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Bull Michael

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WAYS OF HEARING: SOUND, CULTURE AND HISTORY

James G. Mansell

In 1932 a group of social investigators based at Manchester University Settlement surveyed housing conditions in the poorest parts of their city. They reported that in the worst tenement blocks of this English industrial heartland it was not uncommon to find families living in dwellings 'the shape of a long tunnel, 41ft. long by 9ft. wide, divided into living-room and bedroom, and dimly lit by a window at each end.' Speaking to tenants, observers concluded that, 'Only those who have to live year in and year out in the old block dwellings can fully realise all that it implies.' Prominent in testimonies were complaints about 'The tramp of feet up and down the stone stairways and balconies, the running and echoing shouts of children at play in the asphalt courtyard' as well as 'the pounding of traffic' and 'the noise from the goods yard.' '"It's awful,"' one tenant complained. '"I was thankful when they took me to the hospital. The noise nearly drives you mad."' Another said, '"You long for a bit of quiet."' Life in these poorly constructed homes was one of sensory deprivation, according to the investigators: 'Without a vestige of beauty, with little privacy and constant noise, the lives of many tenants are reduced to a dull dead level from which much of the spring and interest in life has gone' (Manchester University Settlement 1932: 6–8).

Sound is there in the historical record for those ready to hear it. It has traditionally been beyond the remit of the historian to listen to the past and most historians still consider sound better left to specialists. However, a whole raft of new sound histories accompanying the wider rise of sound studies prove that historians have much to gain by routinely thinking of their historical subjects as hearing subjects. This chapter offers an overview of methodology in modern sound history, drawing on the works of some of its key practitioners, and argues that the central contribution of this subset of sound studies has been to elucidate not so much *what* but rather *how* people heard in the past. Using examples from my own research on early twentieth-century Britain, the second part of the chapter outlines an approach to sound history based on the analysis of what I describe as *ways of hearing*, a turn of phrase hinted at and sometimes used in passing in existing sound histories, but which I nevertheless take to be their core concern (for wider discussion of this approach in sensory studies see Howes & Classen 2014). My theorization of ways of hearing in this chapter is intended to offer a perspective on what it is that sound historians do and why they do it, but also to convince those engaged more broadly in history writing that they, too, should tune in to the sonic past.

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Soundscapes, soundselves and ways of hearing

Historians have routinely turned to other disciplines in search of a methodology for dealing with sound. In doing so, they encounter two major options. The first is to focus on sounds themselves, on how and why particular places or things sound the way that they do and what this tells us about those places/things. The second option is to focus instead on the hearing/listening subject, the ways in which hearing and listening facilitate particular kinds of knowledges and subjectivities and situate selves in relation to environments and communities. Both come under the heading of what Bull and Back (2003) have described as 'auditory culture.' In the case of Manchester University Settlement's account of tenement sounds, an analysis might focus on the nature and effect of the noises heard by tenants: the relatively new public sound of the internal combustion engine on the city street, or the acoustic properties of poorly insulated homes. It might alternatively focus on the sonic constitution of tenement selfhoods in a wider study of domestic hearing, considering the ways in which sounds situated tenement-dwellers as tenement subjects (poor, rhythmically bound to the city and its industries, and so on) in contrast to those who lived in quieter suburbs. Sound studies scholars sometimes blend these two approaches to good effect and have actively theorized the relationship between the two, but more often one or the other predominates in their work. In this section I will argue that historians draw upon both of these methodologies, but for practical and conceptual reasons commit themselves fully to neither, finding instead their unique contribution to sound studies in the analysis of the interface between sounds and sonic subjectivities. To explain why historians have taken this medial approach, I will discuss the sound itself and the sonic-subjectivity approaches in turn before explaining why historians have settled instead on the analysis of historical ways of hearing.

As far as the study of sound itself is concerned, no influence is clearer in the work of sound historians than that of sonic ecologist R. Murray Schafer, whose concept of the 'soundscape' (Schafer 1994) appears in the titles of a range of sound histories from Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (2004) to Thompson's *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2004) and Birdsall's *Nazi Soundscapes* (2012). Schafer (1994: 7) described the soundscape as 'any acoustic field of study,' adding that 'We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape.' His argument that 'We can isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape' has proven to be particularly influential. He offered technical terms such as 'keynote' sound ('the anchor or fundamental tone' of a soundscape: the sound of motor traffic, perhaps, in our Manchester example) and 'soundmark' (like a landmark, a sound 'especially regarded or noticed' by a community, such as a church bell or a factory siren) (Schafer 1994: 9–10). He also promoted the idea that soundscapes change along with wider historical shifts such as industrialization, arguing that we should pay attention to these changes to fully understand and then, crucially, to improve our sonic environments. His theory of changing soundscapes, along with the notion of hearers as 'earwitnesses' to these changes (Schafer 1994: 8–9), has appealed to historians, who have understandably been attracted to the notion that we might be able to trace shifts in sonic epochs as a way of widening our understanding of historical categories such as modernity (Thompson 2004) or totalitarianism (Birdsall 2012). But most historians stop short of fully embracing Schafer, partly because accompanying his methodological proposals is a stark ecological message about the damage done to natural soundscapes by what he sees as the polluting influence of industrial and urban sounds. Most historians are reluctant to take such a negative *a priori* view of the sounds of modernity. In borrowing the term soundscape, as Kelman (2010) has pointed out, sound historians such as Picker (2004) use it with little of the original political context that

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Schafer intended and often with much of the methodological specificity left out, too, drawing upon it much more loosely as a way of indicating their engagement with an historical world of sound, lost but recoverable.

Schafer's work has inspired a rich vein of scholarship and practical work in sonic ecology, acoustic design and sound arts which on the whole is either sympathetic to his ecological politics or otherwise committed to creating 'good' soundscapes. Such scholars and practitioners are often engaged in field recording or other forms of direct engagement with sound: they capture it, store it, measure it, create with it, and pass judgement on it. Historians do not often have this kind of direct access to sound, and even where recordings of past sounds exist, as Smith (2015) has pointed out, most historians remain skeptical about the possibility of treating these as uncomplicated evidence of what the past sounded like. Smith (2015: 56) warns against attempts to objectively re-create past soundscapes and argues that even when we have recordings, these come highly mediated both by the ear of the recordist and by our own 'epistemological preferences.' He insists that we *can* access the sounds of the past, but that this is best achieved by reading written accounts which offer 'a far more robust way to access the ways sounds and silences were understood in the past, regardless of whether they were recorded electronically' (Smith 2015: 61). Unlike Schafer, who describes earwitnesses' descriptions of sound as 'trustworthy' or 'counterfeit' in their objectivity, historians like Smith are much more apt to think in terms of a multiplicity of meanings operating in any given time or place. In Smith's case, sounds meant different things depending on which side one was on in the American Civil War, for example (Smith 2001). Although one might take issue with Smith's insistence on the primary importance of written text versus other kinds of source material (Hendy 2016 puts forward an alternative perspective), the general premise of his argument that the best sound histories deal with sound itself only in highly contextualized and contingent ways holds good. While it has been important for historians to indicate to their readers, by using the term soundscape, that they are dealing with a specific sound world, unique to its time, they have not in the end committed themselves to the empirical recovery of historical soundscapes.

The second option, to recover instead the ways in which sounds have played a role in constructing and situating selves, might at first seem to offer an ideal alternative. Connor (1997) outlines an account of a 'modern auditory I' that is persuasive and compelling. Historians have referenced 'historical acoustemology' as a method for dealing with this, drawing on the work of anthropologists of the senses. Acoustemology is a term coined by anthropologist Steven Feld which 'joins acoustics to epistemology to investigate sounding and listening as a knowing-in-action: a knowing with and knowing-through the audible' (Feld 2015: 12). Rice (2003) has further distilled the anthropological approach in referring to 'soundselves' as a way of accounting for the role that sounds play in generating selfhood. Writing specifically about the context of the hospital, Rice (2013: 22) explains that 'For those who are immersed in it…the ward soundscape can play an important role in creating and confirming a particular experience of patienthood, bringing patients to experience themselves as 'patient selves'. Moreover, he argues that sounds situate hearers as the subjects of power: in the hospital, he describes a 'panaudicon' (building on Foucault's discussion of the panopticon) in which doctors and nurses gain power/knowledge by listening to auditory signals emanating from medical technologies and patient bodies (Rice 2013: 21–37). Conversely, Cusick (2013) conducted an acoustemology with prisoners detained in the war on terror and demonstrates the extent to which solitary confinement and musical torture can erode a prisoner's sense of self, 'the destruction,' as Cusick puts it, 'of prisoners' subjectivities.' In the silence of auditory isolation and subject to the vibrational onslaught of sonic torture, prisoners lose, according to Cusick (2013: 276), 'the capacity to control the acoustical relationality that is the foundation of subjectivity.' Rice and Cusick's way of working could be

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extended to any number of other spatial contexts (see, for example, Gallagher 2011 on schools), and more widely to social and cultural life, and has produced profoundly important insights about the relationship between sound and subjectivity. Their method, however, based on ethnographic observation and interview, cannot easily be replicated by the historian. Certain kinds of personal testimony might allow for partial insight into how past sounds situated hearers in relation to others and in relation to structures of power, but an acoustemology of the hearing self of the kind offered by Rice is beyond the reach of all but the contemporary historian. Thus, despite gestures towards the construction of historical acoustemology as a method, this, too, is not really where sound history's contribution to sound studies is to be found.

Rather, what historians are best equipped to recover, and in practice have evolved quite sophisticated approaches to dealing with, is historical ways of hearing. In using this term, I am consciously borrowing from visual studies where Berger's famous *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is only the best-known example of a trend towards analyzing all that comes between optics on the one hand and images on the other. It is ironic, given the efforts to which some sound scholars have gone to refute the dominance of the visual in modernity, that visual studies has evolved a model well suited to overcoming the methodological dilemma that I have outlined above. In a process that Mitchell (2002) calls 'showing seeing' designed to overcome the paradox that 'vision itself is invisible,' visual culture scholars have turned their attention to how we see and concluded that between seer and seen is a realm in which perception is shaped socially. Morus (2006: 107–109) directs our attention to the extent to which eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century science depended upon a culture of visual display in which visitors to popular scientific exhibitions and demonstrations were 'taught how to see science' through both visual and verbal instruction. He concludes that 'the practice of seeing is enculturated' and that we should 'direct our attention to the mundane practices of seeing' in order to understand how people were encouraged to 'see nature' in a particular way in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Bennett (2011) makes a similar point about Victorian museums. These were, he claims, laboratories for the production of 'civic seeing' where working-class visitors in particular were explicitly 'directed' in how to see in a process which he describes as 'the social organisation of vision.' He takes Henry Pitt Rivers, founder of the Pitt Rivers Museum, as a typical example of a sight director. Promoting the scientific theory of evolution, Bennett explains that for Pitt Rivers

> it was not enough to simply arrange evolutionary displays to teach the working man the lessons of progress; account had also to be taken of the specific circumstances, rooted in working-class occupations, that limited or impaired working-class vision so as to put in place a developmental program of visual instruction that would counteract those influences.
>
> *(Bennett 2011: 270–275)*

To counteract the ways of seeing 'associated with commercial forms of popular visual entertainment' and other forms of 'civically unproductive forms of visual pleasure,' museum visitors were instructed by lecturers and attendants on how to view the exhibits, creating a 'singular and fixed spectatorial position,' according to Bennett (2011: 264–277). Matthews-Jones (2011) extends this analysis to the art gallery in her work on the origins of London's Whitechapel Gallery, where founder Samuel Barnett undertook an extensive program of lectures (internally described as 'lessons in seeing') instructing working-class visitors in how to see the paintings on display, emphasizing their spiritual meaning in line with his wider evangelizing mission. Interesting, too, in these contexts, is that the 'lessons in seeing' offered by museum curators were not always fully successful and, rather than providing singular all-encompassing regimes of vision,

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were often resisted in whole in or in part by those who were their target (Matthews-Jones 2011; see also Hill 2005). Beyond the formal context of exhibition and display, historians Gooday (2008) and Otter (2008) have argued that we cannot understand the coming of electrical light over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without taking account of the political history of liberalism and the social history of gender. They demonstrate that electrical illumination was neither a technologically determined process nor one that produced a single, neutral or uncontested way of seeing.

While they may not have reliable ways of accessing past soundscapes or past soundselves, historians do have good access to that which came between: the social shaping of hearing, captured as it is in all manner of source materials. In fact, the historical vantage point is perhaps the best position from which to understand these ways of hearing. If perception is shaped socially then we may be better placed to take a critical attitude to past than to present hearing modes. Sound history demonstrates that hearing is enculturated, to borrow Morus's term, just as seeing is. It shows that those who gain power socially also gain the power to shape ways of hearing. That shaping process is nevertheless uneven, contested, and constantly in need of maintenance. Indeed, it is precisely the need for such maintenance that makes past ways of hearing legible in the historical source material available to us.

Although they have not always explicitly theorized their work in terms of ways of hearing, sound historians are evidently engaged in the process of excavating them. Historian of technology Sterne points in this direction when he argues that 'hearing and its limits can be at once an empirical, material, and sometimes brutal reality *and also* subject to historical and personal transformation' (Sterne 2015: 72–73). Boutin (2015: 3) puts it another way in her history of hearing in nineteenth-century Paris when she argues that 'Though our ears work the same way as they did in the nineteenth century, we do not hear the same way: our sensitivity to city noise has changed.' Although Birdsall (2012: 174–178) uses the term soundscape to headline her analysis of sound in Nazi Germany, among her most important conclusions is that far from being 'immediate and intimate,' 'those who grew up during National Socialism were encouraged to perceive auditory experience in social and collective terms.' Sounds, she explains, 'were conceived as amenable tools for political appropriation.' That appropriation took place not just in the sonic qualities of music, broadcasts or sirens, but in the way people were situated as particular kinds of hearers.

Forming a counterpart to Bennett's analysis of ways of seeing in museums is Johnson's (1995) work on nineteenth-century concert hall culture. Where museums were intended to facilitate the extension of bourgeois ways of seeing to the working-class viewer, nineteenth-century concert halls, as Weber (1975) has also shown, were spaces for the establishment of sonic codes of behavior for the middle classes, including the habit of listening in silence and clapping only at the end of whole musical works rather than between movements. These codes of behavior served to form distinctions between cultivated and uncultivated hearers. A culture of cultivated concert hall listening was joined in the nineteenth century by the new modes of expert stethoscopic and telegraphic listening identified by Sterne (2003), who argues that expert listening modes like these were fundamental to the development of modern forms of science, communication and commerce. Thompson (2004) describes these as 'cultures of listening' precisely in order to *historicize* them and, like Sterne, identifies specifically modern cultures of listening particular to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Distinguishing her approach from Schafer's, Thompson (2004: 1) explicitly notes that for her purposes 'a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world,' she continues, 'and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.'

Historians of sound like Sterne and Thompson tend to emphasize the historicity of listening rather than hearing because they view the former as the more obviously cultural act, the more

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obviously situated in history. They focus on expert listeners who, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shaped dominant, modern, modes of knowing-through-sound. While this is undoubtedly vital terrain for historical analysis, I will argue in the next section that by explicitly shifting from a focus on expert cultures of listening to the analysis of the somewhat wider category of ways of hearing we might capture more of the contested cultural history of sound and hearing and more of its everyday dynamics.

Ways of hearing in the 'age of noise'

The Manchester tenement-dwellers who complained in the early 1930s of 'the pounding of traffic' and 'the noise from the goods yard' were far from being alone in encountering the changing world of early twentieth-century Britain through their ears. As I have argued elsewhere (Mansell 2017), Britons who lived through this period were inclined to think of themselves as living in an 'age of noise.' From the late 1920s onward, as Bijsterveld (2008) has also shown, noise became a significant problem in public discourse and public policy. In 1934, following many years of informal anti-noise campaigning, Britain gained its first organization dedicated specifically to the suppression of 'needless noise': the Anti-Noise League (Horder 1935: 46). Although the League put significant energy into lobbying government ministers, its primary goal was education of the public, via pamphlets, radio broadcasts and exhibitions, about the dangers posed to health and personal efficiency by noise, and about good ways to conduct oneself sonically. The Anti-Noise League promoted a specific way of hearing the sounds of modernity. Focusing particularly on new technological sounds such as those made by motor transport, they encouraged hearers to encounter the sounds of the modern city as unnatural, unhealthy, and uncivilized in contrast to the peaceful tranquility of the countryside, whose sonic virtues were promoted in the League's magazine *Quiet* and through undertakings such as its Second World War 'Country Residency Scheme' which took civil defense workers out of London for quiet, rural, rest breaks (Mansell 2017).

It would be easy to take the Anti-Noise League's hostility to urban noise as *the* typical attitude of the British inter-war middle classes, since as Picker (2004: 41–81) has shown, there is a much longer history of British urban 'brain workers' objecting to unruly public soundscapes. And, certainly, the majority of the Anti-Noise League's leaders were drawn from the upper echelons of professional life. However, the Anti-Noise League's anti-urban rhetoric and fixation on the ills of modern technology was only *one* of the available ways of encountering everyday urban sound at the time, and it was far from uniformly accepted, even among the middle classes. In 1907, well before the establishment of the Anti-Noise League but in the context of a longer public debate about the problem of city noise, the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper noted in an editorial that it was unconvinced not only by the medical arguments against noise but also by the social aesthetics of the growing anti-noise campaign:

> No doubt there are temperaments which find the roar and clash of the streets fatiguing, but for others they are a delight and an inspiration, nor is the taste of these last unquestionably degenerate. Noise is motion, and motion is life; and while it may not be true to say the greater the racket the intenser the humanity, to detest the clatter of our fellows is to detest sociability. The street is the voice of the city, and he who would have it gagged is no better than the morose fellow who insists upon sitting in company but requires those around him to be dumb.
>
> *(Manchester Guardian 1907: 8)*

The Anti-Noise League's deputations to government in the 1930s were often met, behind the scenes, with a similar response. Government scientists, on the whole, did not hear noise in the same way as the League's leaders, thinking of it instead as a necessary, and probably harmless, accompaniment of the modern world of trade and industry (Mansell 2017).

In early twentieth-century Britain, contest over the meaning of everyday urban noise was closely bound up with a wider contestation over the meaning, and politics, of modernity. Those who had a stake in promoting technological and urban modernity deliberately countered the anti-noise way of hearing. I have discussed elsewhere (Mansell 2011) how state-sponsored public information films of the 1930s presented noise as a productive emanation of the rhythms of social life and how these films encouraged people to hear as national and imperial subjects. In London Transport promotional materials of the same period, noise was similarly presented as inseparable from all of the benefits of modern life, part of the draw of the big city and its sensory pleasures. Such promotional materials sometimes made explicit reference to the need for hearers to take the right *attitude* to noise as in, for example, the London Underground poster 'Hearing the Riches of London' (Figure 33.1) created in 1927. The poster was part of a set of five, each encouraging people to travel into Central London to indulge one of their senses. The 'Hearing' poster demanded somewhat more of its viewer than the others, however: a woman with a finger

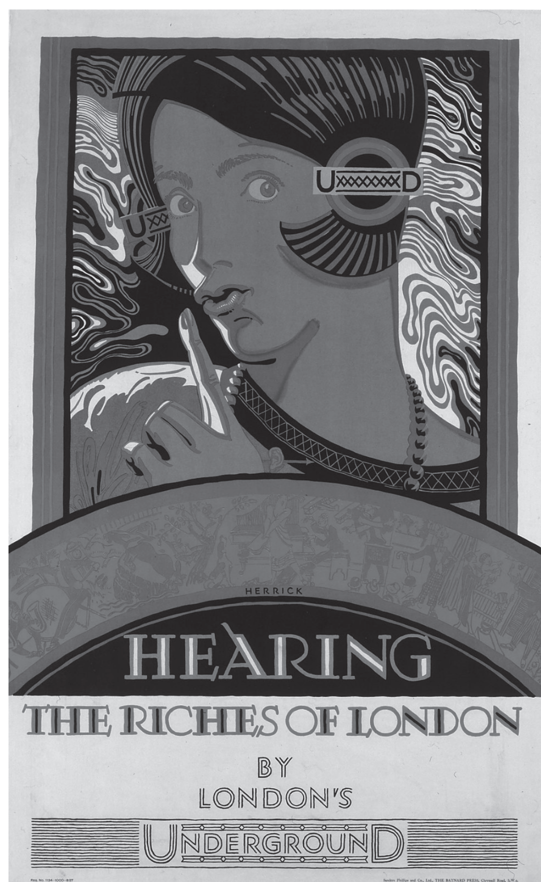

Figure 33.1 'Hearing the Riches of London,' an advertising poster by Frederick Charles Herrick for the Underground Electric Railway Company, London, 1927. Copyright TFL from the Transport Museum collection.

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pushed to her lips in a 'shush!' motion invited sensory pleasure-seekers to hear London but, in contrast to the less complicated acts of seeing an opera, touching fine fabrics, tasting good food and smelling expensive perfumes which were depicted in the other posters, the 'shush!' gesture implied that travelers-by-Tube must take control of their hearing to appreciate the sounding metropolis. They would be rewarded, if they did so, by encountering not only London's musical pleasures, depicted below the central figure, but also the whole spectrum of the vibrating city, indicated in the poster's background by waves of color, and in the smaller illustrations by pictures of dogs barking, Big Ben chiming, and airplanes flying overhead. Each of the five figures depicted in the poster series were intended to be viewed as fashionably modern. In 'Hearing,' the woman has a bobbed haircut and a dress that matches the swirling modernist color patterns in the poster's background. She is wearing hairpins branded with the distinct modernism of London Underground's logo. The poster made explicit reference to the modernity of the 'age of noise' by including everyday sounds alongside music, but encouraged hearers to embrace these sounds as part of the excitement of urban life. In contrast to the hearer in Anti-Noise League propaganda who is encouraged to shield himself from damaging city noise, the hearer in this poster takes a *modern attitude* to sound: she is an aural pleasure-seeker who has learned to hear the sounds of modernity as invigorating rather than unnerving.

What we find in the Anti-Noise League's archive and in materials such as the London Underground poster discussed above is insight not so much into soundscapes or soundselves, but conscious efforts to wed one to the other through the encouragement of particular ways of hearing. While Sterne (2003) and Thompson (2004), for example, identify a singular sonic modernity in dominant expert cultures of listening, my suggestion is that, on the ground, the modernity of modern sound was contested, negotiated, and multiple. Sense-makers, those who had the power to influence ways of seeing or hearing, had to *actively produce* modern ways of sensing. They nevertheless had to do so in competition with one another. We should be alert, however, to the limitations of ways of sensing. For example, when government planners set about tackling the housing crisis outlined in reports such as that published by Manchester University Settlement, they focused their efforts on managing the intrusion of technological sounds into the home, drawing upon the ways of hearing that I have outlined above that focused on how to hear technology. Although some working-class hearers would have welcomed this approach to domestic acoustics (including those whose voices were presented by the Manchester settlers), social surveys produced by Mass Observation (1943: 48–49) suggest that those who were moved from slums into new council flats in the 1930s generally complained not so much about technological sounds, but about the breakdown of the sonic bonds which had held together their previous communities, and about the undesirable sounds created in their new flats by people from other social groups. The pre-occupation with technology, in other words, may not have been such a prominent feature of working-class ways of hearing, and we should remain wary of universalizing the middle-class sensory habitus.

As a number of sound studies scholars have argued, sound is affective: it prompts an embodied response that precedes cognition (Goodman 2010; see also Kane 2015). These scholars have sometimes been hostile to the auditory culture approach that I have drawn on in this chapter, arguing that sound's power lies in its materiality rather than its meaning. However, I would argue that we need not tear the two apart. Sense-makers understood the affective power of sound only too well and sought to intervene to make sound meaningful precisely because those meanings would accompany affect. Ways of hearing were not just about creating meanings for sounds, but also about the embodiment of ideology. This becomes clear in the case of the home front during the Second World War. Having previously rejected the Anti-Noise League's claims about noise's impact on health, government authorities nevertheless realized that enemy air raids

were designed to cause a state of fear in civilian populations and that this fear was enacted in the air raid primarily through sound, hearing and listening (Mansell 2017). Alongside propaganda films such as *Britain Can Take It* (1940) and *Listen to Britain* (1942) which encouraged the stoical hearing of war sounds, scientists at the Medical Research Council decided to promote the use of ear plugs to save urban civilians the stress of listening out for enemy bombers at night. In other words, civilians were closely directed in how they should hear the sounds of war, and indeed when they should refrain from hearing at all. Self-help writers explicitly referred to the need to undertake 'sense training' (Hunt 1918; Hunt 1940) in order to hear the sounds of war not with fear, but with pride in the nation-at-war.

Conclusion

These brief examples I hope are enough to show that by analyzing how people heard in the past we might enrich our understanding of how they lived socially. As Sterne (2015: 72–74) and others have pointed out, we should not forget that hearing varies physically from one person to another and that it changes as we age. But, as this chapter has argued, it is also subject to historical changes that for too long have remained outside the core concerns of the historian. Those who study the past have a good deal to gain by listening.

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