

In Praise of Discord

Beyond Harmony in Historical Acoustemology

Mark M. Smith

Abstract

This piece explores writing on historical acoustemology. It charts the emergence of the field, identifies its strengths and weaknesses, and calls for greater critical engagement amongst its practitioners.

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In Praise of Discord

Beyond Harmony in Historical Acoustemology

Mark M. Smith

Consider this an engaged meditation on the state of the field of historical sound studies or, as some style it, aural history, auditory history, or historical acoustemology.¹ Here, I make no pretense of offering original empirical research. Rather, I wish to ponder what, collectively, historians of sound are doing with their field and, most importantly, to suggest what else they could be doing with it. I am happy to disclose that I have been banging this drum for over fifteen years in various ways. I do so again now because while I am quite thrilled with (and, in very small part, responsible for) some of the work being produced by historians of aurality, I am concerned that without the sort of intervention I am calling for, the field will begin to etiolate.²

This is in no way a catholic survey of recent and ongoing work; instead, it is an attempt to offer a modest manifesto. It is a call to practitioners to think about how their field probably needs to evolve if the real interpretive dividends of historical acoustemology are to be realized; to think about initiatives that will help the field flourish profitably and help it avoid slipping into a kind of comfortable comradery which, while valuable in many ways, can unintentionally deprive us of the dialectic necessary for robust interpretive growth. Part of this call—a challenge to us all, myself included—is born of my own particular research interests; most of it is a product of my reading of recent literature and reviews, some of which hint at a growing unease with simply celebrating sound history as “new” and “burgeoning” and a desire to more actively critique the work that is being produced in a way that simultaneously encourages the production of more work but also attends to the core methodological and interpretive issues underwriting historical acoustemology.

We are at an important moment in the writing of historical acoustemology. Over a decade ago, Douglas Kahn described the growth of sound studies—especially the history of sound—as booming; if he was right then, surely it could be accurately described as deafening now.³ We have an unprecedented number of articles, col-



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lected essays, and books on any number of aspects of historical acoustemology. Various sub-disciplines and virtually all areas and periods of historical study seem positively enchanted with listening to the past. We have, for example, deeply impressive work on the subject from scholars of science and technology, students of American studies, historians of all periods of American history, not to mention historians of the ancient world, Australia, and modern Europe.⁴ We are now cataloging every conceivable sound, noise, and silence from an incredible range of periods and places.⁵

Consider just U. S. history: Sensory history generally began to capture the interest of American historians in the late 1990s, with a number of monographs appearing in print in the early 2000s. Studies of sound, hearing, and listening led the way with at least four monographs appearing in print in a three-year period, 2000–2003. Why U. S. historians elected to write about sound before turning to the other senses remains unclear. It was probably a result of multiple factors including the availability of much earlier and important theoretical work on soundscapes by R. Murray Schafer; an interest in engaging the “great divide” theory regarding the putative shift from orality to the eye most famously associated with media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong; the influence of European historiography, which attended first to sound, hearing, and listening, itself partly influenced by the established work of musicologists; and the particular interests of some sub fields—such as the history of religion—which placed an emphasis on the importance of sound as a way to further interrogate key developments in those fields.⁶ Regardless of the particular reasons, we saw books published on the history of sound and hearing during the Second Great Awakening in 2000; the auditory history of slavery, free labor, and antebellum sectionalism in 2001; a history of American architectural acoustics and modernity in the early twentieth century in 2002; and the history of sound and acoustemology in colonial America in 2003. Since then, other works in a variety of forms have expanded our understanding of how sound (and silence) shaped a number of developments in American history, from the making of “race” to the settlement of the antebellum West.⁷

I mention this rapid increase in production at some length because I think there is a point to be made central to what I have to say. It seems to me that a good deal of this work is emerging so quickly in a context of relative (although sometimes exaggerated) freshness and disciplinary newness that discussion of the larger interpretive issues at stake in the writing of sound history—or sensory history generally, for that matter—can sometimes be elided, poorly attended to, or even ignored. I say this not by way of criticism of individual works but as a commentary on the state of the field. In other words, we are producing more books and articles than ever on historical acoustemology; we are expanding our empirical reach to include constituencies previously excluded (such as women and slaves and nonwestern societies); and we

are doing so in a roiling, additive fashion that is making the field more popular than ever before. But what we are not doing as much is arguing amongst ourselves about things that any field must discuss: methodology, how to read sources, and the interpretive stakes in doing historical acoustemology.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am not asking for internecine warfare among scholars of sound. I like our collegiality and I admire our remarkably supportive environment. What I am asking for is rather more interrogation of our work and, frankly, historians of sound are probably the best positioned to undertake those conversations. Should we not, I do worry about how well the field will mature, how it will refine itself, and whether or not it will slip into easy self-congratulation of the sort that inspires quiet complacency.

It has not always been this way. The inception of historical acoustemology—of sensory history, generally—was rife with the sort of interpretive arguing for which I am calling. None of this early contention was resolved—there was just too little work being done for that to happen. But this early work, replete with its competing interpretive and methodological claims, was important and, I think, is well worth revisiting for the current state of the field. With relatively few exceptions, recent work has not engaged it and I suppose what I am calling for is a resurrection of precisely the sort of thrust and parry some of the earliest writers on sound history thought important.

Am I being unduly harsh? Have I become a merchant of disaffection? I think not, not least because I am not the only observer to raise this issue. Neil Gregor has expressed similar concerns in his highly favorable but probing review of Daniel Morat's edited collection *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th- and 20th-Century Europe* (2014). Gregor reminds us that the field of aural history "has been around for a little longer than some would like to imagine" and while he endorses calls for allowing the field to continue along its current lines of intellectual openness and creativity (something I heartily applaud), he adds that "it may also be time to open up some more explicit polarities in the debate." "It is," remarks Gregor, "a necessary part of the process of defining a field that its early protagonists support each others' exploratory moves, but, as the earlier dynamics of emergence of fields such as gender history showed, there comes a point where some hitherto submerged disagreements need clearer articulation."⁸ In other words, the field, precisely because it is so important, is worth arguing over.

While the theme of discord often characterizes the writing of some sound history, it certainly does not begin to accurately describe the current state of its historiography which is, for the most part, best characterized by an odd, even disconcerting harmony.⁹ This has not always been the case. Indeed, some of the earliest work on sound studies and sensory history generally—work we would rightly consider foun-

dational today—emerged by way of both interest in the topic but also in opposition towards even earlier treatments. I am thinking here of some of Alain Corbin’s earliest interventions into the field of sensory history and sound history which were not only empirical but also, and importantly, interpretive and methodological. Indeed, for Corbin, how we go about listening to the past is as important as what we listen to. Corbin was not at all shy about debating these issues. In his seminal commentary on how to best approach a history of the senses, he expressed reservations about efforts by fellow *Annales* historians to practice sound history. In particular, he challenged Guy Thuillier’s “positivist” effort to “trace the evolution of the sensory environment.” Thuillier, explained Corbin, “has attempted to compile a catalogue and measure the relative intensity of the noises which might reach the ear of a villager in the Nivernais in the middle of the nineteenth century.” Corbin believed this approach “by no means negligible”: “It aids immersion in the village of the past; it encourages the adoption of a comprehensive viewpoint.” But he nevertheless concluded that the entire enterprise of sound cataloging “is based on a questionable postulate, it implies the non-historicity of the modalities of attention, thresholds of perception, significance of noises, and configuration of the tolerable and the intolerable.” “In the last analysis,” notes Corbin, “it ends up by denying the historicity of that balance of the senses. . . . It is as if, in the eyes of the author, the habitus of the Nivernais villager of the nineteenth century did not condition his hearing, and so his listening.” Without a dedicated and careful attempt to attach meaning to what was heard, cataloguing is not only of very modest heuristic worth but, in fact, quite dangerous in its ability to inspire unwitting faith that these are the “real” sounds of the past.¹⁰

More recently, Ari Y. Kelman has upped the methodological and theoretical ante in discussions about how to “do” sound history by highlighting the epistemological and heuristic shortfalls of the ubiquitous term “soundscapes.” Kelman makes the sensible claim that not only was R. Murray Schafer’s original framing of the term at once restrictive, often contradictory, and full of tension but that the way scholars from various disciplines (historians included) have applied the term is now so far removed from Schafer’s application that the notion of soundscapes, while seemingly indispensable, is also entirely too plastic and lacking in analytic specificity. For Kelman, Schafer’s use of the term is prescriptive and limiting, more indicative of Schafer’s penchant for training listeners than holding any enduring interpretive value. Kelman shows, convincingly to my mind, how the term “soundscape” has proven seductive yet quite limiting, requiring historians such as Emily Thompson to so redefine the term as to render the meaning of the word muddled and unclear. Kelman believes that Schafer’s soundscape—which he considers divorced from the habit of listening and highly decontextualized from place and time—bears little similarity to the way many historians use the term.¹¹

In a way, Kelman is quite properly asking how historical sound studies continues to emerge. Does it mature principally through the addition of new work, more work, work on people, places, and times previously unexamined? Yes, of course. But Kelman also seems to be suggesting that for the field to continue to grow it needs to pay attention to theory, terminology, and also interrogate precisely what we mean with the terms we deploy.

To be in praise of discord can help us think more carefully about the presentation of our work and some of the conceits we might unwittingly smuggle into our presentations. In fact, sound historians especially need to think carefully about their method and their use of evidence not least because they enjoy more ready access to public historical consciousness than many of their colleagues in other disciplines and fields. Increasingly, historians of sound specifically, of the senses generally, are invited to advise on museum displays in a loosely curatorial fashion and counsel the tourist and heritage industries. The “rediscovery of the senses has become a highly profitable business,” argues Robert Jütte—and he points to not just the world of advertising but also living museums. “Canny exhibition curators,” he explains, recognize the appeal of the sensory. A number of historic homes and museums now use soundscaping to heighten the experience of visitors; many use soundtracks to suggest the sounds of the past; and reenactors of wars—especially the American Civil War—go to great lengths to recreate with fidelity the sounds of cannons, guns, and shells in an earnest effort to add authenticity to their recreations of key Civil War battles.¹²

My principal objection to this sort of curatorial trick is that, without due attention to the critical importance of context, we wrongly marry the production of the past to its present-day consumption. While it is perfectly possible to recreate the decibel level and tone of a hammer hitting an anvil from the nineteenth century, or a piece of music from 1750 (especially if we still have the score and original instruments), it is impossible to experience those sensations the same way as those who heard the hammer or music. What was noise, sound, comforting, or chilling to, say, a nineteenth-century ear is not entirely recoverable today not least because that world—how those sounds were perceived and understood by multiple constituencies—has evaporated. The same holds true for all historical evidence, visual included.¹³

Properly framed and contextualized, it is possible for curators to anchor the sensory artifacts they deploy to profile what those sensory experiences “meant” to contemporaries; in the absence of such efforts, we are merely catering to expectations, avoiding our responsibility to educate, and, in essence, surrendering to both larger forces of unexamined acts of consumption and the more corporatist and bureaucratic impetus to make the discipline of history “relevant,” a trajectory perfectly evidenced in higher education in the United Kingdom since the mid-1990s (where “rel-



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evance” is termed “impact”) and elsewhere on the continent, as in the Netherlands where some funding agencies insist on “knowledge utilization.”

Museums wishing to deploy historical acoustemology need better advice, it seems to me, as does the public, whom they serve. We can advise curators not only on which sounds to deploy (either newly recorded or archivally reproduced) but also how to deploy them and here I think we need to stress the preeminent importance of contextualizing the sounds that museum visitors hear. Rather than simply feeding sounds to ears, we need to help visitors understand the context in which those sounds were produced and how their reproduction can tell us not only about the nature of the past but about our own intellectual acoustic preferences and prejudices.

I conclude by saying that it is worth keeping in mind Alain Corbin’s wise counsel, first offered in 1991 in a book that, when translated into English in 1995, became *Time, Desire and Horror*. That counsel was, simply, that despite the manifest dividends facing historians of the senses generally—historians of sound and listening included—they must be willing to research not just the history of smell, sound, touch, sight, and taste; they must also pay particular attention to meaning, context, method, and be willing to engage in constructive criticism. And this is fundamentally the point I wish to stress. Healthy challenges, disagreements, interventions, all are essential to helping us remain alert to interpretive pitfalls and slippery false starts. This is a lesson being learned by scholars of all the senses but it is one that seems to have been more resonant among historians of smell than among those of sound (histories of taste and touch, while emerging, simply are too few at the moment to have assumed the mantle of interpretive interrogator; they are very much still in their “additive” phase). Not only do historians of smell argue about the legitimacy of, for example, Alain Corbin’s claims about the connection between modernity and deodorization but they are, as Jonathan Reinartz has argued, increasingly concerned to disrupt established and unhelpful interpretive binaries currently defining the field (foul versus fragrant, for example) by reconceptualizing smell as far more varied, subtle, and even intersensorial. Despite its deeper genealogy, historical acoustemology is quite a long way from this sort of critical examination.¹⁴

It is precisely because we care about the field of historical acoustemology that we should not shy away from informed, honest, and constructive criticism. To not do so will impoverish us all and stunt the maturity of arguably one of the most promising fields of historical inquiry to emerge in years.

Notes

1 On terminology, see David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds., *Keywords in Sound* (Durham,

- NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012), especially page 13. I will use these terms interchangeably in this essay.
- 2 My initial foray was in the form of a debate with Mitchell Snay and Bruce Smith in 2000–02. It is most readily accessed in my edited collection *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 365–404. I have made some of the points made in the present essay before—see, in particular, my “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,” *Journal of Social History* 40 (2007): 841–58, DOI: [10.1353/jsh.2007.0116](https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2007.0116). My modest influence on some of what is published in the field is due to some extent to my previous position of General Editor of *Studies in Sensory History* published by University of Illinois Press and my current one as General Editor of *Perspectives on Sensory History* published by Pennsylvania State University Press.
 - 3 Douglas Kahn, “Sound Awake,” *Australian Review of Books* (July 2000): 11–12.
 - 4 The list of works is too extensive to note here. A good sense of the range and extent may be gathered from a reading of the journal *The Senses and Society*; Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, *The Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and my own effort, *Sensing The Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
 - 5 See, for example, the almost one-thousand-page treatment offered by Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).
 - 6 Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 1–18.
 - 7 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Rath, *How Early America Sounded*. On the sensory history of race making, see my *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
 - 8 Neil Gregor, review of *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th- and 20th-Century Europe*, edited by Daniel Morat, *Sehepunkte* 15, no. 1 (2015), <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2015/01/25587.html>.
 - 9 See, for example, Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
 - 10 Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 183.
 - 11 Ari Y. Kelman, “Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies,” *The Senses and Society* 5, no. 2 (2010): 212–34, DOI: [10.2752/174589210x12668381452845](https://doi.org/10.2752/174589210x12668381452845).
 - 12 Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 1–3, 8–9. On the Civil War, see my *The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).



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- 13 For recent thinking on museums and sound, see Karin Bijsterveld, “Ears-on Exhibitions: Sound in the History Museum,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 4 (2015): 73–90.
- 14 Corbin, *Time, Desire and Horror*, 10–12; Jonathan Reinarz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

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