

Noise

A Human History of Sound and Listening

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Introduction

We're supposed to hate cacophony, but a few years ago on a cold Sunday in Berlin I was struck by the horror that sometimes lurks in silence and by the warm humanity that often emanates from noise. My teenage daughter and I had taken a suburban train north from the city centre to visit the old Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Oranienburg, where more than 200,000 people had been imprisoned under the Nazis. It was still early when we arrived, and only a few other people were around; a chilling mist, which clung to the place all morning, only added to the bleak atmosphere. Its utter noiselessness seemed oppressive yet entirely appropriate: whatever life the camp had once contained had been expunged cruelly many years ago. As the two of us walked around, looking at the evidence of one atrocity

after another, it was difficult to know what to say to each other. So, like everyone else, we stayed silent.

After a few hours of this, and knowing we had to catch a flight home later the same day, we decided that we needed to cheer ourselves up pretty quickly. We caught the next S1 train back to the city centre and made our way to Café Einstein for cakes and coffee. The moment we stepped inside this venerable wood-panelled Weimar institution, crammed to bursting point with Berliners having their Sunday afternoon treat, we were hit by an extraordinary wall of sound. The idea of finding somewhere quieter never occurred to us, however. The clatter and clinking of cutlery and crockery as waiters hurried from table to table, the ringing of tills, the shouting of orders from the kitchen and, rising above everything else, the constant loud buzz of conversation and laughter coming from everyone: after a long morning's silence this din was a blissful affirmation of life, a sonic two-fingers to the Nazis and the deathly silence they had created at Sachsenhausen.

Noise, it has been said, is sound that is 'out of place'.¹ It is usually something unwanted, inappropriate, interfering, distracting, irritating. Many of us would no doubt concur with the nineteenth-century German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz, who distinguished clearly between 'musical tones' and mere 'noise', the latter being sounds that are all 'mixed up and as it were tumbled about in confusion'.² But on that day in Berlin I saw, as I hope to argue in this book, noise is more important than this. When the bell rings, a factory siren sounds, or the skies fall silent after a terrorist attack, noise – or its absence – is charged with meaning. Noise has been a capacious category throughout human history – one full of surprises and drama.

I am with John Cage. 'Wherever we are what we hear is mostly noise,' he wrote in 1937. 'When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.'³ If we

open our ears to sounds that are usually dismissed as unmusical or unpleasant, or simply ignored as merely everyday and banal, Cage implies, we start reconnecting with a whole range of human experience that previously passed us by. Instead of worrying about the usual boundaries between noise and music, or cacophony and silence, or speech and song, we need to discover the virtues of breaking them down.⁴

So although this book has the word ‘noise’ prominently in its title, it is trying to stretch the definition as far as it will go – and in lots of directions, too. It encompasses not just music and speech but also echoes, chanting, drumbeats, bells, thunder, gunfire, the noise of crowds, the rumbles of the human body, laughter, silence, eavesdropping, mechanical sounds, noisy neighbours, musical recordings, radio, in fact pretty well anything that makes up the broader world of sound and of listening. When I turn to oratory in ancient Rome and in modern political campaigning, for example, I am interested in the words spoken but I am even *more* interested in the sounds made: the tone, the cadences, the pitch of the voice; how that voice might have been transformed by the environment in which it was heard, and how the audience responded. When I discuss the jazz scene in Harlem during the 1920s, it is less the musical quality of Mamie Smith or Ma Rainey that concerns me and more the impact recording had in allowing ‘new’ sounds to circulate well beyond a small group of people gathered at a concert or dance-hall and in allowing the ‘voice’ of a marginalised culture to be ‘heard’ as never before by an international listenership.

Having said all this, I still want to hold on just a little bit to that original idea of noise as a nasty, troubling thing. For although I think noise is not always a sound ‘out of place’, nor always strictly speaking unwanted, it can perhaps be thought of as a sound that someone somewhere doesn’t want to be heard. By that, I mean that who gets to make a noise and who

doesn't, who gets their voice heard and who doesn't, who gets to listen and who doesn't, is of crucial importance. Silence can be golden, or it can be oppressive. And as the history of slavery, or the history of the relationship between factory-owners and their workers shows us, whether it is enforced or voluntary makes a world of difference. So this book is really about how sound might help us understand some of the drama and struggle of human history in a new and, I hope, enlightening way.

To trace the story of sound is to tell the story of how we learned to overcome our fears about the natural world, perhaps even to control it; how we learned to communicate with, understand and live alongside our fellow beings; how we have fought with each other for dominance; how we have sought to find privacy in an increasingly busy world; how we have struggled with our emotions and our sanity. It encompasses the roar of the baying crowd in ancient Rome, medieval power struggles between rich and poor, the stresses of industrialisation, the shock of war, the rise of cities, the unceasing chatter of twenty-four-hour media. Throughout all this, we have to keep our ears attuned to the intimate aspects of human life as much as the epic. For, as the historian Elizabeth Foyster reminds us, senses such as listening have always been a part of our private domestic life, our thoughts, our feelings, our memories; in other words, 'a crucial part of the everyday'.⁵

I keep using the word 'human' for a reason. It is to mark out a subtle but important difference between this book and most other work written on sound. Hillel Schwarz's *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*, Veit Erlmann's *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* and Mike Goldsmith's *Discord: The Story of Noise* are just three among several recent contributions to the new frontier of 'sensory history', all of them deeply fascinating.⁶ But they are written from the perspectives of, respectively, a poet, a music anthropologist and a physicist. Though they discuss people – how could they

not when dealing with sound? – their main focus, it seems to me, has been with sound as an idea or a metaphysical phenomenon; they offer what is essentially an intellectual history of the subject. Valuable though that is, my own interest lies less with the abstract or physical qualities of sound than with how it gets used in the world by you and me and everyone else. In other words, I am interested in its *social history*, and, equally important, in the history of how and why we have listened to it and reacted to it.

This means a special fascination in what follows with the subjective aspects of sound: what it actually *felt* like to experience certain sounds in certain places at certain times in history. The pioneers in this respect have been historians such as Alain Corbin in France, and Mark M. Smith, Richard Rath and Emily Thompson in America. Their approach, as Thompson puts it, has been to proceed on the basis that, like a landscape, ‘a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment’. ‘It is,’ she suggests, ‘both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.’⁷ These historians take the pioneering idea of the Canadian musician R. Murray Schafer, who first popularised the term ‘soundscape’ in the 1970s, and test what exactly that meant for ordinary people in very particular times and places: Corbin explored the role of church bells in nineteenth-century rural France; for Smith it was the sounds of the slave plantations and battlefields in nineteenth-century America; for Rath, the drums and guns of colonial-era America; and for Thompson, the cityscapes of the early twentieth century. This work, and other work like it, provides some of the essential building blocks of the story presented here.

But I want to offer, if I can, a wider story, both chronologically and geographically, for, as Richard Rath suggests, a simple noise such as thunder will have been interpreted very differently by, say, Native Americans and New England

colonists. I would add that, most likely, it would have been heard very differently by the early humans of the Palaeolithic, by ancient Greeks, by medieval monks or by soldiers in the First World War trenches of Flanders too, though I should hasten to add that it would sometimes have been heard in very *similar* ways, since we find, for example, that medieval monks and nineteenth-century French farmers – both equally irrationally – viewed thunder as having a supernatural force behind it. Which is to say that one of the benefits of pursuing a history that stretches all the way from prehistory to the present, and encompasses several different parts of the world, is that, whatever is lost in terms of detail, we can at least start to tease out a few continuities, as well as identify a few dramatic breaches, in the long story of our relationship with sound.

This is important because the history of the relationship between sound and human history has tended to be told almost entirely in terms of a quiet ‘then’ and a noisy ‘now’. When exactly ‘then’ *is*, is of course debatable – as is the perceived cause of any rupture. The most common account puts the Industrial Revolution centre stage. This was the position of the Glaswegian doctor Dan MacKenzie, the writer in 1916 of the allegorical *City of Din*. ‘Nature,’ the doctor argued, was ‘quiet’ and ‘pleasant’; modern civilisation, on the other hand, ‘is noise. And the more it progresses the noisier it becomes.’⁸ This, broadly, was also the line taken by R. Murray Schafer in the 1970s, when he declared that the sounds of nature had been ‘lost under the combined jamming of industrial and domestic machinery’.⁹ It’s a line that pits the natural world and humanity against each other, and it retains a strong appeal to environmentalists. Yet I worry about it edging into slightly misanthropic territory, as if the world would be better if only the people in it disappeared. And, as Emily Thompson has suggested, there is an equally strong case to be made that soundscapes have ‘more to do with civilization than with

nature'; indeed, that our soundscapes are constantly changing in subtle ways, and not always for the worst.¹⁰ This, I hope to argue, is emphatically not a simple story of irreversible decline into ever greater cacophony.

A rather different way of dividing the human timeline has been to distinguish between an 'oral' then, which was somehow more magical than the present, and a 'literate' now, which is somehow more rational than the past. In effect, this divides 'ear' culture' (listening) from 'eye' culture (watching and reading) and then proceeds to show that once reading had taken over, 'the visual' came to be regarded as the more comprehensive and trustworthy sense, while 'the aural' was left behind, with associations of passivity, superstition and hearsay. According to taste, this fundamental shift happened either in ancient Greece, when writing was systematically adopted, or during the Enlightenment, when the habit of reading spread rapidly. Even if we take this theory at face value, it's worth pointing out that a truly global, multicultural perspective, which anthropologists are good at providing for us, shows that a 'pre-literate' society is something that continues to exist long into the 'modern' era. But why take it at face value? We surely need to question almost every assumption that has been made here about the supposed triumph of a visual sensibility as time passes, and about the consequent relegation of aural culture: that hearing is less important now than it has been in the past, that listening is a passive activity, that seeing something provides better proof than hearing something, that what happened in the West also happened in the East. A social history of sound and listening suggests otherwise.

But suggests what, exactly? I hope that the following chapters can, to some extent, simply be allowed to tell a series of separate stories. Even with thirty chapters, the span of humanity covered is too great to offer more than a few snapshots, and sound, especially, is too profuse a subject to pin down into a

single, coherent narrative. Yet I suppose there *is* a running thread of sorts: it is about power. I mean this in two senses. First, it's about the power of certain sounds to influence us in profound ways. And secondly, it's about the ability of powerful people – or powerful groups of people, like nation states, organised religions or commercial companies – to shape the soundscapes or listening habits of others less powerful. One of R. Murray Schafer's great contributions to our understanding of the subject was to think of sound as a way of *touching at a distance*. His notion captures perfectly the way that sound travels further than the length of an arm but arrives in someone's ear as a tangible thing, triggering a real emotional response. It is therefore a force acting upon people, for good or ill. At the same time, sound never bestows absolute power on anyone, since by its very nature it is hard for sound to be entirely owned or controlled. Its natural tendency is to move freely through the air. And although human ingenuity is such that sound can always be manipulated, sound is also too intangible and slippery a thing to remain in the service of elites without also being available for use in inventive and subversive ways by the dispossessed – as a brief history of medieval carnivals, eighteenth-century rebellions and twentieth-century protest marches will show.

Being intangible and slippery, one might easily imagine that sound is almost impossible to write about in the purely historical sense. As Douglas Kahn points out, 'Sound inhabits its own time and dissipates quickly.'¹¹ It leaves no traces, and the discipline of history needs traces. That is why historians spend their time among written archives: they provide a satisfyingly stable record of what happened in the past. Yet it turns out that many sounds, even of the distant past, are not entirely lost to us. We can make some sensible guesses about them if we deploy a bit of sideways thinking. Archaeologists, for instance, have begun using experimental techniques to

explore the acoustic properties of ancient sites. They also now draw on ethnographic studies of present-day hunter-gatherer societies in order to speculate on the possible human uses of sound in prehistory. In doing so, they have invented a whole new discipline, ‘archaeoacoustics’. Historians of later periods have also turned to anthropology and ethnography to help them understand past behaviours, such as the role of eavesdropping in different cultures or the effects of overcrowding. Indeed, it is the fieldwork of ethnographers that has helped, more than anything, to build up today’s voluminous archives of sound recordings, such as the British Library’s collection of several million wax cylinders, discs, tapes and CDs, which now allow us to bring back to life an array of voices and music and soundscapes from over a hundred years ago.

Finally, though, we should not forget that even our most traditional source for history, the written record, sometimes tells us a great deal about the sounds of the past. In countless letters, journals, diaries, speeches and books, people from every period of history and every part of the world have recorded their personal impressions of places and events. In doing so, they frequently wrote not just of what they saw but also of what they heard. Sometimes this was because what they heard struck them as extraordinary and so deserved to be recorded in detail; at other times, the references are incidental and fleeting – but, for us, no less informative. That so many people chose to write about sound is a clear measure of how important it was in their lives. And what these people tell us, in the pages that follow, is this: that the desire to understand and control sound – to enforce silence, to encourage listening, to sing, to shout – is not just hundreds but tens of thousands of years old.