

# Lenin in the Groove

Gabrielle Cornish<sup>ID</sup>

University of Wisconsin–Madison, [gcornish@wisc.edu](mailto:gcornish@wisc.edu)

Vladimir Lenin’s voice was a sight to be seen. Literally: in the opening of his essay “A Voice Returned for the Ages,” writer Vladimir Orlov transfigured Lenin’s voice into the Soviet terrain. “The sight in the microscope’s field of view,” he recalled, with scientific acuity, resembled a landscape. “One could see a stormy lake seized, as if suddenly by frost, with the waves fixed into statues and icy knolls furrowed on the frozen surface. . . This is how a world of sound looks in the blackened grooves of a gramophone record. . . And it is with awe that I peer into these grooves, for I know that they bear the trace of Lenin’s voice.”<sup>1</sup> For Orlov, celebrating the 1970 centenary of the leader’s birth, Lenin’s ephemeral voice became a permanent part of the Soviet landscape via its inscription on a gramophone record.<sup>2</sup>

There is a central delusion to Orlov’s topographical fantasy: the materiality of the record is deceptive. Though Orlov sees Lenin in the plastic grooves, his “Lenin” is shaped, prodded, poked, and contorted by format: the medium of the gramophone record. What Orlov sees as “real” begets fidelity; what he sees as a material body begets life. In the mythological imaginary of Soviet culture, Lenin’s voice is one icon in a larger history of monumentality—one that included statues, mountains, lakes, and rivers devoted to extolling Soviet power. Orlov’s description entombs Lenin—not in glass or marble, as his body was, but in the plastic grooves of the record. But perhaps this play between the permanence of medium and ephemerality of life should not surprise us: the two temporalities, Alexei Yurchak writes, coalesce in the death of the political figure. The Leninist system relied on as much, acting, he tells us, as “a distinct

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1. Vladimir Orlov, “Golos, vozvrashchennyi vekam,” *Pravda*, 12 August 1970, 3. “Патетическое видение, открывавшееся в поле зрения микроскопа, напоминало пейзаж. Видно было нечто вроде бурного озера, внезапно схваченного морозом, когда волны превратились в изваяния и грядами торосов избороздили застывшую гладь, породив скульптурный образ бура. Так он выглядит, мир застывших звуков, на грамофонной пластинке с ее бороздами, прочерченными звуковой волной. . . С благоговением я разглядываю бороздки звуковых дорожек, ибо знаю, что это след ленинского голоса.”

2. On the relationship between sight and sound—and, indeed, the historical practice of *seeing* sound: Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language, and the Senses—A Philosophical History* (New York, 1999).

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political cosmology that linked the doubling of a foundational [natural] body with sovereign perpetuity.”<sup>3</sup> The “real” Lenin may have died decades before Orlov’s foray into microscopy, but the symbolic leader survived. Lenin’s voice, disembodied though it was, still packed a semiotic and political punch.

Following Yurchak, this essay interrogates the political potential of Lenin’s voice—beyond merely the words he spoke—as it was mediated by both people and the confines of format over the course of his (after)life. I focus on four distinct points in the history of Lenin’s voice: the early 1920s, when the leader first set his voice to record; 1934–35, when engineers remastered these recordings for higher fidelity; 1964, at the launch of the popular monthly magazine *Krugozor*, which featured flexidisc recordings of Lenin alongside written commentary; and 1970, the centenary of his birth. Tracing the genealogy of Lenin’s voice—or, rather, the history of tinkering with it—reveals changing conceptions of power and mythology around the leader over the course of the Soviet century.

### Capturing Lenin’s Voice

Early sound recordings were key to Lenin’s rise to power and Bolshevik ideology. At a time when literacy rates around the country were meager among those outside the (former) aristocracy, sound recordings (as with film) were essential tools in bringing communist teachings to all corners of the vast country.<sup>4</sup> To spread his message, between 1919 and 1921, the leader recorded sixteen speeches in marathon sessions at the Aprelevskii Record Factory just outside Moscow; by the end of his life in 1924, he would record nearly forty.<sup>5</sup> Founded by the German businessman Gottlieb Moll and his son Johann in 1910, the Aprelevskii Factory’s recording equipment was nearly obsolete by the time Lenin approached the gramophone in 1919, since they had not imported much technology during the First World War. (Moll was arrested after the plant was nationalized under *Tsentropechat’*, the Central Agency for the Supply and Distribution of Printed Works, in 1918. He soon thereafter returned to Germany.)<sup>6</sup> According to recollections in an issue of *Tekhnika—molodezhi* from 1939, the studio was neither equipped with modern recording technologies nor was it constructed to be acoustically sound. Thus, when Lenin recorded his speeches (which could be no more than three minutes long, due to the constraints of the medium), he needed to stand extremely close to the front of the paper sound horn (not metal, like one might find in more advanced technology at the time). This then cut the recording into the disc. As a result, the recordings were distorted and often difficult to understand—exacerbated by inconsistencies in sound reproduction at the time—and had a so-called “tinny” quality to them.<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 1).

3. Alexei Yurchak, “Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty,” *Representations* 129, no. 1 (February 2015): 131–32.

4. For more on the role of film in expanding literacy in the early Soviet Union, see Birgit Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* (London, 2009), especially 38–74.

5. Gleb Skorokhodov, “Slushaia zanovo,” *Iunost’* 2 (1986): 4–12.

6. “Aprelevka Record Plant,” *Muzei sobraniie—Museum Collection*, <https://mus-col.com/en/the-authors/15847/> (accessed November 15, 2023).

7. P. [L.] Volkov-Lanit, “Golos Lenina na Plastiinke,” *Tekhnika—molodezhi* 1 (1939): 8–9. This article is attributed to P. Volkov-Lanit, but this seems to have been a typo. More



**Figure 1. Lenin at the Gramophone (Original image with text overlay in Volkov-Lanit, “Golos Lenina”; unaltered image here from Wikimedia Commons).**

Yet even at its tinniest, Lenin’s voice was of the utmost symbolic importance to the country. This was especially true in the years immediately following his death when the country recalibrated both its ideology and its leadership. And Lenin’s voice, it seemed, was the source of much of his power. Many had written about its hypnotic nature—the timbre, tenor, and diction—and connected its power explicitly with the success of the revolutionary project. As one writer reminisced, Lenin’s speaking voice felt like “some kind of omnipotent tentacular creature that grips you firmly, as if with pliers, and from whose embrace you are unable to break free: you must either succumb to it or resign yourself to defeat.”<sup>8</sup>

Linguists, writers, and technicians made efforts to analyze and reconstruct Lenin’s voice in the decade following his death. Books like the futurist writer Aleksandr Kruchenykh’s *Methods of Leninist Speech* went through multiple editions in the second half of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> To Kruchenykh, Lenin’s words and declamation—both message and medium—were of equal importance. Analyzing transcripts of Lenin’s speeches, Kruchenykh determined that Lenin’s voice was rooted in a “peasant meter,” a sort of “national in form, socialist in content” for the human voice that recalled the nationalism of Johann Gottfried von Herder’s nation-building work in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> One might compare this with the more refined

likely, the author was the famed journalist Leonid Volkov-Lanit.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Aleksandr Kruchenykh, *Priemy Leninskoi rechi*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Moscow, 1928). The second edition was published in 1927 and the first, under the title of *Iazik Lenina: odinnadtsat’ priemov Leninskoi rechi*, in 1925.

10. “National in form, socialist in content” is typically how Soviet nationalities policy in the 1920s and 30s was formulated. The idea—be it in language, art, or music—was that the medium could be unique to local Soviet culture (Uzbek, Tatar, etc.) but carry a universal socialist message. On Herder, voice, and the peasant ideal, see Johann Gottfried

“Old Moscow” dialect of Russian, which found its most prominent audience in the first half of the twentieth century with members of the intelligentsia and actors at the Moscow Art Theatre (MKhAT).<sup>11</sup> Kruchenykh distilled from Lenin’s speeches eleven basic principles, some based on the words being said, others on the nature of Lenin’s utterances. The first few were the most easily emulated: phrase repetition, avoiding foreign loan words, and the use of vernacular language. The end of the list, however, was more opaque: “resoluteness,” “activeness,” and “chewing overness” (*razzhevyvanie*).<sup>12</sup> Yet, crucially, for Kruchenykh and others writing on Lenin’s voice alongside him in a special issue of LEF, the object of analysis was overwhelmingly text. Kruchenykh remembered Lenin’s voice more clearly than any recording, and in it, he heard the origins of the Soviet nation.

“Hearing” Lenin’s voice through text on a page was one thing; listening to it—feeling it intimately—was another altogether. But through static, hiss, and skips, the Aprelevskii recordings showed their age. Thus in the early 1930s, engineers at the Central Laboratory at the Moscow House of Sound Recordings set about remastering Lenin’s speeches. Their task went hand-in-hand with a new documentary film, Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs about Lenin*, which featured footage of Lenin addressing eager crowds. Shortly after the film’s premiere in 1934, a team at the Moscow Gramophone Record Restoration Factory (Gramplastrest) was tasked with restoring all of Lenin’s speeches (not just those used in the film). This, too, was an important step in legitimizing Stalin’s power, since he allegedly shared all the “greatest qualities” of his predecessor’s voice.<sup>13</sup> Using Lenin’s “Address to the Red Army” as a case study, the group experimented for several years with a variety of restoration techniques like frequency manipulation, noise reduction, and volume changes. In 1937, they released an album with the most convincingly remastered speeches, including “Anti-Jewish Pogroms,” “The Middle Peasants,” and “What is Soviet Power?” It sold out almost instantly.<sup>14</sup>

The occasion gave engineers the opportunity to edit out missteps and inconsistencies in Lenin’s speech, demonstrating that the remastering enabled a broader reorientation of the Leninist myth. Their task was less about restoring the authentic Lenin than it was restoring the known, real “Lenin,” in necessary quotation marks. Their editorial changes to Lenin’s voice mapped the changing social demands of sound recordings over the course of more than a decade, and would continue to do so for the next half-century.

Take, for example, the case of *O rabote dlia transporta* (On the Work of Railways). In the original 1920 version, Lenin stumbled over his words in the third line of the speech (transcribed below): he says *no voiska* (but the troops) before correcting himself with *no voina* (but the war).

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Herder, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman (Oakland, 2017).

11. See a discussion of Russian dialects in G.O. Vinokur, *The Russian Language: A Brief History*, trans. Mary A. Forsyth, ed. James Forsyth (Cambridge, Eng., 1971), 10–20.

12. Kruchenykh, *Priemy Leninskoi Rechi*, 10–51.

13. Volkov-Lanit, “Golos Lenina.”

14. *Ibid.*

**Table 1. Lenin's (Mis)Speech in *Pravda* 18, (1928)**

<b>О работе для транспорта</b>	<b>On the Work of Railways</b>
<b>В. И. Ленин</b>	<b>V. I. Lenin</b>
Товарищи!	Comrades!
Великие победы Красной Армии избавили нас от нашествия Колчака, Юденича и почти покончили с Деникиным.	The great victories of the Red Army have saved us from the intervention of Kolchak, Yudenich and have almost finished off Denikin. <sup>15</sup>
Разбиты войска помещиков и капиталистов, которые хотели при помощи капиталистов всего мира восстановить своё всевластие в России.	The armies of landowners and capitalists who wanted to regain their limitless power in Russia with the help of the capitalists from abroad have been smashed.
Но войска, но война империалистская, затем война против контрреволюции страшно разорили и обессилили всю страну.	But the troops [Lenin corrects himself] but the imperialist war—and then the war against counter-revolution—have ruined and weakened the whole country terribly.

In the 1937 version, however, the misstep is removed. The change erases the error, of course, but it also changes the tenor, urgency, and impact of the entire sentence. Removing the mistaken “But the troops” and splicing in the corrective changes the stress and cadence of Lenin’s words. Though a change of mere milliseconds (Fig. 2), the hastened result adds additional energy to Lenin’s condemnation of the imperialists.

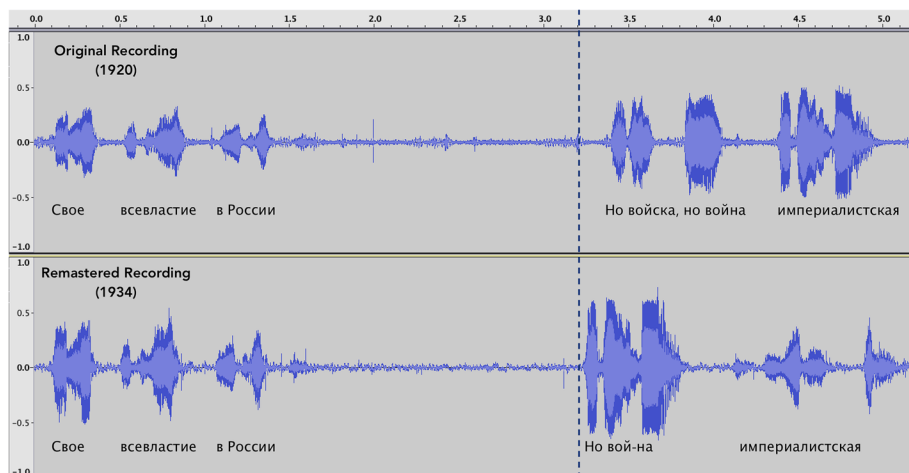
Though experienced by listeners as a purely sonic alteration, the editing process was rooted in visual manipulation: engineers cut, spliced, and diced Lenin’s voice. And the tactility of Lenin’s voice—the materiality of the sound format—extended beyond these recordings. Borrowing methods from sound films of the 1920s and technologies like Boris Skvortsov’s “talking paper” (which fed paper with electromagnetic ink between a photocell and powerful lamp to create sound), and Evgenii Sholpo’s “drawn sound” (an optical synthesizer that used a 35mm camera to read sound off cardboard disks), engineers hypothesized that they could transcribe recordings of Lenin’s speeches onto paper, which would allow for more careful retouching before copying them back onto a record.<sup>16</sup> In this visual format, they postulated, corrections to the voice could avoid the distortions inherent in sound recording, while syllables and stresses on words that were muddled in the original recordings could be recreated or intensified when necessary. They believed that in the future they could literally “revive” Lenin’s voice—*ozhivit’ golos*.<sup>17</sup>

15. Aleksandr Kolchak, Nikolai Yudenich, and Anton Denikin were prominent leaders in the Imperial Russian Army.

16. On Skvortsov, see B. Tseitlin, “Zagovorivshii nemoi,” *Smena* 17 (June 1931): 20–21; and G. Gil’gendorft, “Biblioteka govoriashchikh knig,” *Smena* 7 (July 1935): 14. On Sholpo, see V. Solev, “Risovannyi zvuk,” *Radiofront* 14 (July 1935): 44–47. Questions of viewing sound had long occupied Russian audio engineers: see an early example in “Mozhno-li videt’ zvuki,” *Nauka i zhizn’* 23 (12 June 1893): 356–57.

17. Volkov-Lanit, “Golos Lenina.”





**Figure 2. Waveform Comparison.**

But their desire to reorient oration into the minutiae of format did not stop there. Engineers ultimately hoped that these paper methods would allow them to create a “sound passport” (*zvukovoi pasport*) of Lenin’s voice. The sound passport would serve as a sort of virtual recreation of Lenin’s speaking apparatus, which in turn would allow them to create recordings of Lenin’s speeches that had never been made in his lifetime, to present his voice in translation throughout the Soviet republics, and to even enable the leader to comment on contemporary events.<sup>18</sup> They could, in the uncertainty of the late 1930s, resurrect the leader, even if only in sound.

### Lenin Resounds

Amidst the turmoil of the 1940s and the early post-war period, however, many of these restoration efforts stalled as factories directed their resources toward boosting morale and sending records to the front. It was not until the creation of Melodiya, the state recording apparatus, in 1964 under the Ministry of Culture that they would resume. That same year, the Ministry created a monthly magazine of sound recordings called *Krugozor* (Horizon). Though begun around the same time as Melodiya, the publication, which included flexi-disc records with curated playlists accompanied by explanatory literature and photographs, was explicitly didactic in nature.<sup>19</sup> Issues featured speeches from political leaders—both old and new, from around the world—classical and popular music, poetry readings, and even dramatized stories of open-heart surgery and other technological accomplishments. (One issue, published in 1969, was devoted in full to Aeroflot and the Soviet aviation industry.) Officials at the Ministry of Culture and, eventually, Melodiya (where it

18. *Ibid.*

19. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), fond (f.) 5446, Opis' (op.) 99, delo (d.) 1389, list (ll.) 67–69.

would be concentrated) deliberately geared the magazine to a younger reader- and listenership. And this audience was substantial: Melodiya pressed over 125 million records in 1968 alone, of which 23.4 million were for *Krugozor*. This suggests a subscription base of roughly 1.95 million individuals per month.<sup>20</sup> For many lay-listeners and aficionados, the monthly publication was the primary way they engaged with the Soviet recording industry and, especially for those outside of major urban centers, with Soviet music more broadly.

Lenin, of course, featuring prominently in the earliest issues of the magazine, was presented as a sort of “father figure” for the Soviet recording industry. An issue from the first year of publication, 1964, included a recording of *Chto takoe Sovetskaia vlast’?* (What Is Soviet Power?), which was presented as the “unaltered, honest words” of the leader. “Honest,” perhaps, depending on your definition, but certainly far from “unaltered”: taking a remastered version from the 1930s, engineers added reverb, echo, and applause to give the effect of a live speech taking place in a large, open (and well-attended) area (Table 2). The scene, while impressive, was a far cry from the actual original recording, made in a small, solitary, and ill-equipped studio. But through this creative sound design, Lenin’s voice resounded—and re-sounded—to thousands of attentive, eager socialists, be they imagined by engineers or listening on record players at home around the country. Audio technology allowed engineers to both reimagine and reinvigorate the early Soviet period—to resurrect Lenin through sound.

At the centenary of Lenin’s birth, however, when *Krugozor* released an entire issue dedicated to the leader, reverb and echo were nowhere to be found. Why, in 1970, had engineers decided to present Lenin without commentary? Even the opening of the issue, the 1937 version of “What Is Soviet Power?” was neither announced by a host nor contextualized in the written magazine companion. In fact, the issue featured little context specific to the tracks at all. After all, Lenin’s voice was Soviet power, and after a hundred years of historicizing the man’s origins, there was a certain truth, perhaps, in hearing its age—static, hiss, and all. Through these audio foibles—a sort of sonic carbon dating—listeners could hear the endurance of Lenin’s voice—and thereby the Soviet project. At the apex of Leniniana, when cultural actors across the Soviet Union were called upon to celebrate the enduring nature of their founding father, it seems that the editors of *Krugozor* thought that Lenin could speak for himself.<sup>21</sup> In the mythology of the Soviet nation, Lenin’s voice was inevitable. It was always there, crackles and all.

## Formaldehyde and Vinyl

What might it have meant, then, to hear Lenin in this way? Death and sound recording, as Jonathan Sterne has pointed out, have long been linked.<sup>22</sup> And

20. GARF, f. 5446, op. 99, d. 1390, ll. 70–75.

21. On various celebrations and commemorations of Lenin in 1970, see GARF f. 9527, op. 1, d. 2593.

22. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003), 290.

**Table 2. Annotated opening of Lenin's  
"What Is Soviet Power?" in *Krugozor 9* (1964)**

<p>Announcer: На трибуне—Ленин.</p> <p>Он стоял, держась за края трибуны, обводя прищуренными глазами аудиторию и ждал, по-видимому не замечая нараставшую овацию.</p> <p>Невысокая коренастая фигура с большой, лысой и выпуклой, крепко посаженной головой.</p> <p>Простой, любимый и уважаемый так, как быть может, любили и уважали немногих вождей в истории.</p> <p>Необыкновенный народный вождь, вождь исключительно благодаря своему интеллекту, чуждый какой бы то ни было рисовки, не поддающийся настроениям, твердый, непреклонный, без эффектных пристрастий, но обладающий могучим умением раскрыть сложнейшие идеи в самых простых словах.</p> <p>Lenin: Что такое Советская власть? В чём заключается сущность этой новой власти, которой не хотят или не могут понять ещё в большинстве стран?</p>	<p>Sound Effects: <i>(Add reverb to announcer)</i></p> <p>[Applause] <i>(applause fades to about 50%)</i></p> <p><i>(applause fades to background)</i></p> <p><i>(Applause fades completely)</i></p> <p><i>(Add reverb and echo)</i></p>	<p>Announcer: Lenin is at the podium.</p> <p>He stood, holding onto the edge of the podium, scanning the audience with his dark eyes, apparently not noticing the standing ovation.</p> <p>He's a short, stocky figure with a big, bald, prominent and strong head.</p> <p>He is as simple, loved, and respected—as loved and respected as any leader in history could possibly be.</p> <p>He's an unusual people's leader, an exceptional leader thanks to his intellect, immune from any sort of showing off, not giving into moodiness, firm and uncompromising without spectacle—but a leader who has a powerful ability to describe the most complex ideas through the simplest of words.</p> <p>Lenin: What is Soviet power? What is the essence of this new power people in most countries still either will not or cannot understand?</p>
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yet, while our instinct might be to assume that recordings are merely preservations of the dead—of corpses long buried or, in Lenin's case, entombed in glass—to do so is shortsighted. Just as death was crucial in establishing the cultural significance of sound recording, so too did sound recording provide



listeners the opportunity to “resurrect” Lenin after death. In this way, the remastering—and reviving—process mirrored that of Lenin’s body more broadly, which, Yurchak tells us, preserved the body’s “dynamic form and not its biological flesh.”<sup>23</sup> The substance, quite literally, was less important—less essential in the literal sense—than the form: Leninism over Lenin. Lenin’s preservation was thus equal parts aesthetic performance as it was a cultural project: one in which decomposition was forestalled through equal parts formaldehyde and vinyl. To preserve his voice was to preserve the man—and his ideas—himself.

But then again, Lenin’s voice was not really about Lenin at all. It was about what the people—in the Ministry of Culture, in Melodiya, in the recording studio, and in the vast reaches of the Soviet empire—wanted Lenin to sound like. At the outset, his recordings served a purpose: as one man, he could only travel so far and to so many places to spread socialist ideology. But after his death, his voice, like his body, was transfigured according to the desires, whims, and demands of those tasked with his preservation. The decisions of editors and bureaucrats alike who participated in the remastering project imposed their own expectations of what the leader should sound like: loud, clear, forceful, and, in the 1964 case, widely adored by the masses. A genealogy of tinkering with Lenin’s voice, then, tells us more about what people then wanted him to sound like than it does of the man itself.

Sound fidelity and recording practices make legible networks that extend beyond the audible. Sonic practices are entangled with social practices, and constructed categories like fidelity and liveness both reflect and engage with the ethical values of a group.<sup>24</sup> As Eliot Bates writes, “Recording work—musical-technological work—is done in relation to and within broader social networks.”<sup>25</sup> Thus inquiry into audio perception across sound categories—beyond melody and harmony and into quality—allows for the study of sonic subjectivities across institutional divides.<sup>26</sup> The ways in which ordinary people experienced sound—both as an audible object and as a socio-cultural repository of meaning—were facilitated by recording media. In our endeavor to “listen” to Soviet history, hearing these media as both social gatherings and resonant objects is crucial. In this way, nearly one hundred years after Lenin’s death, we, too, participate in the process of preservation—and resurrection.

GABRIELLE CORNISH is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where her research broadly considers music and everyday life in the Soviet Union. Her monograph-in-progress, *Socialist Noise*:

23. Yurchak, “Bodies of Lenin,” 118.

24. On this, see Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), especially 1–24.

25. Eliot Bates, *Digital Tradition: Arrangement and Labor in Istanbul’s Recording Studio Culture* (New York, 2016), 12.

26. As Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett write, “our goal is to continue developing critical modes of inquiry that make room for multiple and potentially divergent acoustic subjectivities and technologies”: Théberge, Devine, and Everett, eds., *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound* (New York, 2015), 28.

*Sound and Soviet Identity after Stalin*, traces the intersections between music, technology, and the politics of socialist modernity during the Cold War. Her writing has been published in the *Journal of Musicology* and the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, as well as *Slate*, the *Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.