Researchers at the University of Brighton are challenging the ways we engage with sound and reflect on the value of music in our lives. The impact can be heard across a wide range of scholarly activities, from the use of sound to empower marginalised communities, to the exhibition of sound in gallery spaces, to the understanding of cosmological theories.

"Audiences act as co-producers in the making and understanding of an artwork," said Conall Gleeson, researcher in performance, sound and music. "They perform an active role in constructing the experience of listening and making sound."

He continued, "The mobility of audiences, within the context of a gallery, offers the contemporary sound artist a range of challenges that differ from that of the concert hall composer. Historically, music for seated listeners focused on the temporal sequence of sound. The presentation of sound in galleries, however, tends to allow for the free and open movement of sound and the flexible movement of audiences. Audiences in turn orientate their experience of artworks according to their interests and preferences."

The idea of an open and fluid co-production of experience and meaning allows for a strong and purposeful exchange of ideas, histories and cultures between audiences, artist and artwork.

Towards new ways of listening

When a vacuum, there is no sound. When full of air, the sound is at its loudest. The work recontextualises the intellectual heritage of the seventeenth-century scientific enlightenment, and aestheticises the scientific methodologies, apparatus and laws that stem from this period.

Constantly innovative in its use of technologies, both traditional and emerging, and far-reaching in its materials and processes, Hooker’s work simultaneously embraces and questions new scientific and artistic knowledge, not for its own sake alone, but primarily to communicate his working of this material with an audience.

Dr Mikhail Karikis explores the experience of communities through the sounds and music that inhabit their everyday lives. He recently worked with the last generation of female sea-workers living on the South Korean island of Jeju. Drawing upon the sounds of breath and the songs of their work Dr Karikis developed an installation that framed the lives and industry of the sea-workers within the context of questions concerning the anthropological and the global economy.

Professor of Sculpture, Charlie Hooker, develops installations, audio-works and sculptures that produce sound from invisible elements of the natural world, creating works such as Timeline, an audio installation triggered by cosmic ray activity. Through recent links with the Brighton Centre for Regenerative Medicine, he is now creating a new interactive immersive audio-visual environment triggered ‘live’ by cell and tissue growth as it develops in petri dishes in a controlled laboratory environment.

Gleeson’s own work questions the relationship between composer, performer and audience through experimental practice, whilst encouraging a more mindful understanding of the way sound influences our emotional and intellectual lives.

He has utilised the apparatus of the seventeenth science laboratory to make music. His Bell Jar Orchestra consists of a series of bell jars; inside of which, is an automated hammer that repeatedly strikes a small bell. The volume of sound is controlled not by the how hard the hammer strikes the bell, but by varying the air pressure inside of each bell jar.