to disbelief, however. Many self-respecting and sincere spiritualists would not feel they had done their duty if they did not examine the possibility of fraud to a satisfactory degree. Doyle's archives are rich with descriptions of similar psychical experimentations and his own writings on well-known subjects of study like the Boston-based medium Mina (Margery) Crandon.²⁷ In the case of Crandon, Doyle noted that during a 1926 séance the medium's clothing was searched by another woman, braided steel wire and rubber tubing were used to bind the medium's wrists and ankles, and her neck was secured to the spirit cabinet by a dog collar.²⁸ These were just a few of the measures taken that evening to verify the veracity of Crandon's psychical claims as medium. Regarding the investigation of spiritually produced séance sounds, musical mediums often underwent similar measures. During a séance in Brussels given by the Davenport brothers—a pair of musical mediums known for performing musical instruments inside a spirit cabinet while their hands were bound—a compatriot described measures taken by local skeptics. Prior to the séance, blue paint was placed on the instruments. Following the performance, the men inspected the mediums' hands for evidence that their physical hands, and not manifested spirit hands, had produced sound from the instrument.²⁹

The theatrical elements of both descriptions relate to the next element of spiritualist acoustemologies, which is the significance of sound's multisensory nature within spiritualist contexts. It was not only the sounds heard that set the stage, but the play of the lights around the room as they were dimmed, the shadows that danced across the walls. Nevertheless sounds were not only comprised of what could be heard, but were constituted by the vibrational frequencies that caused them. These frequencies could produce audible sounds or spiritual vibrations—vibrations that occurred at such elevated frequencies that they could not be perceived by the human ear.

In his 1911 instruction manual, spiritualist practitioner J. C. F. Grumbine wrote about this kind of spiritual vibration, the practice of clairaudience or "(s)upernormal hearing... thoughts unmanifest or unexpressed in sounds."³⁰ According to Grumbine's definition, "normal" hearing was a result of physical sonic vibrations.³¹ This can be understood in terms of Eidsheim's sound event. Although the sound events that constituted "normal" hearing were physical in nature, the vibrations of Grumbine's clairaudient hearing were produced by a spiritual source. Additionally, Grumbine specified that the voices heard by a clairaudient are separate entities from their own voice.³²

This is an important distinction between the sounds heard internally by a clairaudient versus the independent voices produced by spirits. The presence of a clairaudient voice signifies contact taking place within the soul—spirit communicating with spirit—and thus does not require hearing physical vibrations with the auricular organ. In the case of a musical performance where sounds are audible, such as a congregation singing a spiritualist hymn, a clairaudient communication does not necessarily

²⁷Materials pertaining to this particular case can be found in Doyle's archive at the British Library as well as the Arthur Conan Doyle Collection, Richard Lancelyn Green Bequest at the Portsmouth City Libraries' History Centre.

²⁸"Report: Boston, September 14, 1926." MS 88924/4/14 Reports on séances (1896–1930). British Library.

²⁹Robert Cooper, *Spiritual Experiences, Including Seven Months with the Brothers Davenport* (London: Heywood and Co., 1867), 202.

³⁰Jesse Charles Fremont Grumbine, *Clairaudience* (Boston: The Order of the White Rose, 1911), 7.

³¹Here I use "normal hearing" to describe the dialectic to Grumbine's "supernormal hearing," not to imply a state of physical normalcy.

³²Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 8.

take place. Singers produce physical vibrations and audible sounds, and spirits (if they respond at all) produce independent voices that are audible and heard by all in attendance, not just those who are clairaudient. Despite a clairaudient voice being ethereal, however, the voice as it is “heard” can take on a material quality, seeming to be physically present and near. As Grumbine explains:

Often one’s attention will be suddenly and startlingly arrested by a clairaudient spirit voice, spoken and heard so loudly that one may be surprised not to see a mortal standing near; or a voice may be heard so loudly in one’s sleep as to awaken one, and yet no one physically visible called. These clairaudient voices are so subjectified as to make them seem objective or material, the impression of sound being registered on the objective mind as such sufficiently through the subjective, spiritual process as to make it seem physically audible.³³

According to Grumbine’s description of clairaudient voices, spirit voices and sounds were often perceived as real and material in presence. Although another person in their company may not hear anything, a clairaudient who heard these voices heard them as though with normal hearing. The difference between physical and clairaudient sounds was understood in terms of vibrational frequency. Clairaudient sounds and hearing occurred at a higher vibrational frequency than that of the physical. At this heightened frequency it was not the auricular organ that worked in perception, but the oracular: the “etheric ear.”³⁴

Grumbine makes an important point concerning spirit voices: “Whether one hears clairaudiently, or hears dependent and independent voices, no voice of a spirit can reach a mortal except by means of the functions which make voices audible.”³⁵ Dependent voices refer to spirit voices as channeled through the voice of a medium. Dependent voices could be produced by physical sound or clairaudient voices, which Grumbine classifies as “normal and supernormal,—voices of speech which we make or hear by sound waves, and voices which though soundless are not speechless, but are heard within and clairaudiently as spirit hears spirit.”³⁶ Independent voices refer to voices that are produced directly by the spirit, seemingly emanating from thin air. Although independent voices use the presence of a medium, the medium’s voice was not heard. Instead, the spirit’s voice would be heard near or around the medium’s head “and seem to issue out of the lips and vocal organs of the medium without any effort on his part.”³⁷ According to Grumbine, for a spirit to produce sounds that are audible to normal hearing, the spirit must draw energy or materiality from a medium’s body. Although bodiless, the voice relies on the body of the medium, coupled with the intelligence of the spirit itself.³⁸

Grumbine offers a mechanical understanding of the way spiritual sounds were produced and communicated to the living. His writing provides a working guide for one way in which a spiritualist acoustemology may have been enacted. Another map for spiritualist acoustemologies exists in the contemporary practice of séances. Séances were host to a wide spectrum of spiritual activities. The diversity of sonic events is particularly useful for understanding how these spaces could give birth to a host of differing spiritualist acoustemologies. In the following section, I look closely at several séance reports and accounts to break down the sounds that were heard and their effect on the sitters who heard them.

Spiritualist Listening in the Séance

Séances could operate on a singular mode of sounding and listening—perhaps audible or clairaudient modes—or they might incorporate different sounding methods in one sitting. Séance reports were typically dictated by an amanuensis and noted the events of a séance, the people in attendance, dialogue

³³Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 9.

³⁴Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 11–17.

³⁵Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 45.

³⁶Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 45.

³⁷Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 46.

³⁸Grumbine, *Clairaudience*, 46.

between sitters and spirits, and aspects of a spiritualist acoustemology. These reports offer a detailed view of the ritual and range from the mid-nineteenth century to séances occurring in the early decades of the twentieth century. Many of these accounts are included in the archives of Arthur Conan Doyle and are records of séances that he attended or reports—many from the United States—that he found interesting enough to collect and keep with his papers concerning spiritualism. Accordingly, these accounts often represent practitioners of a white, middle- and upper-class social background.

It is important to note that because séance reports are written transcripts of sonic events, it is often difficult to decipher what exactly occurred in that moment. Complex events that rely on a first-hand knowledge of the acoustic environment can seem confusing to an outside viewer who was and is not privy to the sitting's happenings. In *Anatomy of a Séance*, Stanley McMullin notes the difficulty of working with written séance reports originating in Canada during the 1930s and 1940s. For McMullin, the séance notes he wished to use as the basis for his study were lackluster and unconvincing. However, his discovery of séance recordings from a circle that met during the 1960s motivated him to complete the study. The sound recordings provided a window into the dramatic events where the written word could not.³⁹

Séances hosted a great deal of diversity in terms of setting, audience sincerity, and the degree of showmanship on display. Despite space for variety, séances based the traditions of the latter nineteenth-century often-contained consistencies. For example, based on my archival research, it is evident that séances often began with singing and affirmations to the belief in God. Both were believed to protect the ritual from malevolent spirits. Procedures such as the séance's setting in a parlor or domestic space and the arrangement of participants were also typically consistent.⁴⁰

Séance reports recorded the date and time of the séance, the location, and the names of the medium and sitters. Alternatively, sitters would simply record the séances they sat in as they experienced them. Some sitters were more critical than others. These depictions were often recorded in memoirs, usually those focusing on the writers' spiritualist conversion as in May Wright Sewall's *Neither Dead nor Sleeping* (1920), or in travelogues like Willy Reichel's *An Occultist's Travels* (1908). Comparing séance reports from 1850 to 1924 demonstrates changing beliefs concerning sound in the séance as well as differences in séance protocol and process.

The first séance I examine is one that was conducted in 1850 in New York City. The sitting was led by the Fox sisters in the very early days after spiritualism's official beginning in 1848. The séance took place at the home of Rufus Griswold, writer and rival to Edgar Allan Poe, who had been introduced to the phenomenon of spirit communication through his brother. Attendees included members of an esteemed literary set with the guest list including James Fenimore Cooper, John Bigelow, William Cullen Bryant, and George Bancroft. This so-called "Post-mortem Soiree" demonstrates early spiritualist processes for communicating with the dead during the mid-nineteenth century.⁴¹ Specifically, they relied on nonvocal raps and knocks to communicate spirits' responses. Additionally, a type of mental-thought communication—implied to be inaudible in nature—was sometimes employed by sitters to pose their questions to spirits.

It was a Thursday evening and the group of men had been invited to be ear-witnesses to the spirit sounds produced in the presence of the famed women and girls from Rochester—Katie and Maggie Fox; their mother, Mrs. Fox; and their eldest sister, Leah Fish. Griswold's home was chosen for the séance because the women had never set foot in the dwelling prior to that night. Their unfamiliarity with the location was meant to protect the proceedings from tricks or fraudulence. Once the men gathered in the appointed room, the Fox women entered, and the group sat in silence. They waited for the sounds for half an hour. Although it seems most obvious to talk about the sounds that they heard, it is also important to note this period where they did *not* hear the spirits. For 30 minutes, a group of

³⁹Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), xviii.

⁴⁰Julian Holloway, "Enchanted Spaces: The Séance, Affect, and Geographies of Religion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (March 2006): 182–87.

⁴¹See Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*; David Alexander Chapin, "Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity" (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, Durham, 2000).

prominent men waited in silence with their attentions focused on a pair of young girls. As the minutes wore on, the men grew impatient.

Although accounts of the evening made no mention of this silence, the room could not have been absolutely silent. What sounds did they hear in these moments as they waited? In a room where conversation and movement presumably stopped, their sense of hearing became heightened, tuning into the least change in the room's acoustic atmosphere. They likely became hyperaware of their own breath or the breathing of those near them. As the prolonged moments of "silence" wore on, perhaps one or two members of the party expelled a deep sigh as a sign of impatience. Perhaps in their heightened state of concentration they began to hear things that they might not normally perceive. Maybe they even attributed these sounds to the spirits.

After half an hour with no audible results attributed to spirits, they rearranged themselves in hopes of enticing the spirits to sound. The men were instructed to form a tight circle around a table directly in front of where the women sat. Soon after their reconfiguration the rappings began, faint and coming from under the floor, around the table, and from various places around the room. This moment once again called the men to engage in a deep practice of listening to follow the sounds as they traveled around the room, emanating from behind and below them. The raps grew louder until "no one could deny their presence nor trace them to any visible cause."⁴² The group questioned the spirits, who gave knocks to indicate that they would answer questions posed by the men, one at a time. The process of question and answer demonstrated in this séance was developed by the Fox sisters during the previous 2 years. The sitter asking questions would silently think about a deceased person with whom they wished to communicate.⁴³ They would then ask questions, either audibly or to themselves, and the spirits would respond—raps for "yes" and silence for "no." Dr. Marcy was the first to pose a series of questions that evening, after which he attested that the spirits' answers had been correct.⁴⁴

The members of the sitting had varying degrees of success with their spirit conversations. Dr. Francis Hawks's questions were met with faint sounds that failed to constitute communications and he soon resigned himself to the background of the séance. The following communicator, Dr. John Francis, was greeted by the spirits with a loud and generous roll of knocks. Francis's conversation, which turned out to be with the spirit of Scottish poet Robert Burns, was as follows:

Would they [the spirits] vouchsafe to speak to his illustrious friend, the world-renowned author, Mr. Cooper? Would they converse with the great American poet, Mr. Bryant? ... [N]o reply was given. Would they speak to so humble an individual as himself? Loud knocks. Dr. [Francis] then asked, fixing on a person, "Was he an American? Was he an Englishman? Was he a Scotchman?" The knocks were loud and unanimous. "Was he a merchant? Was he a lawyer? Was he an author?" Loud knocks. "Was he a poet?" "Yes," in distinct knocks. "Will you tell his name?" Here the spirits called for the alphabet, by sounds intelligible to the "ghost-seers" [the Fox sisters]. The answers by this method are given in knocks at the letter desired, when the alphabet is repeated by one of the ladies. It then spelled out B-u-r, when the company indiscreetly, but spontaneously, interrupted, by crying out, "Robert Burns." This was the true answer, and after the interview with the favorite Scotch poet Dr. F. declined any further communication.⁴⁵

Francis began his conversation with the spirits by inquiring whether they would speak with other members of the circle. When no reply was given—implying a "no"—Francis asked if they would speak with him, to which he received loud affirmative knocks. Francis began asking a series of questions to narrow down the identity of the spirit: "Was he an American? Was he an Englishman? Was he a Scotchman?" After each question there was a pause as those gathered waited for the knock that may

⁴²Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 64.

⁴³Ann Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (New York: T.R. Knox and Company, 1885), 138–39.

⁴⁴"He inquired whether the spirit which he wished to converse with was a relation, was a child, and what was its age at the time of its death, etc." Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 64.

⁴⁵Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 64.

or may not come. Did the sitters hear complete silence during those moments? Or did the shifting of a nearby sitter or the shuffling of a foot under the table momentarily trick the listener into thinking them the knocks of the spirits? Regardless, the spirit's replies to Francis's questions were clear and apparently did not cause any confusion as to the correct answer. Eventually—after a request to spell the spirit's name—the alphabet was called for by the spirits. The spirits called for the alphabet with a sonic signal that only the Fox sisters could distinguish. As they recited the alphabet slowly, the knocks sounding after the correct letter was spoken, the above quote makes the anticipation of the sitters palpable. Eager to unveil the spirit's identity the sitters “indiscreetly, but spontaneously” exclaimed Robert Burns's name together.

The Fox séance demonstrates the early procedures for contacting the spirits, namely a reliance on acousmatic raps and knocks. In this séance, verbal exchanges were rare. Language was incorporated into responses using the alphabet, but letters were indicated once more with the acousmatic knocks. The acoustemological environment of this séance was comprised of the sounds of the knocks and the silences that separated the raps. It also implies instances of clairaudient sound. The sitters thought the spirit they wished to communicate with—and often the questions—to themselves rather than aloud. According to the above account the spirits were able to hear the sitters' thoughts and their audible speech. In this setting, the ears became sensitive to the slightest changes. The mobile nature of the spirit sounds meant that the sitters had to listen carefully to the space of the room. The object of their attention frequently shifted as the raps emanated from above or below them, behind or in front, near or far. The sitters also had varying degrees of success. Although the spirits were apparently excited to see some sitters, such as when they rapped enthusiastically for Dr. Francis, they would not sound for others.

As mentioned earlier, spiritualist conceptions of séance sound transformed over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Although the Fox séance conducted in 1850 functioned largely using spirit sounds that were nonvocal in nature, over the next few decades séance sounds became more varied and complex. Physical manifestations became prevalent, with the use of spirit cabinets making more and more fantastical visions possible.⁴⁶ The second séance that I will discuss is one that occurred in 1924 in Altadena, California and is representative of the vocal communications and physical manifestations that were more common by the beginning of the twentieth century. The acoustemological setting of this séance is different in terms of the types of sounds heard and the ways that the sitters communicated with spirits. Although the prestigious men who attended the Fox séance likely did so out of curiosity for the new phenomenon and perhaps to gather evidence for or against the event's validity, the members of the Altadena séance met regularly, with multiple séance reports demonstrating their serious investment in spirit communication.

Like the Fox séance, the Altadena séance was held at the home of two of the sitters, Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Baker. The séance was attended by the members of a regular circle with the addition of several guests. The sitters joined together in the evening. Gathered in a circle, the lights were lowered and an affirmation spoken. Next, the circle sang two hymns, “Ask the Angels to Bless You” and “Nearer my God to Thee.” During the second hymn, the circle heard a spirit voice join them in singing. The voice was strong and deep, changing the dynamic and timbre of the group singing. The voice was identified as that of the medium's father:

In the latter hymn a strong Spirit voice joined, and was recognized by the medium as her father. She so addressed him, and he replied, “Yes it is Byron Wanamaker and I love to sing. I always sang in the choir and enjoyed it. Let us sing another verse.” This was done and again he joined in.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Medium cabinets were small spaces that were separated from the rest of the séance room, either as boxes that could fit one or two people or as a small enclave closed off by walls or curtains. Mediums could use the cabinets in several ways. Often a medium would enter a cabinet and while inside produce spectral images or an array of musical instrumental sounds. Sometimes, as was the case with a séance sat by Hereward Carrington in Lily Dale, NY, individual sitters would sit with mediums inside the cabinet where they would witness or hear the spirit. See Hereward Carrington, “Ingenious Frauds at Lily Dale Seances: Psychological Research Society Investigates Reported Marvels at Famous Spiritist Stronghold and Exposes Fraudulent Methods of Mediums,” *New York Times* (New York City) March 5, 1908.

⁴⁷Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924. Add MS 88924, 1, 14. Arthur Conan Doyle Archives, British Library.

A crucial part of spiritualist acoustemologies was the potential spiritual source of sound as well as the meaning or evidential value that sitters might attach to the sound. According to the above description, the spirit voice that was identified as the medium's father was independent of the living sitters, meaning it was acousmatic or disembodied. The medium recognized the voice as belonging to her deceased father, thus giving this particular sound significance. It is useful to consider what may have occurred if none of the living sitters present during this communication had recognized the spirit voice. How would this spirit voice have been received if it identified itself as the medium's father, but the medium did not recognize it as her father's voice? Her recognition and affirmation that the voice was that of her father's spirit provided evidence for the communication's validity.

This séance report provides short asides to inform the reader of insider knowledge of the circumstances of the séance, the circles, and their usual habits. After the opening song, the first spirit to contact the circle was Daisy, an "Indian maid." It was common for Native American spirits to be contacted during spiritualist séances, often as spirit guides who connected the medium to other spirits in the Summerland.⁴⁸ In this case, Daisy was the medium's guide and spoke independently of the medium. As an independent voice, she was heard as a separate entity from the medium or any other sitter in the room.⁴⁹ During this séance, the medium was conscious and joined in the conversation with Daisy and other spirits. As described by Grumbine in *Clairaudience*, the independent voice referred to a spirit voice that was heard separately from the medium's vocal apparatus. Although it is not specified in this report, sitters probably heard Daisy's voice emanating near the medium or above their heads. Daisy greeted each sitter individually by name, demonstrating familiarity and regularity. Much of the transcript records Daisy speaking almost uninterrupted, though there are moments where replies by the sitters have been noted.

One interesting portion of Daisy's monologue is her greeting to a particular sitter, Mrs. Gates. The spirit references Mrs. Gates's hearing loss and that she might get her hearing back "if we can just get the vibration started."⁵⁰ Daisy goes on to say, "We must get the arteries and [nerves] functioning."⁵¹ Not only was it believed that the spirit could make contact with the circle and participate in polite conversation, but spirits were also able to influence and heal the bodies of the living from beyond with magnetic and vibrational influences. Mediums, such as the young Victoria Woodhull, were often advertised as healers or doctors. Furthermore, it is not surprising that Daisy, a Native American spirit, should be tasked with healing this attendee. Historically, white religious followers of spiritualism and Shakerism looked to Native American spirits for remedies and healing, of both physical and social ailments.⁵²

The rest of the sitting featured a revolving cast of spirits who communicated through several methods including independent, audible voice and automatic writing.⁵³ Many of the spirits were familiar with the members of the circle and frequent visitors to their séances and included: The physician-poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.; Crystal, the spirit of a young girl who in other séances had conversed with Arthur Conan Doyle; Raymond Lodge, the son of psychical researcher Sir Oliver Lodge; and children of sitters including George, Ernest, and Mary Chitester; William Stilson Baker; and Jacky Murray. The last set of spirits, those of the sitters' children, is particularly important for a study of this séance's acoustemology. The other spirits who communicated were either names famous within the spiritualist community or spirits that, though neither famous nor known by the sitters during life, had a specific attachment to either the circle or the medium. The children's spirits, however, were intensely personal and implied an intimate domestic setting. Not only did these parents have the chance to converse with their departed children, but they attested that they heard their voices.

⁴⁸See Bridget Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Darryl Caterine, "The Haunted Grid: Nature, Electricity, and Indian Spirits in the American Metaphysical Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 371–97; and Darryl Caterine, *Haunted Ground: Journeys through a Paranormal America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

⁴⁹Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924.

⁵⁰Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924.

⁵¹Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924.

⁵²Caterine, "The Haunted Grid," 389.

⁵³Automatic writing refers to the process of written communications or spirit responses via the channeling of a spirit.

The following quotation is taken from the transcript of the sitting and describes the entrance of the children of sitters Mr. and Mrs. Chitester: “Three children of Mr. and Mrs. Chitester here came in, George, Ernest and Mary, each speaking in turn and each in a different voice. Conversation was personal, giving many names of those both in Spirit and in Earth Plane. All seemed to be recognized.”⁵⁴ Take a moment to contemplate the implications of this description. By the time the Chitester children joined this séance, the sitters had been communicating for a lengthy period of time, perhaps half an hour to an hour. They had been concentrating for an extended period, focusing their senses—particularly their hearing—to perceive and understand the independent spirit voices. Perhaps by this time their energy was waning, weakened after continuous concentration. The report’s amanuensis indicated that three different voices were heard, each one representing a different Chitester child. It is implied that the voices, like the ones that came before, were independent. The exact conversation was not recorded, instead simply reported as being “personal.” Perhaps the nature of the conversation was so intimate that the transcriber did not feel comfortable committing it to the report or else it was personal to a degree that made it uninteresting to anyone else. Hearing the voice of a deceased child was a common phenomenon experienced by parents taking part in séances. For people like the Chitesters who had lost children, the séance was a space where they could once again speak with their children, hear them, and perhaps even see them.

Unlike the Fox séance of 1850, where simple knocks and raps gave proof of invisible intelligence capable of communication, the sounds of the Altadena séances crystallized into individual voices. From an evidential perspective, the difference is enormous. The sounds made by rappings served to signal the presence of an agent separate from the circle, but their meaning was nebulous and impersonal. The strength or weakness of the knocks could signal a variety of different responses. However, communication was dependent upon the activity of the living, their ability to ask qualifying questions, and to voice both correct and incorrect answers. In this scenario the living voice—either audible or in silent thought—was essential for communicating with the spirits who were voiceless, aside from their ability to create generic sound.

In the Altadena séance, the voice became the proof of life after death. Spirit voices provided additional evidence by way of answering questions directly. The introduction of independent spirit voices into séance circles added an element of extreme specificity and intimacy to living/nonliving interactions. If the voice was recognized by a sitter as a loved one or acquaintance—if they could “hear” the spirit’s identity—the communication immediately became more significant. They no longer relied on anonymous raps and knocks to speak with the dead but could lean on the power of the “human” voice. Even if the voice was not recognized as familiar, speaking with a voice that was human (even though it was understood to be unhuman in nature) made the communion more “real.” A responding knock might be enough to convince a sitter of the presence of an intelligent being, but hearing the disembodied voice lent a certain relatability and humanity to the conversations. Speaking with a humanlike spirit voice gave the exchanges a sense of normalcy. Dialogue with spirit voices often involved talking about previous events, family members, and events in the lives of the living and the deceased. Mundanity marked the audible séance conversations toward the end of the nineteenth century.

For many, sitting in a séance was not unusual or extraordinary, but was scientifically rational and something they participated in on a regular basis. Circles could meet once a month, once a week, or even more frequently. These spaces gave practitioners a place where they could hear the spirits and draw conclusions about the afterlife and the continuing spiritual life of their loved ones through the sounds they heard.

Conclusion

The physics of spiritual sound go a long way to explain the acoustemologies of spiritualism and the séance, and how knowledge of the afterlife was produced by listening to the sounds in the spaces of spirit communication. As the examples above have shown, the use of sound could vary widely in

⁵⁴Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924.

circles, especially as the century wore on. Voiceless knocks constituted spirit communications at the very beginning of the movement but became increasingly human over the next few decades. Sitters hearing the voices of a spirit and their deceased loved ones developed different acoustemological understandings than their spiritual predecessors. The result was that their understanding of the afterlife and their ability to contact it was much more personal and intimate, often recreating domestic social interactions like the Chitester parents who momentarily reunited with their children.

Within the context of a spiritualist séance, sound had the power to transform a space, the communications that occurred there, and the people who attended. Although other sensuous elements of spirit communications such as automatic spirit writing and physical spirit manifestations could provide evidence for the existence of life after death, sound was an equally moving piece of proof for sitters. Furthermore, sound and the soundscape not only relayed these communications between the living and nonliving, but also influenced how these communications were received by sitters. Sound, listening, and the acoustemologies that developed within these spaces are necessary for understanding how spiritualists understood the construction of the earth and their cosmologies, yet it has often gone unstudied or understudied within spiritualist histories.

Sound and listening were extraordinarily crucial to spiritualism and rituals such as the séance. Although it was—and is—a religion and practice that relied heavily on the senses and sensual experience, the sonic dynamic provided a method of communication that could be more immediate, moving, and sometimes even human in quality. As this article has demonstrated, conceptions of spirit sound as audible or inaudible expanded the potential for communication and what the process of spiritualist listening might involve. As a result, studies of spiritualism and similar religious practices must consider this very particular and nuanced method of sound, listening, and sound's influence over understandings of the world and life beyond the earthly plane.

Spiritualist acoustemologies are useful for understanding the nuances of séance culture and spiritualist cosmologies, but its conception also has the potential to expand our understanding of sound and its communicative power. Feld's original formulation of acoustemology accounted for the ways in which sound could facilitate relationships between humans and the environment, including nonhuman animals and nonliving, natural entities. Nevertheless, his conception of acoustemology does not account for moments of "sonic" communications that are inaudible or inaudibly perceived, effectively moments of unshareable sound. To ignore such methods of communication, however, is counterintuitive to a practice such as spiritualism, which privileges these modes of inaudible and acousmatic sounding that would otherwise go unacknowledged.

Spiritualism of the long nineteenth century demanded a particular kind of listening, one which often conflicted with traditional modes of hearing. Here, sound was a privileged mode of communication, one which could reveal secrets of the afterlife, spiritualist cosmologies, and connect individual spirits even across the divide of death. Although the conception of spiritualist acoustemologies as I have outlined in this paper may serve as a useful tool for understanding a particular spiritual and cultural phenomenon within the context of nineteenth-century North America, I believe an expanded conception of the nature of sound, and which sounds constitute the creation of an acoustemology, will prove useful to studies of spiritual practice and sound broadly.

Acknowledgments. The author would like to acknowledge the British Library and the Marion H. Skidmore Library at Lily Dale, NY for access to archival materials and rare books that informed this research. The author is also grateful to the scholars who provided useful feedback on this work, particularly Dr. Olivia Bloechl and the two anonymous reviewers. An early version of this paper was presented at the Esotericism in Music conference in Rochester, NY in 2020.

Competing Interest. None.

References

Primary Sources

Carrington, Hereward. "Ingenious Frauds at Lily Dale Séances: Psychical Research Society Investigates Reported Marvels at Famous Spiritist Stronghold and Exposes Fraudulent Methods of Mediums." *New York Times* (New York City), March 5, 1908.

“**Report: Boston, September 14, 1926.**” MS 88924/4/14 Reports on séances (1896–1930). Arthur Conan Doyle, British Library. **Séance Report from Altadena, CA; May 8th, 1924. Add MS 88924, 1, 14.** Arthur Conan Doyle Archives, British Library. “To the Musical Public: Introduction to Vols. III and IV of Longley’s Beautiful Songs,” *Longley’s Choice Collection of Beautiful Songs for Public Meetings and the Home*. Washington, DC: C. Payson Longley, 1899.

Books and Articles

- Bennett, Bridget.** *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Braude, Ann.** *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Britten, Emma Hardinge.** *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years’ Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits*. New York: Published by the author, 1870.
- Carroll, Bret E.** *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Caterine, Darryl.** *Haunted Ground: Journeys through a Paranormal America*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011.
- Caterine, Darryl.** “The Haunted Grid: Nature, Electricity, and Indian Spirits in the American Metaphysical Tradition.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 371–97.
- Chapin, David Alexander.** “Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity.” PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, Durham, 2000.
- Cooper, Robert.** *Spiritual Experiences, Including Seven Months with the Brothers Davenport*. London: Heywood and Co., 1867.
- Cox, Robert S.** *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Delp, Robert W.** “Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism.” In *Pseudo-Science and Society in 19th-Century America*, edited by Arthur Wrobel, 100–121. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.
- Dewey, Dellon Marcus.** *History of the Strange Sounds or Rappings Heard in Rochester and Western New York and Usually Called the Mysterious Noises!* Rochester, NY: D.M. Dewey, 1850.
- Diotrephes, Doctor.** *The Knockings Exposed!* New York: Self-published, 1850.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan.** *The History of Spiritualism*. New York: Arno Press, 1975.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun.** *Sensing Sound*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Elliott, Charles W.** *Mysteries, or, Glimpses of the Supernatural: Containing Accounts of the Salem Witchcraft, the Cock-Lane Ghost, the Rochester Rappings, the Stratford Mysteries, Oracles, Astrology, Dreams, Demons, Ghosts, Spectres, etc.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852.
- Feld, Steven.** “Acoustemology.” In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 12–21. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Grumbine, J. C. F.** *Clairaudience*. Boston: The Order of the White Rose, 1911.
- Holloway, Julian.** “Enchanted Spaces: The Séance, Affect, and Geographies of Religion.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (March 2006): 182–87.
- Kane, Brian.** *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Lause, Mark A.** *Free Spirits: Spiritualism, Republicanism, and Radicalism in the Civil War Era*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016.
- McGarry, Molly.** *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- McMullin, Stanley.** *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004.
- Pomeroy C. G. and D. S. Chase.** “The Rochester Rappings,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 29, no. 25 (June 19, 1851): 197.
- Rose, Jonathan S., Stuart Shotwell, and Mary Lou Bertucci,** Editors. *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg’s Life, Work, and Impact*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005.
- Schmidt, Leigh Eric.** *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Shelhamer, Mary Longley.** *Teachings and Illustrations as they Emanate from the Spirit World*. Chicago: The Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1908.
- Spinner, Codee.** “(In)Audible Sound and Spiritualist Acoustemologies.” In *Explorations in Music and Esotericism*, edited by Marjorie Roth and Leonard George. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2023.
- Underhill, A. Leah.** *The Missing Link in Spiritualism*. New York: T. R. Knox and Company, 1885.

Codee Spinner is a music educator in South Florida. She holds a PhD and MA in musicology from the University of Pittsburgh and a BA in music education from SUNY Fredonia. Her research interests include American music, nineteenth-century musical practice, and historical sound studies. Her dissertation, titled *Resonant Spirits: Spiritualism, Music, and Community in Lily Dale, NY (1848–1940)*, is a study of sound and musical practice in the spiritualist community of Lily Dale.

Cite this article: Spinner, Codee. “The Spiritualist Ear.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 18, no. 1 (February 2024): 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175219632300041X>.