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Data music album *Please Hold*: A sonic account of higher education during and after Covid-19

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Abstract

This article presents the data-based spoken word music album *Please Hold*. The album is the outcome of a research project which investigates experiences of higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lyrics stem directly from the research data that I collected through interviews with students and academics at the University of Cambridge. With this album I introduce data music as a new format for research communication that is uniquely capable of conveying affective understanding and embodied knowing. The interpretation of research data is never finished or final when working with data music, since the process of meaning-making continues with each listener. In this article, I discuss my creative process and expand on the content and form of each of the four tracks. As such, I frame and situate the album as a sonic account of the pandemic university and of learning and teaching online during Covid-19.

Keywords

Data music, spoken word poetry, Covid-19, higher education, sonic methodology

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Introduction

Hold off. Hold back. Hold on.

Hold your feelings in

As you hold the fort down.

Hold up your head,

Hold up your hopes,

Hold yourself tightly, together.

But most of all, please, just hold.

Stay on the line and wait

While we hold out this pandemic.

During this time of Covid-19, many people's lives have been put on hold. This is certainly the case for students and academics, for whom their laptops have become their classrooms, their Zoom rooms their world. What do they miss? What do they feel? What do they hope for, and what do they fear for the future of the university after Covid-19? (Eringfeld, 2021a). These are the questions that are central to the research project that I undertook at the University of Cambridge in the spring of 2020, when the UK first went into lockdown. The results of this research are presented in the form of a spoken word music album titled *Please Hold*. The lyrics of each track consist entirely out of data fragments taken from research interviews that I conducted with students and academic staff at the Faculty of Education shortly after all educational activities had been moved online.

I was a student myself undertaking a master's degree in Education at Cambridge when the pandemic also put my life – and my initial research plans - on hold. To document the development of the Covid-19 crisis and its impact on higher education (HE) in real time, I started a weekly podcast in which I interviewed students and academics about their experiences with online learning and teaching, as well as their utopian and dystopian visions for the future of the university after Covid-19. I used podcast fragments from these *Cambridge Quaranchats* episodes in additional anonymized research interviews to elicit responses from participants. I then used the resulting data to compile data poems with. Finally, I turned the poems into spoken word performances and composed original arrangements to accompany the text. As such, the album represents a new format for communicating research results. I call this method data music.

The main purpose of this article is to discuss and situate *Please Hold* as a sonic account of the university during Covid-19. To do so, I firstly describe my use of sonic research and storytelling methods, including their ethics, for this project in more detail. Then I discuss the content, form and creative production process of each of the four tracks on the

album: *I Miss*, *Please Hold*, *Not Really Real* and *More Human*. I do this in the short written reflections that accompany each of the four tracks, which are included in this article as YouTube videos.[1] In my conclusion, I tie some key themes together and emphasize that in the case of this data music format of research communication, the interpretation of the research data is never completed; the process of meaning-making continues with each listener.

My deliberate intent with this article is to put the album tracks themselves centre-stage, thereby putting the sonic experience of this work centre-stage. This means that I explicitly privilege the spoken words in this article over the written words that form part of it. To engage with my work in the richest and fullest way possible then, I warmly invite you to privilege listening over reading.[2]

Sonic methodology

Data collection: Podcasting and interviewing with podcast elicitation

My methodology for this project has been driven by my strong interest in developing new creative methods for the use of sound in qualitative research. This interest in sound derived directly from the relentless screen fatigue I experienced after shifting to online education at the start of the pandemic. The forced cancellation of all in-person teaching, combined with explicit instructions to discontinue fieldwork and move all research activities online, led me to look for a digital alternative to remain in touch with peers and professors without causing further eye strain. Podcasting became my first sonic discovery in search of a novel Covid-proof methodology.

In April 2020, I started the podcast *Cambridge Quaranchats* (Eringfeld, 2020a). Every week, I had a 'quarantine chat' with a different guest speaker from the Cambridge University community to talk about the ways in which their lives, studies and work had been impacted by the pandemic. Using the podcast as an outward-facing public platform for communal reflection, I documented the hopes and fears that students and academics held for the future of the university after Covid-19, all while the crisis developed in real time (Eringfeld, 2021b). The podcast grew quickly as more listeners from inside and outside the University starting tuning in, illustrating the potential for podcasts to serve as sonic platforms for connection, dialogue and interaction.

To turn podcasting into a novel research methodology, I developed a new elicitation technique that I call 'podcast elicitation'. This technique uses fragments from podcasts to elicit rich responses from research participants in interview settings or focus groups. Through a combination of social media posting and the snowballing approach, I gathered a total of ten research participants that agreed to do a private anonymized interview with me. All participants came from the Faculty of Education: two undergraduate students, four postgraduate students, and four academic staff members. I used fragments from various *Cambridge Quaranchats* episodes and edited these into a cohesive sonic elicitation device which I sent out to this group of participants in advance of their individual online videocall interviews. The participants listened to this compilation episode, took notes on

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[1] In the comments section below each YouTube video (follow the website links to access the comments) you will find the lyrics in written format as well.

[2] For an optimal listening experience, I recommend the use of headphones. This will allow for a more intimate, full-body and 'physical' listening experience, which benefits the affective understanding and embodied knowing conveyed by the data music.

the thoughts and feelings that arose for them, and brought these notes to the interview with me. As such, I used podcast fragments to provoke affective responses from the participants about their own experiences with online education and their ideas about utopian as well as dystopian visions for the post-pandemic university (Eringfeld, 2020b).

The research interviews were semi-structured in form, with the podcast fragments serving as entry points into the interview topics. I organized the interviews according to a temporal framework: in the first stage, I asked participants to share about their experiences of learning and teaching at the Faculty of Education before Covid-19. In the second stage, participants shared about their current HE experiences inside the 'pandemic university'. This included extensive discussions – again sparked by podcast fragments – on advantages and disadvantages of online education. The third stage focused on reimagining the future of the post-Covid university and involved participants describing dystopian and utopian visions for what that could look like.[3] In addition, I asked participants to talk about podcast fragments that had stood out to them, or that they had strongly agreed or disagreed with. I also asked whether they had observed any significant gaps – themes left unaddressed on the podcast – that they wanted to add.

The ethics of working with podcasting as a research method proved an interesting question to consider. As podcasting is a relatively new medium, the technique has remained largely absent from research contexts and thus from ethical guidelines on how to use podcasting as a method. With regards to the creation of *Cambridge Quaranchats*, I clarified to podcast guests in advance that the episodes would be published on open-access platforms in the public domain without anonymity, as such ensuring informed consent. With regards to the private research interview participants, I made use of consent forms to document that the interviews would be fully anonymized, safely stored and only accessible to me as researcher. With the podcasts out in the public domain, I could use this material for the creation of the podcast elicitation compilation. During the research interviews, podcast fragments were used as *starting points* for conversation, yet I made clear to participants that their own views and reflections remained central to the interview, including those that may be disconnected from the podcast.

Data analysis and communication: Poetry and data music

After conducting the research interviews, I transcribed the recordings and coded and analysed the resulting data. For the coding process, I followed the core principles of the constructivist approach to Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2013). To maintain the emotions and affective expressions that emerged in the interviews I decided to process the data by writing research poems. These are also called data poems and refer to poems that consist of qualitative data fragments (see, for instance, Faulkner, 2009; Janesick, 2016). Based on the key themes that had emerged from multiple rounds of coding, I selected text fragments that expressed these themes in evocative and meaningful ways. I then used these fragments to compose multivocal data poems – multivocal because they each contain a mix of student and academic voices rather than the voice of one single participant – and formed them into a collection of four poems in total.

Each individual poem is focused on a different set of themes that emerged from the data; all together, they tell a larger story about nostalgia for the pre-Covid past, disorientation

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[3] The setup of these interviews according to this temporal past-present-future framework is mirrored within the structure of the music album *Please Hold*: the first track is about the past, the second about the present, the third about dystopian futures and the fourth about utopian futures.

in the pandemic present, and fears and hopes for the post-Covid future. As a final step, I turned the poems into spoken word performances and recorded these. I wrote musical arrangements for each of the performances and electronically produced the music to accompany the text. By doing so, I returned to the original medium of speech to communicate the results of the research. This final step closed the circle from podcasting to data poetry to what I call data music.[4] A unique benefit of this approach for researchers is the ability to convey both verbal and non-verbal information vocalized by research participants, including the diverse sounds of emotions, the loudness of thoughts, the silence of doubts, and the musical ways in which affective understanding resonates in the bodies of both speakers and listeners.

The album *Please Hold* can therefore be described as the data-driven outcome of an interconnected cycle of spoken word practices. Every lyric is derived directly from the data I collected; every sentence you hear is a quotation from a student or an academic that I interviewed. Each track consists of a diversity of voices, from undergraduates to senior academics, relating their experiences, hopes and fears. I use my own physical voice here as researcher-poet-musician to literally vocalize the voices of the participants I interviewed. In addition, as participants responded to the podcast speakers they listened to in advance of the interviews, the lyrics also echo the conversations held on the *Cambridge Quaranchats* podcast. This means that whereas on the first impression you are listening to a single voice performing, a deeper listening will reveal a large choir of voices communicating their hopes and fears through an intricate web of intertextual connections between the podcast, the research interviews and these album tracks/data poems.

The composition of each of the four tracks was again heavily informed by the data. Whilst producing the music, I listened back to the interview recordings to pay close attention to the ways in which participants spoke about their experiences and visions. I listened for the silences, the laughs, the hesitations, the searching for words, the stuttering, the sighs of despair, the raised voices, the muted ones, and the words that received most emphasis or repetition. This data informed my interpretation of the data poems and through this process of musical sense-making, my principal aim was to retain and transmit the affect, emotional understanding and sense of embodiment that was so audibly present in the data I had collected.[5]

When considering the ethics of data music as a method of data sense-making and of communicating research results, it is key to consider how the voices of research participants are represented in the final sonic product. The positionality of the researcher, and the artistic liberty she or he takes to compose and perform data music, need to be carefully taken into account. To do so, throughout the creative process I continually asked myself the following questions: does my voice as interpreter-performer convey the voices of the students and academics I'm quoting in a way that *echoes* their

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[4] Put differently, the format for communicating my final research results mirrors the methods I used to collect the data to begin with; that is, through spoken word practices.

[5] As you will hear when listening to the tracks, embodiment – or rather the phenomenological experience of disembodiment that for many followed the shift away from physical in-person education – is a major theme that runs throughout the data music album. How could I as researcher possibly convey this finding by merely writing it down, when my aim is ultimately to make the reader/listener affectively understand the importance of the body in learning and teaching practices *by feeling it in their own body*?

original expressions? Do the emotion and intensity with which I speak and sing *resonate* with what I heard when listening back to the interviews? An ethical approach to data music must be informed by integrity first and foremost. With regards to the creation of *Please Hold* then, I kept integrity close at heart through this process of continuous self-questioning combined with repeated sessions of critical close-listening.[6] The intention to represent the words of research participants as meaningfully as possible must be carefully calibrated alongside the aim to communicate the findings as *eff*ectively and *aff*ectively as possible to the listening audience.[7]

In sum then, by using music as a vehicle for research communication I intentionally seek to impart the affective and embodied knowing that stands central to this research project and is indispensable when attempting to comprehend its data. Having *written* that, the time has finally come let the research *speak* itself.

Discussion: *Please Hold* album (Spotify)

1. I Miss
[YouTube video 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAxkcI2Sh7Q&ab_channel=SimoneEringfeld]

Thinking back of higher education before the pandemic, what do you miss? What do you long back for, what are the elements of pre-Covid life you cannot wait to return to? I asked this question to every student and every academic that I interviewed. The interviews took place in the spring of 2020, several months after all educational and research activities had been moved online. I collected, coded and analysed their responses to this question, seeking to understand what people felt most nostalgic for, what had been lost during to the shift to distance education, what the most prominent absences were that people experienced whilst learning or teaching online. The poem *I Miss* is a collage of quotes that lists the nostalgic longings expressed by my interviewees.

When listening to the lyrics, we hear respondents mention experiences like "being in a classroom", "feeling part of an academic community", "hearing people talking in the background", and the "in-between study breaks with peers". These are examples of a larger overarching theme that emerges from this poem, which is the sensed lack of togetherness in online education. The togetherness longed for here points to the phenomenological experience of what I refer to as *socio-physical togetherness*, that is, being together with others in (real) time and (physical) space. The missing of others around you – of peers, of colleagues, of that sense of community and belonging – is expressed as a visceral, sensorial and ambient experience. Academic work in essence tends to be a soloistic undertaking that involves much time spent alone in libraries or in

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[6] Much like close-reading, close-listening focuses on uncovering nuances of meaning and on reading, or listening, between the lines.

[7] This process is an inherently imperfect one which nevertheless leads to very evocative and truthful ways of conveying embodied understanding, in some cases arguably even more so than when data is stripped off its emotional and corporeal layers in academic writing where (re)presentation of data is more distanced or 'cleansed'. In this way, data music builds further on constructivist notions of data analysis (as noted by Charmaz, 2013) by acknowledging that the researcher is never objective, removed from the data or 'neutral' but always interpreting the data through their own individualized lenses and frameworks.

front of screens; by taking away the in-between moments of socialisation, such as lecture breaks and corridor encounters, what is left is a sense of isolation and loneliness.

This loss of 'the social' in education has a profoundly physical dimension: while it is still possible – socially speaking – to remotely be together in virtual spaces, participants pointed out that this is not the same as being together with others in one shared physical space. As the poem concludes, it is about "that sense of somebody else, not even through touch but by occupying the same physical space", that matters. What is felt to be missing is a sense of embodied togetherness. A togetherness of people in person. A togetherness in time and space. A togetherness in *presence*.

In my musical interpretation of this poem, I focused on creating a nostalgic mood in line with the theme addressed. This track is the only a cappella song of the album, meaning there are no instruments other than voice. It is one of the most closely harmonized songs, which helps to create a reflective, intimate sonic experience. I recorded the spoken word with minimal distance from the microphone to strengthen a sense of proximity – to make my voice sound as if I were standing right next to listener, speaking straight into their ears. When you listen closely, you can even hear my breath in several places. This contrast between the lyrics addressing the lack of physical togetherness and the rendering of this text in which I focused on physical closeness and sonic intimacy, is designed to strengthen the poem's message.

2. Please Hold
[YouTube video 2:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpce1e6ab6g&t=160s&ab_channel=SimoneEringfeld]

The title track of the album describes the many awkward, strange and alienating experiences of online education that students and academics shared with me during interviews. The poem opens with a disorienting jumble of voices talking over and interrupting each other to share thoughts and reminders about conferences, deadlines, shoes on sale and Facebook friend requests. This opening represents an experience many can relate to during this time of online, digital existence: a chaos of thoughts, to-do list items, app notifications, social media noise and online chat streams. The sounds of keyboard-typing and incoming Skype call ringtones trigger a sense of anxiety that for many is inseparably associated with teaching and studying online.

This track is where I have taken the most artistic liberty to engage with the data through storytelling. It is the only track with a distinct 'narrator's voice' which directly addresses the listener (or whoever started the video call) by asking them the all too familiar question "can you hear me?" before proceeding to explain why she has had such a chaotic morning. This is where we enter a rushed, high-paced, anxiety-inducing musical mood as the lyrics tell us about digital distractions, dissonance, screen time records and the stress of having "a thousand tabs open of things I'm supposed to read and emails stacking up". The gloomy vision of education being "just another video to watch, like the YouTube and Netflix we already consume" strikes a personal chord for many. But then the narrator points out that perhaps the most distressing of all is the harsh realisation that at the end of the day, "I'm just sitting in a room, alone". A hollow echoing silence follows. The track continues to describe experiences of disconnection, of unstable Wi-Fi throwing you out of the Zoom room, and of cameras and mics switched off, hinting at the anonymity of education online.

This storytelling gets interrupted itself and the narrator gets thrown out of her poetic cadence when the connection suddenly drops. The voice gets frozen, cut off, and comes back only to fall away again, as the sound gradually gets completely distorted. A male computerized voice announces: "Oops, looks like something went wrong. Due to poor connection, this audio has been disrupted. Please hold, as we try to get you back into the poem". This is the fragment that gave both the track and the album its title. We have all experienced interrupted video calls, frozen faces, stumbling voices. We have all had our patience tested, not just during online meetings but during the entire pandemic which has put many lives 'on hold' until further notice.

Finally, the connection picks back up and we resume the story unfolding. We hear the voice explain how terrified she felt after teaching on Zoom for eight hours straight on a single day. She compares herself to Max Headroom, a British artificial intelligence character from the '80s known for his lagging glitches and electronically altered voice. This fragment comes from an interview with a faculty academic who explained Max Headroom to me as a "talking head in a television box", similar to how he felt himself after a full day of staring at his own face stuck in a little Zoom box, which displayed a frozen, distorted and delayed version of himself. That phenomenologically disorienting experience of feeling bodilessly trapped in a digital two-dimensional box, points to the larger theme of disembodiment that runs throughout *Please Hold*.

My performance of this data poem is arguably the most 'dramatic' or theatrical of the four tracks. During interviews, participants shared their experiences with a variety of emotions connected to them. I sought to communicate this mix of feelings ranging from humour and self-mockery to panic and despair by using sound effects in the production of the track and by editing in sound snippets from the original 'Max Headroom' and beeps of disconnected phone lines, amongst others. The fragmentation, the storytelling, the direct addressing of the listener and the disruption happening within the track all add to a truly immersive experience for the listener, whereby the performance of the data poem itself *embodies* the message about *dis/embodiment* as conveyed by the lyrics.

3. Not Really Real
[YouTube video 3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMXmw0gVuRE&ab_channel=SimoneEringfeld]

The track *Not Really Real* bundles responses from research participants to my question about what they fear the most for the future of the university after Covid-19. The track opens with the question "You're asking about my perfect dystopian university?", which is indeed a question I asked during research interviews and which one of the interviewees repeated out loud. What follows are descriptions of nightmarish visions for the future, such as a fully online university without any physical campus, universities becoming 'placeless' and turning into files stored on desktops instead of being brick-and-mortar locations. Other dystopian visions include those of virtual reality taking over, of education being reduced to a simulation of reality and of students and professors turning into 'Zoom zombies' (Hunsinger, 2020).

Such experiences were described by one participant as 'hellish', a striking term which I focused on for the first chorus of the song. The track then discusses what might happen "when learning is no longer a physical thing", including the loss of the body in educational settings and therefore the loss of knowledge obtained through our body. This

forms a bleak contrast with real life interaction with people in person, which another participant coincidentally described as 'holy'. This became the term that I emphasized in the second chorus. Again, we return to the importance of socio-physical togetherness here, as the data poem goes on to wonder that without this, education would feel like it is "not really real but really, reality is all in our heads anyway". Learning is a physical and social practice, as the lyrics state, it is "a way of Being-in-the-World". While it is unclear if the participant who uttered "being in the world" meant this as a reference to the Heideggerian concept of 'Being-in-the-World' (Heidegger, 1996), in the written versions of the poems I use the latter spelling to link back to the onto-epistemological and existential dimensions connected to this concept, which I then gave emphasis in the third chorus.

Finally, in opposition to education being a 'Real World' affair, a last dystopian vision highlighted in this track is one where physical access to universities becomes an exclusive right reserved for a demographic elite, thereby creating further inequality. The closing chorus sings 'not really real', summarizing the core emerging theme of the dystopian university becoming an 'un-real reality', a simulation of the *real deal*, with all its consequences.

This track is the one I produced last. This might be audible as it is the most heavily laboured production and possibly the most musical one as well. I structured the song around the four sung choruses of 'hellish', 'holy', 'Being-in-the-World' and 'not really real', with spoken word verses in between. The song has an eerie opening part filled with spooky-sounding bells and suspension-building waves of high-pitched synthesizer sounds before the voice comes in to paint a horrifying picture of the dystopian university. Then the beat drops, and from that point onwards the song is carried by a steady beat combined with a host of instruments which I used to create the groove. I also used a range of horror sound effects, such as monster-like filters on my voice and sounds of squeaky floors and slamming doors. I pretended to be a 'Zoom zombie' by recording myself performing whispery and raspy breathing, gasps, pants, and groans into the microphone. You can hear these sounds edited into the 'hellish' chorus. The contrast with the 'holy' chorus that follows could not be any bigger, since I arranged this as a multi-tonal choir performing a rather delightful variation of the melody.

4. More Human

[YouTube video 4: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pffOIcxZ6y4&ab_channel=SimoneEringfeld]

The fourth and final track presents data fragments that deal with the question of what a hopeful utopian university after Covid-19 may look like. This track is the most political one and has been said by some listeners to sound like a manifesto. The song is structured around a sung chorus which repeats the line: "the point of education is to make you more human". This is a quote from a student who reflected on education as a humanizing project, which should not aim to train you for a capitalistic labour market but rather aspire to turn people into better human beings. The lyrics state opinions from students and academics who spoke about what the ultimate purpose of higher education *should* be and paints a picture of a university that no longer serves 'global elites' only, a university that no longer revolves around consumerism and status, a higher education system that is no longer focused on promoting materialistic 'happiness' but rather one

that seeks to 'frustrate' students by being challenging, thought-provoking and stimulating.

The data poem also addresses the system's attachments to "measuring things like learning outcomes, profitability and progress", while ironically pointing out that it would be impossible to measure someone's humanity, as such implying that universities could never adopt humanisation as a learning goal. The idea of humanness is the central theme throughout this song, with other fragments framing this crisis as being about the valuation, depth and experience of human life and the question of "who gets to count as being human". Besides capitalism and neo-liberalism, whiteness, racism and patriarchal structures are also critiqued here, with one participant pointing out that it is mostly "(surprise!) white guys" who are considered the most human, given that they are "on the winning side of profit seeking". The track suggests that the "abolition of whiteness as a thing" will need to be part of any utopian future.

Further along, the poem asks, "how to organize education with this utopia in mind?". Some suggested solutions include an increased focus on alternative (and alter/*native*) knowledges, enhanced understanding of what it means to be a bodily being and the development of a new vocabulary with which to construct, conceptualize and make sense of this new utopian future in which the meaning of 'human being' is redefined along anti-racist and counter-capitalist lines. The track concludes with the assertion that perhaps what this requires is for current university institutions to 'crumble'.

In terms of my musical interpretation of this data poem, I combined a sung chorus with spoken word verses. The beats that I produced for this song have a lo fi quality to them and sound relatively relaxed and laidback, which produces a strong contrast with the powerfully political lyrics. There are a lot less effects or staged interruptions and relatively few changes happening in the musical arrangement. The simplicity of the performance balances out the complexity of the text and allows the listener to focus on what is being said, and to understand *the point* that this track is trying to make. To that end, the catchy chorus literally repeats that point over and over again.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented my spoken word music album *Please Hold* as a new way of making sense of research data and of communicating its results. The album is fully data-based, in the sense that all the lyrics come straight from my qualitative dataset: each track consists of quotations from Cambridge students and academics who participated in my research through anonymized interviews. After summarizing my use of sonic research methods for this project, including its novel podcast methodology, I explained the creative process behind the data poems and their spoken word performances. I argued that the medium of spoken word music is uniquely capable of conveying the affective understanding and embodied knowing that are embedded in the data that I collected about hopes and fears for the future of higher education post-Covid-19.

I then moved into a detailed discussion of each of the four tracks: *I Miss*, *Please Hold*, *Not Really Real* and *More Human*. I highlighted the key themes that emerge from the lyrics of the tracks. Respectively, these include: the nostalgic longing for a return to education as an experience of socio-physical togetherness; the sense of disconnect, disruption, disembodiment and alienation that are connected to teaching and learning online; the fear of a dystopian university taken over by virtual reality, leading to education being

reduced to a simulation of the real world; and finally, the hope for a more humanizing education system and a utopian university that is defined along anti-racial and non-capitalist lines.

In the discussions of each track, I also shared details about the creative decisions that informed my musical interpretations of the data poems. By doing so, I hope to have given some pointers to help listeners understand the album as a research output and to help frame *Please Hold* as a sonic account of online learning and teaching at the university during Covid-19. The fascinating thing about musical renderings of research insights is that the process of data interpretation is never finished. The meaningfulness of this data music album is not just inscribed by me as researcher-performer and by the participants whose words are featured in the lyrics, but also by the listener who interprets and makes sense of the different tracks through their own lenses of experiences, feelings, thoughts, hopes and fears. In that regard, the co-constructed meaning of this research output will always continue to change, shift and expand.

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