

# Sensory Atmospheres: Breathing and Sounding Modern Airs

## Interdisciplinary Study Days

3–4 December 2026, Vienna, Austria

Sponsored by the ERC project *GOING VIRAL: Music and Emotions during Pandemics (1679–1919)*  
mdw–University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna

We are pleased to announce a study day hosted at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna on the topic of air, atmospheres, and breath from c. 1800 to the present, with a particular focus on sonic and sensory experiences. Topics related to air are beginning to invite greater scholarly attention not only in connection to the anthropogenic climate crisis, the recent airborne COVID-19 pandemic, and the steadily growing field of the Environmental Humanities, but also across other areas of humanistic academic inquiry. Recent scholarship has registered an “atmospheric turn” (Zhang 2025), attending to aerial violences and hazards connected to atmospheric modernity and the medico-environmental conditions of the Anthropocene, while foregrounding questions of toxicity, survival, and more-than-human interconnection.

With its shifting meanings as resource, medium, or lived environment, air has been recruited into service as metaphor and symbol across diverse time periods, aesthetic frameworks, and scientific discourses. Ideas about “bad” air shifted during the nineteenth century from airborne miasmatic threats toward notions of unhealthy atmospheres understood as human made. In this context, J. Q. Davies locates the nineteenth-century ideal of invisible and autonomous music within a heightened awareness of air, breath, and environment, emerging “in relation to a system of power-knowledge that targeted the air as a natural resource and extracted value from it” (2023). Davies posits that the aesthetic rubrics emergent under nineteenth-century colonial modernity simultaneously obscured music’s materiality and its inextricability from air, purporting to separate music as art from its elemental medium.

A further provocation of the study day is to call into question the notion of air’s invisibility and imperceptibility by foregrounding its materiality (Konrad 2025) and considering related aspects such as pollutants, which are sometimes acutely felt. We are interested in how ideas about sound and air’s materiality can resonate in aspects of sound’s relationality and connections to the more-than-human environment. In this context, we are particularly curious about approaches that take up embodied experiences of air beyond visual domains, as seen, for instance, in research on perceived noise as a “way of attuning toward the atmospheric” (Peterson 2021). Similarly, air and sound can both complicate or resist simple distinctions between inside and outside, and disturb spatial boundaries.

We further aim to recognize how listening, breathing, and further embodied relations to air are historically shaped within social and political environments. Phenomena such as “atmo-orientalism” (Hsu 2020) and differentiated exposure to poor air quality reveal global and (post)colonial disparities, while breathing itself can become a key mode through which humans relate to the world. Such relations are understood as culturally variable, as reflected in Indigenous perspectives that can privilege breath over the body (Ingold 2020).

With particular attention to sonic dimensions, and open to submissions focusing on any geographic context, we invite proposals that engage with, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- air, atmospheres, breath
- pollution, decay, toxicities, climate
- fragrance, stench, the olfactory
- breathing, lungs, breathlessness, masks
- disease, epidemics, pandemics
- winds, breezes, mist, fog
- dust, smoke, steam, gas

Together, participants will share new research and discuss scholarship that investigates themes of air from diverse disciplinary perspectives. We welcome explorations from across disciplines such as musicology/ethnomusicology, history, anthropology, literary studies, art history, film and media studies, philosophy, architecture, as well as from broader interdisciplinary areas including environmental/medical humanities, sound studies, cultural studies, media ecology, and histories of the senses and emotions.

We invite submissions in the following formats:

- regular presentations (20 minutes)
- lightning talks (10 minutes)
- object lessons (20 minutes)

Panels, artistic interventions, or alternative formats are welcome.

The in-person event will take place in English. Please submit a 250-300-word abstract that indicates your intended format and a 100-word biographical note to [schrott@mdw.ac.at](mailto:schrott@mdw.ac.at) by **15 June 2026**. Responses to submissions will be sent out by the organizing committee by early July.

We welcome submissions from early career scholars, graduate students, and independent researchers. We seek to provide financial support for travel and accommodation expenses, please indicate in your submission if you wish to benefit from this support.

**Committee:** Emma Schrott (University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna), Sadie Menicanin (University of Oslo), Andrew Gumataotao (University of Göttingen)

**Contact and Information:** [schrott@mdw.ac.at](mailto:schrott@mdw.ac.at) & <https://goingviral.hypotheses.org/>

