

Projekttitel: SONIME – Sonic Memories. Audio Letters in Times of Migration and Mobility

Projektleitung: Eva Kapeller-Hallama (Universität für angewandte Kunst/Medientheorie) und Katrin Abromeit (Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (ÖAW))

Projektteam: Dominik Ivancic (Universität für angewandte Kunst/Medientheorie), Johann Hinterstoisser und Georg Kräutzel-Höfer (Phonogrammarchiv der ÖAW)

Zuordnung des Projekts: Forschungsprojekt

Projektstart: 11/2021 (an der Universität für angewandte Kunst 05/2024) – Projektende: 04/2026

Fördergeberin: Heritage Science Austria Programm der ÖAW

Broad interdisciplinary scholarship has explored the significance of letter writing as a cultural practice of staying in touch during periods of migration and mobility, yet little attention has been paid to analogue audio letters and the practice of sending one's recorded voice.

Although audio letters have enabled 'vivid' communication since the end of the 19th century, they are still relatively unexplored by natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. For this reason, they have remained unnoticed as a very early and – latest since the invention of the compact cassette – highly widespread form of media communication across distances. These unique, mostly self-recorded items are by all means cultural heritage of great value, yet they can hardly be found and accessed in public archives and – on the account of a lack of knowledge about the historical substances and their conservation – severely threatened with loss. The latter is due to the decay of material but also the absence of public awareness of the significance of these objects for our cultural memory; migration, flight or wars also account for the loss of much valuable material.

The goals of the SONIME project are twofold: Firstly, we are building up a reference collection of restored, digitised, findable and accessible audio letters sent from and to Austria from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1990s, when digital media took over. The collection is docked at the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Österreichische Mediathek of the Vienna Museum of Science and Technology, both Vienna, and consists of analogue audio letters from existing collections and newly acquired ones from private individuals. Thus we contribute to the visibility of spoken letters in the archives as repositories of cultural memories. The format range covers wax cylinders, wire recordings, instantaneous discs, magnetic tapes, cassette formats like dictation cassettes and compact

cassettes as well as especially rare formats like magnetic discs. The collection is built up in a participatory process with the donors, with whom we conduct interviews in order to understand the role that audio letters have played for them personally and as “memory objects”.

Secondly, we aim to explore the material culture of audio letters by analysing their material and cultural meanings in their interrelatedness. The focus of our research questions lies on the cultural technique of the acoustic letter in the 20th century, questions about the specificity of this medium such as the intimacy of the acoustic, the fleetingness and affectivity of the voice, which become particularly significant in times of separation, as well as material-technical and conservation-restoration aspects. We are interested in the character and particularity of the audio letter, with special consideration of the voice as a cultural technique and as a carrier of meaning beyond the spoken word (e.g. intonation, tone of voice):

- In what ways did audio letters serve as ‘memory objects’ during migration and mobility? How did they connect those who left and those who stayed?
- If so, how does the (imaginary) speaking to a friend/family member as well as listening to a recorded voice of a beloved person enable closeness and intimacy in times when one is apart – and thus shape ‘sonic memories’ of the absent person? To what extent did the acoustic letters represent the absent persons as ‘sonic memories’ as they carry their voices over distances and time?
- What does the specific material composition tell us about the historical use and meaning of the audio letters? What is their current status of preservation? What conservation measures need to be undertaken to preserve this fragile, unique and possibly damaged cultural heritage for the future?

Therefore, we apply an interdisciplinary perspective embracing methods of conservation science, media and cultural history. In our analysis we include psychoanalytical theory and knowledge of the manifold technical possibilities of inscribing the voice – itself a medium – in a carrier material. The collection is built in a way that includes the donors’ knowledge, with whom we conduct interviews about the meaning of the audio letters as ‘sonic memories’. In participatory workshops with donors of private audio letters we worked out archiving parameters and asked how the donors want their personal items and data to be stored and remembered in the future.

A web presence showcasing the progress of the research accompanies the project on various social media channels and on our project website (sonime.at). We organised two 1-day-conferences with international experts on audio letters in Vienna. Our final 3-day conference takes place in October, 1-3 2025 at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Zentrum Fokus Forschung). We have presented our findings at international conferences, and discussed our project in podcasts, blogs, and exhibitions. The results of our research will be shown in our open access database and will be published in peer-reviewed journals. Above that we document the audio media, their degradation status and the results of material analysis in a consistent vocabulary in our open access project database, that will be online in spring 2026.

At the end of the project we want to be able to describe the key developments, materials and characteristics of the acoustic letter from a cultural-historical as well as a conservation and material-science perspective. The SONIME collection, the associated metadata, and the research results will be online accessible for further research, where legally possible, and will stimulate and enable future interdisciplinary research and artistic engagement in this field.