

# *Sound is in the Air*

O Som está no Ar

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**Abstract:** *This essay discusses the curation of atmospheres in the Live Arts, proposing that the curatorial act must extend to the auditory experience and the viewer's hearing. Grounded in contemporary sound studies, the text explores how listening dictates the perception and production of art within shared spaces. It examines the sensorial, relational, and socio-political dimensions of collective listening as a critical tool. To ground these theoretical reflections, I analyze a performance held at the Coimbra Botanical Garden. The study concludes by offering curatorial strategies that strengthen the dialogue between artists and audiences in dissemination spaces.*

**Keywords:** *listening; curation; sound; live arts; Portugal.*

**Resumo:** Este ensaio discute a curadoria de atmosferas nas Artes Vivas, propondo que o ato curatorial deve estender-se à experiência sonora e à audição do espectador. Com base nos estudos contemporâneos do som, explora-se como a escuta condiciona a percepção e a produção da arte em espaços partilhados. Analisam-se as dimensões sensoriais, relacionais e o potencial sociopolítico da escuta coletiva enquanto ferramenta crítica. Para fundamentar estas reflexões, apresenta-se uma performance realizada no Jardim Botânico de Coimbra, em Portugal. Conclui-se oferecendo estratégias de curadoria que fortalecem o diálogo entre artistas e público em espaços de disseminação.

**Palavras-chave:** escuta; curadoria; som; artes vivas; Portugal.

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## Introduction

Sound is air-borne. It travels through the air and changes as it does so. It is thus part of the atmosphere. In this essay, I bring emergent discussions on sound and listening to address atmosphere and the arts.

Sound art since its inception in the 1960s has explored the dynamic relationship between sound and space. Derived from musical practices, it mainly involved abstract sounds and prioritised sound over listening. A recent shift in contemporary art has sparked interest in the sensory and relational dimensions of sound. It also emphasizes the dialogical relationship between sound and listening. If listening in sound art has long been approached as an individual pursuit driven by prescriptive techniques, it is today investigated as a collective practice, with social and political ramifications.

I have long considered sound as secondary. Live Arts curation traditionally involves scenography, light, audience setting, and other visual aspects of the curatorial space. Sound is commonly reduced to technical apparatus, time and mode of activation, volume of the tracks. However, “Sound is a thick, layered space that advances in complete coexistence” (Deshays 2023, 90). Moreover, sound acts at the level of sensation. It affects our bodies before producing meaning. Because atmosphere is filled with sounds, I argue that curating atmosphere should include the curation of sounds, or rather, the curation of our hearing. The listening I put forward in this essay is a listening *with*, situated in time and space, that shapes our perception of Live Arts. To support my argument and my listening perspective in the arts, I propose a development in three parts, two theoretical, and one practical. In chapter 1, I present an anthology of recent publications in the sound field, beyond sound art. In chapter 2, I discuss listening specifically in the curatorial space, bringing together the works of two authors of contemporary Sound studies. In the last chapter, I take a concrete example, the “Concert for a Tree” by Portuguese artist Fernando Mota I have attended in Coimbra Botanical Garden in May

2025. I use my listening experience of the performance to make suggestions on curation.

## **I. Listening Beyond Sound Art**

This chapter challenges established role and approach of listening in sound art. It moves toward the social and political aspects of listening together, based on recent publications in the field.

In his practice-based thesis dissertation, Daniel Scott-Cumming points out that the dialogical as well as the social dimensions of listening are notably absent from sound art canons of listening. He insists on the importance of distinction and removes hierarchy: “Listening is an ally of sound, but neither the same thing as, nor a secondary function, of sound” (Scott-Cumming 2017, 12). Accordingly, he operates an epistemological shift that puts listening in the centre of the sound phenomena. Further, Scott-Cumming defines his listening practice as a mode of engagement with and for the people. It doesn’t involve expectation nor evaluation. It is underpinned by social and political stances.

Early works of Berlin-based American sound practitioner Brandon LaBelle traces back the history of Sound art, as a practice rooted in “the activation of the dynamic relationship between sound and space” (Labelle 2012, 469). This relational condition of sound, in other words, the sonic agency, also works as a social and sensory connection, through the activation of the bodies of the people present in the space. In recent works, LaBelle explores the political potential of this invisible zone of contact between people, as a “social force that works to interrupt the dominant order” (Labelle, 2020, 4), based on politics of visibility. He writes:

As hidden, infra-sonic energies, vibrations may also shudder the articulated and delineated forms of sociality, cohering instead around deep matters and shared atmospheres often supporting more intimate relations. From such a view, vibratory models of alliance and sharing often interrupt the representational

codings active on that “visual surface” of particular worlds, supporting instead constructs of togetherness that may carry great social and political potential. (Labelle 2020, 3).

For scholar Gascia Ouzounian, based in the UK and originally from Armenia, approaching sound as a vibration destabilizes established discourses, notably in urban studies and architecture. In the essay “Three disrupting voices in Sound studies” (Kozlova 2025), I make audible subjective voices, which critically engage with the still referential R. Murray Schafer’s notion of soundscape. Disputing the fixity of sonic elements, Ouzounian points out the unstable, and always changing nature of sound. Moreover, she argues that in the West the study of music as an object “has diminished or even prevented a wider understanding of music as a spatial practice: as an art form of place, and one that has emerged in dialogue with space” (Ouzounian 2022). In “Becoming air: On Sonic Spatial Metaphysics” (Ouzounian 2022), Ouzounian recalls a sacred music concert she attended in Armenia, in a fourth century monastery carved into a mountain. For her, the intensity of the moment wasn’t to find in categories, such as the musicians, or the audience, but in the whole they formed together with the space “since everyone was part of a community, or perhaps a communion, created from sound as it emerges in, becomes part of, and transforms a space” (Ouzounian 2022, 13). To reach intensity, it seems that sound needs to be thought in relation with space.

## **II. Listening in the curatorial space**

This chapter frames the importance and limited consideration of listening in the curatorial space, with the help of two authors of contemporary Sound Studies. One, Daniel Deshays, has forty years’ experience of sound design for theatre and cinema. The other, Salomé Voegelin, approaches listening from a philosophical perspective that challenges the concepts of art perception and production.

Live Arts and the listening I bring forward have in common to hold a temporal and spatial relationship, to involve the body, and to be social. I argue that listening situates us within an atmosphere by connecting us with the space's aura. Listening as an “actual practice and a conceptual sensibility” (Voegelin 2010, xiii) has been theorised by the scholar Salomé Voegelin. In “Listening to Noise and Silence” (Voegelin 2010), she points out that the listener is always physically within the acoustic space in order to hear: “Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneously with the heard. However far its source, the sound sits in my ear” (Voegelin 2010, xii). Taking a critical stance in this position may be challenging. But Voegelin's approach to listening is philosophical. It must embed the “principle of sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration”. Based on this concomitance of auditory position, Voegelin addresses objectivity and subjectivity in art perception as well as our position in art production.

The sense through which we perceive an event is marked by ideology and aesthetics. The visual approach to art is distanced, critical and contextualised. Adopting the auditory sense changes paradigms and thus modifies our relationship to artwork. It is more raw, chaotic and fugitive. To convey the physical reach of sound, Deshays compares listening to a touch:

These senses [listening and touch] occupy the same regions of the brain. The brain centres for perception are adjacent to those for movement. When I listen to an event, my body is committed to responding instantly, and this response does not first go through a meaningful analysis. The body does not wait to understand the meaning contained in the sound that reaches it. It moves immediately to protect itself or is drawn to gather more information and collect more sensations. That is to say, listening is active. (Deshays 2023, 126).

These sensual dynamics, prior to sense-making, operate in the curatorial space. They are amplified by the state of anticipation and desire experienced by the audience.

Regarding the collaboration with the other narratives at play in the curatorial space, Deshays and Voegelin both advocate the concept of “coexistence,” which requires further consideration. The issue is not the dominance of visual perception. Deshays points out: “Sound comes after the visual, but this is by no means a disadvantage. Discreet, it knows how to work in the background, and that is precisely its strength” (Deshays 2023, 96). For Voegelin, her audition-based philosophical project which promotes a “sonic sensitivity” doesn’t aim to eliminate the visual, but rather to amplify its perception. It “suggests that sound sensitivity would illuminate the invisible aspects of visibility, augmenting rather than opposing a visual philosophy” (Voegelin 2010, xiii). That being said, both authors regret the subjugation of sound to the visual referential. When it comes to criticism, “focus is invariably on the score or arrangement, the orchestra or performer, the sound source, the overall view of the installation, or the documentation of the sound event—in short, on the visual manifestation rather than the sounds heard” (Voegelin 2010, xi). In context of a performance, Deshays insists on the differences between visual and acoustic spaces. The visual space is what the audience sees, that is, a frame limited to the field of vision. The acoustic space is broader.

When we talk about sound space, we must consider the entire space around us, the totality of the volumes that unite the stage and the auditorium [. . .]. We must also consider spaces that are not visible: the wings, nearby corridors and spaces outside the theatre. We cannot forget so-called nuisance areas such as streets, rooftops with birds and aeroplanes, and trains or underground trains, as well as the weather. These are also present to the ear, and we each perceive them differently. This is the place of sound. (Deshays 2023, 89).

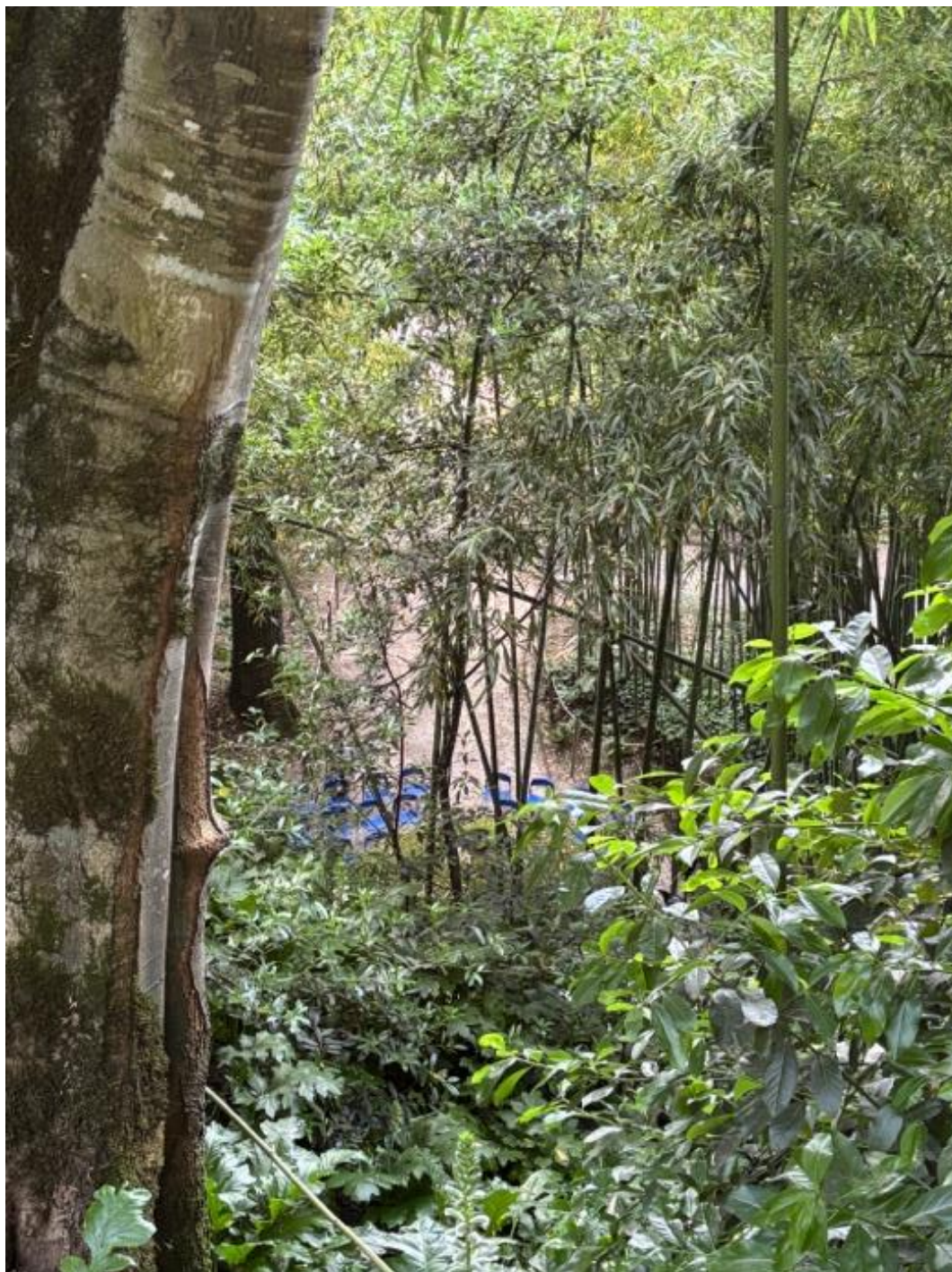
Acoustic space always transcends visual space. Likewise, the atmosphere of a place transcends the time and location of an event. The aura, or what is in the air, permeates and affects our bodies beyond the performance. For Deshays, the “living sounds” and the “mediated sounds,” and for Voegelin, the “direct sounds,” all circulate in the curatorial space, which is a social space. This shared space hosts a shared atmosphere that shapes

our perception. Despite its obvious presence and agency, sound has yet to find its place in the performing arts. Drawing on his experience as a theatre sound designer, Deshays envisages an acoustic space as a shared concern, rather than “that redundant space of commentary, illustration and waiting music, in short no longer the filler sound, found in too many productions” (Deshays 2023, 91). For Voegelin, sound is “the heard, immersive and present” (Voegelin, 2020, xii). It unfolds with the complicity and engagement of the listener. This “interactivity” influences each one of us. It therefore deserves to be recognised. To achieve this, we must consider how the audience will be “touched,” which goes far beyond providing technological equipment. Moreover, it is the “contingency” (Voegelin) and the “degree of uncertainty” (Deshays) of the acoustics that are heard and leave a trace. Deshays writes: “What matters in listening is not what is defined but what is uncertain. [ . . . ]. Our listening grows in proportion to its incompleteness. What is offered too readily engages only brief interest.” (Deshays 2023, 126).

Below, I provide a concrete example in support of this argument: our listening experience deserves to be taken seriously because it either enhances or detracts from our perception of the Live Arts.

### **III. Listening to Mota’s “Concert for a Tree”, in Coimbra Botanical Garden**

I chose to present this performance because, based on the title alone, we can expect a musical piece dedicated to an element of nature. It therefore engages our sense of hearing with an artistic intent. Moreover, it took place outdoors in the heart of a botanical garden, a place with a special aura and connection to nature. First, I will describe the venue and the concert. Then I will share my sonic experience, and what I missed based on my expectations. I will use this example to support a curation of listening that go beyond technology, to enhance our perception of Live Arts.



**Figure 1.** A view of the blue chairs arranged for Mota's audience, taken from the path leading down to the chapel in the Botanical Garden of Coimbra, Portugal, in May 2025.  
Credit: Laetitia Kozlova.

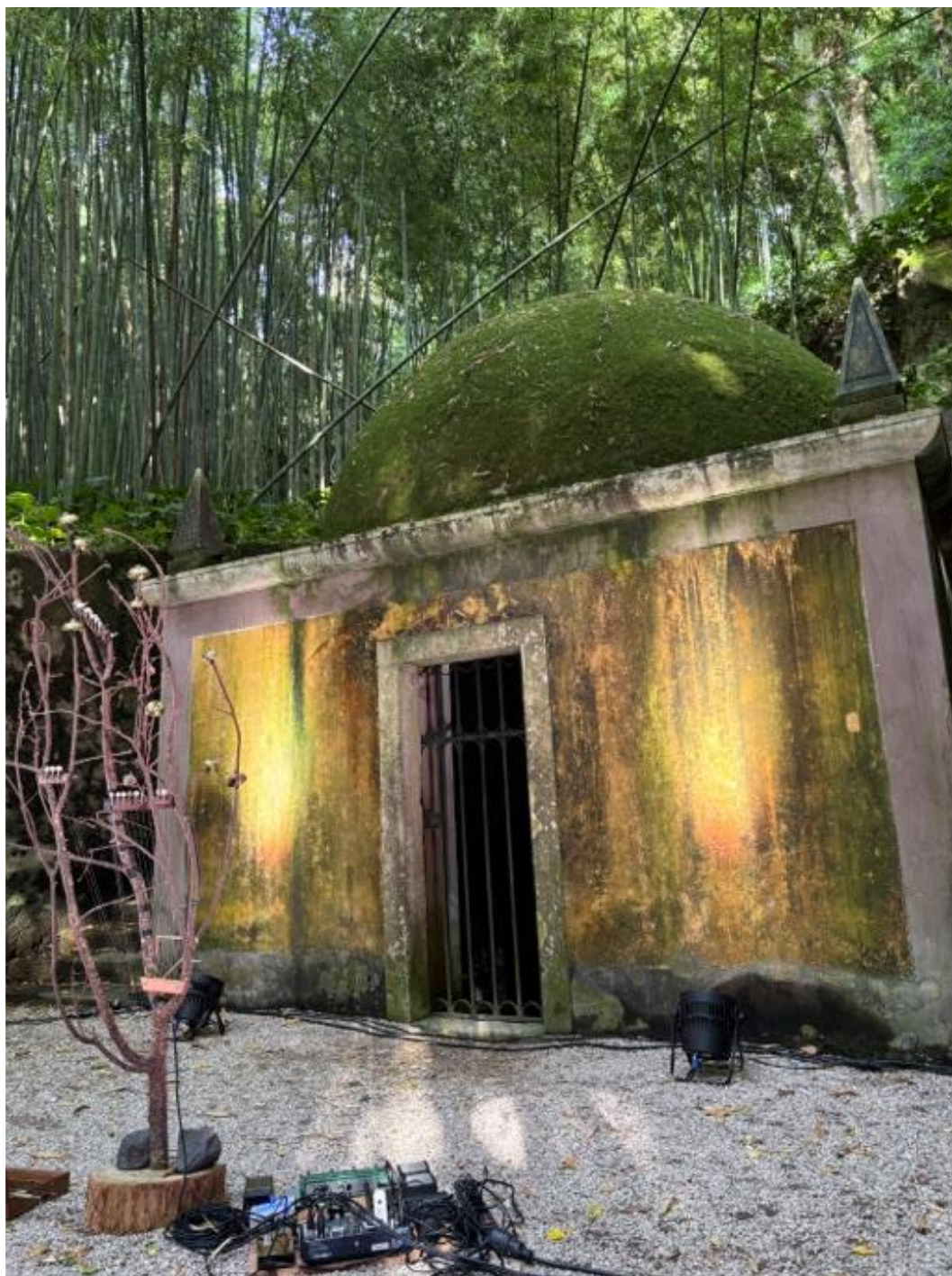


Figure 2. A view of the chapel, with its moss-covered dome and Mota's instrument and technical elements on the ground, a few minutes before the performer arrives. Botanical Garden of Coimbra, Portugal, May 2025. Credit: Laetitia Kozlova.

At the end of May 2025, I drove from Porto to the magnificent Botanical Garden in Coimbra, Portugal. I walked down a path lined with a dense forest of tall bamboo trunks which gradually came together to form a canopy of vegetation above my head. At the bottom was a small, domed chapel with moss growing on its ancient stone walls. In front of it, two floor-standing loudspeakers faced rows of blue folding chairs. The air was warm and humid, filled with the sounds of nature. Suddenly, a clear hooting sound came from within the enclosure, disturbing the audience's perception as they could not tell whether the sound was man-made or natural. Fernando Mota, dressed in white linen, emerged from behind the audience with an open birdcage on his head. At mouth level, wooden beaks of different shapes produce distinct bird songs when the artist blows into them. Mota then holds up a large branch he collected in nature and starts to play it. The audience observes the poetic exploration of the performer's gestures which activate sounds. The artist's touches and their sonic responses invent a dialogue, moving forward in complicity between human and nature. Viewers are captivated by the uncertainty and astonishment of this visual and sensory communication.

However, from an auditory perspective, I felt frustrated. The performance didn't engage our listening as much as our visual perception. The mediated sounds ignored the live sounds of the surrounding environment. Yet for the audience, the listening experience encompasses everything heard. Disengaging from the acoustic space disrupts sensory perception and renders it passive. It reduces the performance to its visual dimension, which, as discussed in previous section, is more distant. As argued, the issue is not the dominance of visual perception. It is the lack of involvement of sound in the curation of the event, which is all the more surprising given that acoustics are presented as its core. Simply placing two large loudspeakers in front of the audience is not enough. Technology cannot help shaping the fragile zone of contact with sound. In fact, it

might arguably blight it. Furthermore, I question the relevance of labelling Mota's dialogue with nature as a "concert," as this confines it within a musical context, emphasised by the frontal arrangement of chairs.

The atmosphere of a performance transcends the physical curatorial space. It is an experience that viewers take home with them. It is made up of various elements such as the air temperature, the spatial arrangement, the words used and, I argue, the sounds present in the overall acoustic space. Their fleeting and contingent nature makes organising their circulation challenging. For the purpose of this essay, I propose that treating listening seriously—that is, incorporating it into the creative process and curation of Live Arts—increases the audience's reach at a sensory and tangible level. Curating sound involves making informed choices, not only technical ones, in order to manage the coexistence of all sonic elements emerging during a live event. Questioning how the audience will be affected influences the spatial configuration. Eliminating established references, mainly musical, is inclusive, and allows for freedom in interpreting the sounds heard. Accepting all acoustic phenomena and seeking global attunement builds a narrative that enriches the perception of the arts. In the case of Mota's "Concert for a Tree," I argue that incorporating the live sounds of the Botanical Garden would enhance the dialogue with nature. This would not only extend the artist's intention but also situate the audience's perception within a broader acoustic and spatial dynamic to which it belongs.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that, because the atmosphere is filled with sounds that are audible or not, but which circulate and contribute to shaping the viewer's perception, listening as a means of engaging with a place's aura deserves to be curated together with the other artistic elements. Furthermore, curating listening experiences should not be reduced to

visual considerations, such as technological choices and spatial arrangement. The complexity of sound in Live Arts stems from the resistant nature of sound—wild and chaotic—and the different layers of acoustic space. According to Deshays, who has extensive experience in sound design for theatre, sonic phenomena in the curatorial space involve two types of sound: “living sounds,” which arise from the bodies and movements of performers and audience members and instantly disappear, and “mediated sounds,” i.e. the soundtrack of the performance, which only take on meaning in relation to the living. These two sonic realities coexist in the ear of the viewer. The way in which this “fragile copresence” (Deshays 2023, 126) might be balanced alongside other narratives is the core of the sonic challenge for Live Arts curators.

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