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Underwater Music: Tuning Composition to the Sounds of Science

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Author: Helmreich, Stefan**Citable URI:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/114601>**Department:** Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Department of Humanities; Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Anthropology Program**Publisher:** Oxford University Press**Date Issued:** 2011-12**Abstract:**

This article attempts to audit underwater music. There are two primary venues for underwater music: field settings of the ocean and lab settings of swimming pools. For the field tradition, underwater music emerges from the noise of the Cold War, revealing the songs of whales and harboring evidence of global warming, of sea creatures under stress, etc. For the lab tradition, the pool is a stage to realize the aesthetic of Cagean modernism. It becomes a space to play with meanings of water. While the field setting is “wild” and entangled with nonhuman sounds and the lab setting is more social, cultural, or anthropocentric, artists working in both settings seek to evoke an “immersive” experience. In both settings the transductive properties of water must be managed to invoke water as a material accomplice in this enterprise, this aim of soaking listeners in the sublime surround of sound submerged.

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In planning Wild Music: Sounds & Songs of Life, the exhibition team—an unusual partnership among ASTC, the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), and the Music Research Institute at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro—decided to approach sound from an alternative perspective. It was important to the Wild Music team that an exhibition about the deep roots and universality of music be broadly accessible and offer a rich and positive sonic experience. As it moves to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in June, we are just beginning to explore the possibilities for reaching new audiences through its rich sound experiences and themes. Evaluation suggests some fine-tuning that will help improve the visitor experience, but in