

Enriching public appreciation of the role of sound in society

Professor David Hendy's 2013 BBC Radio 4 series and accompanying book *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* engendered an enthusiastic and widespread public response, stimulating discussion and appreciation of the role of sound and listening in social history and contemporary life. It has also led to commissioned musical works, and the recordings have been given to the British Library to become a national cultural resource.

Overview

It would appear that we live in an increasingly noisy world, bombarded by the chatter of 21st-century life. Often, we try and shut out the din, craving quiet and hearkening back to a distant past that we assume was altogether quieter. But was it? In his 30-part BBC Radio 4 series and accompanying book, David Hendy (Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Sussex) challenges the notion of a quiet past by telling the extraordinary story of the sounds that we have made since the dawn of humanity. In a story that goes beyond words or music, he explores the diverse role of sound across 100,000 years of human history and what it communicates in all its forms.

Beginning with early echoes from Palaeolithic caves, through the rise of shamanism, to church bells ringing out religion's extraordinary hold on medieval Europe, *Noise* explores the evolving soundscape of religion and ritual. It reveals the complex and

subtle conversations of Africa's talking drums, the babble of civic life from the streets of Ancient Rome to the modern metropolis, the roar of Dickens' 'conquering engines' of the industrial revolution, the din of civil unrest, revolution and war, and the impact of 24-hour media.

Drawing on influences from archaeology, ethnography, musicology and mainstream social history, and using primary written sources, rare archival recordings and original field recordings, Hendy's research took an immersive approach to exploring the role of sound in the making of the modern mind. Structured around 30 historical case studies, this work provides a new understanding of how past events and processes were experienced subjectively by ordinary people and how sound and listening have played a role in all aspects of human life.

The Radio 4 series was originally broadcast in March/April 2013 and is now permanently available for download on iTunes and Audible.com. Original field recordings made for the series have been given to the British Library, and Hendy's accompanying book was published in 2013.

Achieving impact

This popular piece of research has stimulated and enriched public discussion and understanding of the importance of sound as an aspect of our history and contemporary social relations. *Noise* generated significant commentaries in major national and



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international newspapers and from influential bloggers, and prompted interactions with the general public, from feedback from radio listeners to comments on social media sites such as Twitter.

Hendy's work has reached a wide audience through its original radio broadcast, re-broadcast of excerpts both in the UK and internationally, and through online listening and downloads. In a typical week in the first quarter of 2013, programmes in the Radio 4 slot in which *Noise* appeared had approximately 2.4 million adult listeners (9.8 per cent of the available national audience). Programmes from the series were listened to online at the BBC website 312,000 times and downloaded as podcasts 41,000 times during the first two weeks. An interview and extended feature on *Noise* was broadcast on *The Takeaway*, a nationally syndicated public radio show based at WNYC, the biggest non-commercial radio station in New York. Following this, New Yorkers were invited to describe their own experiences and the Mayor's Environment Committee invited to respond: the station noted that it had 'received an overwhelming response to our segment on the effects of urban noise'. Hendy has subsequently been interviewed twice for WNYC about the history of sound, as well as by the BBC World Service, BBC Five Live, and Raidió Teilifís Éireann.

The accompanying book (Profile Books: London, 2013) was available in high-street bookshops, through newspapers and via iTunes, selling approximately 4,000 copies in the first two months. A US edition was published in October 2013 by Harper Collins, with rights also being sold to Korea, Turkey and Estonia. Prominent articles by Professor Hendy were published in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Huffington Post*, to coincide with publication. Various blogs have been written on how the series cast new light on the relationship between music and silence in music therapy, the relationship between music and Islam, on urban cycling policy, and even on animal consciousness.

Noise has also been the feature of several talks at public arts festivals including the Bath Literature Festival (March 2013) and Bristol Festival of Ideas (July 2013) and most recently as part of the Brighton University Insights Public Lectures series (January 2014).

The second major impact of this research has been the way it has inspired new artistic endeavours and created national cultural resources. The field-recordings and sound archives featured in the programme have been used in the creation of new musical works. Jo Acheson of the Hidden Orchestra received a commission to compose 30 different signature tunes for the series and Matthew Herbert, Head of the New Radiophonic Workshop, received a commission to create a 14-minute musical work following the overall narrative structure of *Noise*. August 2013 saw the world premiere of *Festival City*, a portrait of Edinburgh in music and sound by American composer Tod Machover, who drew upon recordings and research from *Noise* to inform his work.

The series has led directly to the creation of new permanent holdings by the British Library, accessible to both the public and future researchers, since the field recordings, as well as episodes from the series, have been handed over to the Library. Finally, *Noise* has contributed towards the goal of two national institutions – the BBC and the British Library – to enhance, as the BBC puts it, 'the art of listening'.

Future impact

Noise continues to have a public impact in the UK and abroad with an invitation to write a blog for Noise Action Week, campaigning for better aural environments in British cities, and a filmed interview for the US-based documentary film *In Pursuit of Silence*, to be released in 2015. A book from the series has also recently been published in Estonian, with positive reviews published in various Estonian newspapers, and Professor Hendy has been invited to speak at the 'Perfect Silence' Music and Arts Festival in Estonia, February 2015.

Funding and partnership

Professor Hendy was supported by the Leverhulme Trust during the making of *Noise*. The series itself, including travel for field recording, was funded by the BBC through one of Radio 4's largest-scale commissions of 2013. The series was also made in formal partnership with the British Library Sound Archive.



Preparing to record by the 'Door of No Return' at Elmina Fort in Ghana, which was a key stop on the route of the Atlantic slave trade.

Working with us

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The Public Culture Hub:
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