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Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space

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KEYNOTE

What was urban about urban sound in early
modern Europe (c. 1500-1800)?

David Garrioch

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David Garrioch

The author is professor emeritus at Monash University and has published extensively on Early Modern Urban History with a particular interest in Eighteenth Century Paris, including the award-winning *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* and the article 'Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns' from 2003.¹ His most recent book is *The Huguenots of Paris and the coming of Religious Freedom* (Cambridge UP, 2014) and he is currently working on the project *Artisan mobility, innovation, and the eighteenth-century Republic of Things*.

Introduction

This paper asks two inter-connected questions: what can we know about sound in this period, and what, if anything, was specific about early modern European urban sound? The first question arises in part because of the irony of using mainly written sources to comprehend aural environments. It is particularly acute if we wish to comprehend how sounds were understood and experienced. Some historical work has sought to move away from the idea of an 'objective' soundscape and to emphasise individual listening, while the history of emotions suggests that hearers were affected by sound in different ways. The second question relates more directly to urban history. Were differences between urban and rural environments of degree or of kind?

I suggest, firstly, that while we cannot ever fully recapture past aural experience, our sources and methods do enable us to sketch a history of urban sound. Secondly, I argue that urban sound, in the early modern period, was both qualitatively and quantitatively different from rural sound. Certain sounds were characteristic of urban environments, but above all their combination and their meanings were distinctive. Indeed, these characteristics contributed to making certain environments 'urban'.

1 D. Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*, (University of Chicago Press, 2002) and D. Garrioch, 'Sounds of the city: the soundscape of early modern European towns', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 5-25.



Fig. 1. Fire rattle, Vonderau Museum, Fulda. Photo: David Garrioch.

When I first wrote about urban sound, I was living in a tiny hamlet in the French Alps. I remember listening to the sounds around me and reflecting on what made *that* soundscape different from those of the early modern towns I was writing about. I realised that many sounds could be heard in both contexts: the bells of the local church, the gusts of the wind, various animal and human sounds. The second part of this paper points to some sounds that were characteristic of early modern urban environments, but I will argue that what most clearly demarcated urban soundscapes was the intensity of sounds and above all the complex messages they conveyed. To demonstrate that point, I will examine bells and human voices as illustrations of the multilayered semiotic systems of early modern European towns. This paper begins, however, by asking an important prior question: how we can know about sounds in the past? It is crucial to bear in mind the limits of our understanding. We can learn a lot about past sound, but there remains much that we cannot know. In particular, when we try to understand how people in the past experienced and understood sound, there is much that we are obliged to interpret, to reconstruct imaginatively, with all the risks this entails.

Our sources and their limits

Recovering the history of sound is not easy. We rarely have direct access to the sounds themselves and must rely on the ways people described them. The one exception to this is where we possess the objects that produced particular sounds.



Fig. 2. Side Drum, Netherlands, 18th century. The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

Many early modern churchbells have survived, along with handbells, clocks, rattles and drums, tools such as hammers and files, and certain musical instruments.

Yet we cannot always be sure how they were sounded in the past. Stringed instruments can have varied tunings. Bells can be rung in very different ways: quickly or slowly; with the clapper hitting just one side, or both sides. And even if we think we have reconstructed the sounds people heard in the past, we must still ask what they meant to their hearers.

For that, we must rely primarily on written sources. Certain legislative documents, for example, prescribe what a fire alarm should sound like. Others ban certain noises, especially at night. Sometimes, too, personal records such as diaries, letters and autobiographies offer clues to the significance of specific sounds. We possess court testimonies in which witnesses describe sounds, screams or voices raised in anger, for example, and how they interpreted them. Sometimes poems and novels, too, evoke urban noise and what they meant to the writer.

Rich visual sources have also survived, notably paintings and engravings such as those in Figures 3 and 4 (p. 5), that depict activities that we know produced sounds.

Written or performed music, too, can occasionally be helpful, for folksongs sometimes preserve oral traditions, and the tunes of some street cries have been written down or incorporated into compositions.² There are even a few classical pieces that evoke certain sounds, such as Boccherini's *Musica notturna*. Each of these genres has complex conventions, which have changed over time, but with a knowledge of those we can deduce something of the meaning of the sounds they record.

2 There are many recordings available of Clément Janequin's *Cris de Paris* (1529).



Fig. 3. William Hogarth, *The Enraged Musician* (1741). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain.



Fig. 4. Thomas Rowlandson, *Miseries of London* (1807). National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public Domain.

All such sources, though, present challenges for the historian. We are often limited by the imprecision of language.³ A police ordinance banning ‘undue’ noise at night does not tell us what the quality of that noise was. Both written and visual sources require us to imagine the sounds they describe. Sometimes that is easy: a mention of crows cawing, for instance, refers to a sound that probably has evolved

3 E. Cockayne, *Hubbub. Filth, Noise, and Stench in England* (New Haven and London, 2007), 16. S. Rosenfeld, ‘On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear’, *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), 316-334 (318).

very little. Most animal noises are no doubt similar to those we hear today, although cattle, horses, dogs and other domestic breeds have changed significantly through human selection. The rumble of carriage wheels is well within our imaginative range, yet in order to reconstruct it, we need to know whether the street was paved – before the eighteenth century, most were not – as well as the auditory qualities of the surrounding buildings.

We must also consider how complete our record of past sound is. Many written sources primarily describe unusual sounds. Urban descriptions, for example, generally focus on the churches that possessed a carillon or that had especially fine bells. Other accounts record the most spectacular events: a royal entry, notable civic processions, particular religious celebrations. In Milan, the Easter passion play provided by the Jesuit church was famous and we know something about the music that was performed.⁴ By contrast, the archives say little about ordinary parish processions.

Similarly, judicial testimony generally records sounds that were relevant to the case: voices raised, rude noises, screams. They are particularly useful if we are interested in the meanings of such sounds, since the actors describe them. But we hear about them precisely because they were *not* ordinarily acceptable. Nevertheless, these kinds of sources can sometimes tell us about the everyday, for instance when witnesses evoke the absence of a sound they would normally expect to hear. A neighbour failing to open the shutters at first light might be mentioned as a signal that something was wrong.

Literary and musical sources pose other challenges. Their authors chose sounds that fitted the atmosphere they wished to create or that met the needs of the plot. Autobiographies are sometimes nostalgic, and we must recognise that memory can be deceptive, although their great value is that they identify sounds that had particular meaning for the writer. Yet none of these types of sources describes the *soundscape*, by which I mean the integrality of urban sounds at a particular moment.⁵

We must remember, furthermore, that people in the past blanked out most of the sounds they heard, just as we do. The physiological process of hearing is different from the conscious recognition of sound. Yet both can be important for the historian, because the entire soundscape, whether consciously heard or not, created the context that gave particular sounds their meaning. I will give examples later.

4 G. Borrani, 'Diario milanese dal 1737 al 1784', Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, N18.SUSS, 8 Feb. 1757.

5 R. M. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, (Rochester, Destiny Books, 1994).

In practice, the history of sound includes at least two different sorts of project. The first is to find out what sounds were present at a particular time and place in the past: they represent what we might call the ‘objective’ soundscape. It may be important for historical documentaries or museum reconstructions. But if we are interested in the ways people responded to sound, in their emotional or physical reactions, then we need to think about what they consciously heard. We also need to consider, in that case, that particular individuals or groups were conscious of different sounds, or that they reacted differently to the same sound. An example is the servant who listened for a bell their employer used to summon them. It was irrelevant to other people, who therefore disregarded it.⁶

Both of these approaches to sound are important for my question of what was ‘urban’ about urban sound. That question involves, on the one hand, identifying which sounds existed in towns that were not generally found elsewhere. On the other, it requires consideration of the meanings of those sounds and of the specific behaviours associated with them. For this, too, we must go beyond individual sounds and consider them in combination, as semiotic systems. While individual noises conveyed meanings to people who were able to interpret them, so did the full panoply of urban sounds.

Urban sound

So what sounds were found predominantly in towns, those we might consider to be *markers* of urban societies?⁷ For this purpose, ‘urban’ is best defined in terms of the functions – economic, political, and social – that a place fulfilled within its region or state, and that gave it particular characteristics. Of course, settlements of different size had shared characteristics, but to varying degrees. Hence the commercial function that we associate with towns might also be present, to a lesser extent, in a large village that served as a market centre. In relation to consumer culture, a case can be made for an ‘urbanization’ of the countryside in modern times, as what began as urban practices – fashion in clothing, some types of manufacturing, advertising – spread beyond their original locations. There were degrees of ‘urban-ness’ in soundscapes, too, since certain sounds were not confined to towns and cities, but were most conspicuous there. Bells offer a good example. A village typically had a few, but even relatively small towns might have hundreds.

6 On hearing and listening, B. Truax, *Acoustic Communication* (Norwood, N.J., 1984), 13-27.

7 Much of what follows is developed in D. Garrioch, ‘Sounds of the city: the soundscape of early modern European towns’, *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 5-25. Many similar points have been made, with reference to England, by B. R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England. Attending to the O-Factor*, (Chicago and London, 1999), and Cockayne, *Hubbub*, 106-30.

Of course, not every town had exactly the same functions. Places with royal courts, and hence a concentration of nobles, were more familiar with horses ridden through the streets and, by the later seventeenth century, with carriages. Ports were characterised by the shouts of watermen, the thud of wooden hulls against wharves, and the clanging of ships' bells. Garrison towns had a strong military presence, accompanied by drums and firearms. Some towns contained more manufacturing than others. The metal trades, more diverse in towns than elsewhere, typically involved clanging, hammering, and the whooping of bellows. But goldsmiths tapped and scraped, cutlers filed and ground. The building trades brought hammering and sawing, sometimes stonemasonry, and the shouts of teams of workers. Above all, cities offered a density and range of work sounds that were not found elsewhere.

Various kinds of music, too, were primarily urban. Most early modern towns had far more churches than survive today, each one employing music for liturgical celebrations. In most Catholic areas, they used trumpets, serpens, even full orchestras. Drums and fifes marked military parades and sometimes religious processions, and drums might also signal the evening curfew. Trumpets and horns were usually official instruments, sounded before public criers announced the latest royal decree. By contrast, fiddles, pipes, and other forms of percussion were widely used in taverns, for dancing or to accompany singers.

Certain non-human sounds were also characteristic of towns. The poet John Gay described how, on windy days in London, 'the swinging [shop-]signs your ears offend with creaking noise'.⁸ This was part of the soundtrack of early modern urban life. But it was far more than background. As many authors have pointed out, urban sound functioned as a semiotic system that provided the inhabitants with many sorts of information. A great many sounds contributed to this, but for brevity, I will focus on two examples: human voices and bells.

Human voices were heard everywhere people lived, but in towns were more continuous and generally louder. In narrow streets, neighbours shouted from the windows, without competition from the engine noise that often drowns them out in modern cities. Street cries were everywhere. Balladeers hawked new words set to old tunes. Religious chants echoed from churches, schools, and chapels. Snatches of song spilled from the doors and windows of taverns and of some workplaces: in late seventeenth-century Paris, an apprentice to a cloth and lace-seller recalled that the shopgirls sang as they worked.⁹ Voices carried a wide variety of infor-

8 J. Gay, *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, first published 1716, Book I, lines 157–8. I have used W.H. Williams' edition (London, 1922).

9 U. McIlvenna, *Singing the News of Death. Execution Ballads in Europe, 1500-1900* (Oxford, 2022). N. Lyon-Caen, *Un roman bourgeois sous Louis XIV* (Limoges, 2008), 83-4.



Fig. 5. Nicolas Bonnart, *Crieur public*, seventeenth century. Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Public domain.

mation, starting with neighbourhood news. Public criers told of dynastic celebrations, public executions, city regulations, royal decrees, funerals and objects lost and found.¹⁰ Songs sometimes contained commentary on events or prominent people.¹¹ Street cries offered goods and services, and urban descriptions often comment on their diversity, their carrying quality, and their incomprehensibility to outsiders.¹² They were products of the urban environment, whose ambient noise encouraged the development of specific cries, penetrating but often musical, that facilitated recognition.

Most of these sounds were not consciously registered by the inhabitants, but unusual auditory signals, such as a fire bell or a call to arms, immediately claimed attention. So did the noise of angry crowds, louder and more frequent than in rural environments, drawing more participants and amplified by narrow streets and tall buildings.¹³

Yet the meaning of these sounds went well beyond their obvious content. If we think about a blind person navigating the streets, we can imagine how concen-

10 On the complexity of official sounds, see M. Fogel, *Les cérémonies de l'information dans la France du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1989).

11 There is a large literature on songs. Recent works include N. Hammond, *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2019); McIlvenna, *Singing the News*; R. Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Harvard UP, 2010).

12 L-S. Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 12 vols (Amsterdam, 1782-88), 5: 66-7. J. Pezsl, 'Sketch of Vienna' [1786-90], abridged translation in H.C. Robbins Landon, *Mozart and Vienna* (New York, 1991), 82.

13 The most complete study is for France: J. Nicolas, *La rébellion française, 1661-1789* (Paris, 2002), which contains many mentions of sounds.



Fig. 6. *Cries of London*. Rudolph Ackermann, 'Buy a trap, a rat-trap'. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain.

trations of street cries and song enabled them to identify taverns, marketplaces, specific shops and churches. But for all the residents of each neighbourhood, voices were part of its ambience, making it familiar and livable. They were markers of place, but also of time. In Vienna, the market finished at 10 am, but, according to one observer, the street noise was loudest between six and seven in the evening.¹⁴ In many cities, hawkers passed at regular times on particular days. In Milan, neighbourhood-based lay religious confraternities gathered around neighbourhood crosses in the evenings, to sing and pray.¹⁵ Voices helped to shape what Barry Truax called 'acoustic communities', often based on very local territories.¹⁶

The same was true of the different accents, dialects, and languages that were a feature of many towns, particularly ports. In Venice, ships arrived from around the Mediterranean, so it was common to hear Turkish, Greek, Armenian, French, Sicilian, Arabic, Spanish, and other languages, and regular trade encouraged the formation of immigrant communities. Sometimes these were reinforced by proximity: Huguenot refugees were concentrated in the London suburb of Spitalfields. But such groups were not always geographically concentrated. The Greek inha-

14 Pezzl, 'Sketch', 82-3.

15 D. Garrioch, 'Sacred neighbourhoods and secular neighbourhoods: Milan and Paris in the eighteenth century', *Journal of Urban History*, 27 (2001), 405-19.

16 Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 57-83. Smith, *Acoustic World*, 46-7.



Fig. 7. Members of religious confraternity praying before cross of San Materno, Milan. Eighteenth-century engraving. Photo: David Garrioch.

bitants of Venice formed an ethnic, linguistic and religious community, centred on their own institutions but not living in a particular neighbourhood.¹⁷ In Stockholm too, the congregations of the official Finnish and German churches were defined not by locality but by language.

Where there were established groups speaking different tongues, language and accent underpinned both identity and identification. In eighteenth-century Paris, German-speakers often socialised and displayed group solidarity, in tavern brawls for example. French speakers identified them as a distinct group.¹⁸ The same applied to immigrants from the Auvergne, in south-central France. They demonstrated a high degree of cohesion in disputes, and were recognisable to others, perhaps by their dress but certainly by their dialect. A witness to one loud altercation stated

17 E. C. Burke, *The Greeks of Venice, 1498-1600: Immigration, Settlement, and Integration* (Turnhout, 2016), especially 194-209.

18 For example, Archives nationales, Paris (AN), Y10996, 13 April 1755.

that 'he understood nothing of their Auvergnat language except many threats and vulgar swearing.'¹⁹

Some cities developed distinctive versions of the dominant language: Cockney English in London (spoken, supposedly, by those born within earshot of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow), and 'poissard' in Paris. Milan had a dual linguistic system: the social elites used a version of standard Italian, but some sermons were preached in Milanese dialect so that they would be understood by 'working people'. Here too, language shaped social identities and hierarchies, since these were predominantly working people's ways of speaking, often mocked by their 'betters'.²⁰ Verbal expression also reinforced differences of age and sex: for example, men and women used, and were subject to, different forms of insult. This generally operated in conjunction with class, since young middle- or upper-class women were taught to be quieter and less emphatic than men or even older women.²¹ Rowdiness was expected of young men, and their greater willingness to engage in street violence also undoubtedly made them respond differently to its auditory signals.²²

Urban voices marked religious difference, too. In Paris in 1664, the authorities closed an illicit Protestant school, particularly singling out 'the outrage [the children] cause by loudly singing psalms and hymns'.²³ In London, where there was greater religious freedom, satirical depictions of Dissenter meeting houses condemned their singing as 'a sort of Jarring Medley of Sounds'. A century later, the 'joyful noise' of the early Methodists was similarly condemned by other Protestant groups.²⁴ Sounds shared or rejected thus helped to define the boundaries of religious communities. These examples also reveal sound to be both a source of tension and a political tool, as different religious groups attempted to suppress or deny the legitimacy of the 'noise' produced by the other. They even attempted to expel the 'other' from the space of the community, both physically and acoustically. In seventeenth-century France, Catholic or Protestant preachers sometimes tried

19 D. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and community in Paris, 1740-1790*, (Cambridge UP, 1986), 122, 124. Quotation from AN Y12816, 4 January 1786, witness 14. Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

20 Borrani, 'Diario milanese', N.41.SUSS, 7 July 1783. L. Picard, *Restoration London* (London, 1997), 198-200. L. Wright, 'Speaking and listening in early modern London', in J. Stewart and A. Cowan (eds), *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500* (Farnham, 2007), 60-74. P. Jaubert, *Dictionnaire raisonné universel des arts et métiers*, 4 vols (Paris, 1773), article 'Poissardes'.

21 L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1998), 59-110. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal insults in eighteenth-century Paris', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *Essays in the Social History of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 104-19. P. Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Cambridge, 1993), 130-2.

22 M. Berglund, *Massans röst. Upplopp och gatubråk i Stockholm 1719-1848* (Stockholm, 2009), 122-4. For examples of responses in two very different cities, D. Rosenthal, *Kings of the Street. Power, Community, and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Turnhout, 2015), esp. 120-127; A. Jarrick, *Back to Modern Reason* (Liverpool, 1992), 21-55.

23 AN Y12238, 7 May 1664.

24 *Works of Mr Thomas Brown*, 3rd ed, 4 vols (1715): 3: 287; P. Bailey, 'Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise', *Body and Society*, 2 (1996), 49-66 (50).



Fig. 8. William Hogarth, *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism. A Medley* (1762). Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

to monopolise public squares, gathering large crowds of their own followers and filling the space with their own voices and with collective songs and prayers.²⁵

A similar politics of sound also existed in more secular contexts. In many towns, neighbourhood disputes were taken into the tribunal of the street, with ritualised expressions of anger and insult, each side attempting to discredit its opponent and win over the onlookers.²⁶ Most popular protest also relied on shouting and loud chanting. In some contexts, though, protest took the opposite form. Whereas royal entries into towns were usually marked by loud cheering, Louis XVI's arrival in Paris a few days after his attempted escape from the Revolution in 1791 was watched by large crowds who remained eerily silent. Such uses of sound for political purposes were primarily urban, because it was in towns that religious and ethnic diversity were most common, and the density of population facilitated mobilization.

25 K. P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries. Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early Modern France* (Washington, 2005), 44, 88-96.

26 Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 111-38; Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*, 33-55; J. Farr, *Hands of Honor. Artisans and their world in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca and London, 1988), 180-89; J.A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England: The Church Courts at York*, *Borthwick Papers* 58 (York, 1980); R. Shoemaker, 'The Decline of Public Insult in London, 1660-1800', *Past and Present*, 169 (November 2000): 97-131.

My second case study is that of bells, which were far louder and more numerous in urban areas than in rural ones. The French provincial town of Metz, for example, with a population around 40,000 in 1791, had 188 bells.²⁷ Urban bells conveyed a wide range of meanings. The most dreaded was the urgent tolling that, in many places, warned of fire or some other dire emergency. It immediately cut through the daily cacophony or the nocturnal silence and brought people running. But most signals were more benign. Church bells delimited the working day, announced religious services, and were rung differently on holy days. Their complete silence, before Easter Sunday, commanded reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Handbells were used for diverse purposes: by the nightwatchmen of London to reassure the population that all was well, in eighteenth-century Strasburg to alert the lamplighters to start work, and in Catholic towns to warn of the approach of a priest bearing the sacraments.²⁸ Bells in Amsterdam's harbour signalled the return of ships from long voyages, and the city bell in Milan was rung when criminals were about to be punished.²⁹ Dynastic events and military victories, and in England, elections, were marked by ringing all the bells at once.

Bells were thus crucial elements in an urban information system, but their role, like that of voices, extended beyond straightforward signals. They too were markers of place. Each town had a distinctive range of bells, and so did individual churches. In many places, as in the French town of Lyon, the main bell in every parish was tuned to a different note.³⁰ Their ringing therefore distinguished each neighbourhood from other parts of the city. Much of the information they conveyed was intended primarily for the locals. The tolling of the passing bell announced the imminent death of a member of the congregation and invited people to pray.

Like voices, therefore, bells contributed to the formation of geographically defined acoustic communities, with a shared sense of identity and belonging.³¹ Church bells lent a spiritual dimension to such communities. In many parts of Europe, furthermore, bells were held to be sacred objects, with real power to defend the town or the parish from harm. They might even have maleficent power, and there are instances of bells being put on trial and physically punished.³² Such be-

27 A. Corbin, *Village Bells. Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* (New York, 1998. First published 1994), 9.

28 Gay, 'Trivia', Book III, line 139. L. Gwiazdzinski, 'La nuit dimension oubliée de la ville: entre animation et insécurité', Ph.D. thesis, Université de Strasbourg, 2002, 94. D.G. Allen et al. (eds), *The Diary of John Quincy Adams*, 2 vols, (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 1: 227.

29 S. Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (London, 1999), 314. Borrani, 'Diario milanese', N.41.SUSS, 25 Feb., 9 Aug. 1783.

30 J-P. Gutton, *Bruits et sons dans notre histoire. Essai sur la reconstitution du paysage sonore* (Paris, 2000), 29.

31 William Tullett has stressed the emotional dimension of this identity in 'Political Engines: The Emotional Politics of Bells in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 59 (2020): 555–81.

32 D.M. Zolli and C. Brown, 'Bell on Trial: The Struggle for Sound after Savonarola', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72 (2019), 54–96.

liefs led certain Protestant groups to oppose many uses of bells, which they saw as superstitious.

In towns, the multiplication of churches meant that in each location there was a complex hierarchy of bells. The most important church had the largest bell, which rang the deepest and most carrying note. On certain occasions, in many places, other churches were not allowed to ring their bells until the cathedral – or in Stockholm, the church of the nobility – had sounded. In Catholic areas, after the late sixteenth century, the Council of Trent's insistence on the primacy of parish churches for lay worship led to limits being placed on the bells of convents and monasteries. Here again, the number permitted, as well as their tuning, reflected the religious hierarchy. In some places, as in Florence, the city bell was larger and deeper than any of the church bells, a clear statement of authority by the secular government.³³

For this reason, bells – like voices – were part of an urban politics of sound, in which conflicts were common. They were sometimes linked to the 'high' politics of kingdom or church. Hence, in 1688, the Catholic Lord Mayor of Dublin had the Protestant officers of Christ Church arrested because they had not rung the bells joyfully enough for the birth of the son of James II, the Catholic king. Such conflicts played out in local struggles for control of bells. In England, Anglican churchwardens used them to drown out sermons by Dissenter ministers, again attempting, acoustically, to exclude opposing groups from the community.³⁴ In Florence, after the overthrow of the religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola in 1498, his enemies reduced his monastery to silence, as punishment. They removed its bell and forbade the brothers to preach, sing, or pray together. Less dramatic struggles might also take place within an individual neighbourhood, as when the parish of San Babila in Milan protested vigorously when a local confraternity attempted to erect its own bell-tower.³⁵

Conclusion

I have argued that our sources do not permit us fully to recreate the soundscapes of the past, and that even when we do have access to the sounds that past societies heard, we can never understand and experience them exactly as they did.

33 Gutton, *Bruits*, 36-7; Instructions from city Consistory, SSA, Maria parish, J11, fol. 22 (1751); Encyclopédie, article 'Cloche (Jurisprudence)'. Zolli and Brown, 'Bell on Trial', 71-2.

34 K. Milne (ed.), *Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin: A History* (Dublin, 2000), 269 (I am grateful to David Cuthbert for this reference). For English examples, Tullett, 'Political Engines', 566-73.

35 Zolli and Brown, 'Bell on Trial', 66. M. Olivieri Baldissarri, 'I "poveri prigionieri": La confraternità della Santa Croce e della Pietà dei carcerati a Milano nei secoli XVI-XVIII (Milano, 1985), 199-223. See also D. Garrioch, "'Such a despotic rule": confraternities and the parish in eighteenth-century Paris and Milan', in N. Terpstra and A. Prospero (eds), *Faith's Boundaries: Laity and Clergy in Early Modern Confraternities* (Turnhout, 2012), 353-74.

The messages that sounds conveyed, the ways people listened, and the impact that their perceptions of sound had, were socially, culturally, and historically determined. We can, nevertheless, gain sufficient insight to enable us to understand, imaginatively, how past sounds and soundscapes worked.

Few sounds were heard exclusively in cities and towns, yet urban environments had distinctive soundscapes. Although they were enormously varied, depending on the specific economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics of each town, each one offered a far greater concentration of human-produced sounds than rural contexts did. They were also more varied, and often louder. Yet what people heard, and what it meant to them, varied according to a wide range of factors: the hearer's occupation, age, sex, origin, religion, and the nature of their integration into the local community. Each of these factors, and no doubt others as well, determined which sounds they listened for or heard, what these sounds meant to them, and how they responded. Yet above all, urban sounds combined to form rich semiotic systems. My examples of human voices and of bells illustrate the complex and highly contextual meanings that they could convey to people who understood the code.

I wish to conclude with an important point that I have not had space to develop. Urban centres were also the places where soundscapes changed most rapidly, and arguably most significantly. Even in the early modern period, they became more secular, more commercial, and more continuous, although not necessarily louder, and new sounds appeared as old ones vanished. Changing forms of construction and of urban design influenced the audibility of certain noises. Attitudes to sound, furthermore, shifted earlier in cities and towns, with anti-noise campaigns targeting particular sounds and groups within the population.³⁶ Urban language and speech patterns also changed, in general, faster than rural ones. Some of these aspects of the history of sound have been studied, but all of them deserve further examination.

36 Building on P. Bailey, 'Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise', *Body and Society*, 2 (1996): 49-66. See also Cockayne, *Hubbub*, 106-30.

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