

## HEARING MODERN HISTORY

### AUDITORY CULTURES IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

#### 9TH BLANKENSTEE COLLOQUIUM

17 - 19 JUNE 2010, BERLIN

#### ABSTRACTS

##### **Wolfgang Ernst (Humboldt Universität Berlin)**

Towards a Media-Archaeology of Sonic Articulation

A new kind of historical knowledge has emerged: the research into past sonospheres and ways of listening. So far historiography has privileged the visible and readable archival records (thus fulfilling McLuhan's diagnosis of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* as being dominated by visual knowledge). But since Edison's phonograph sound, noise and voices can be technically recorded and thus memorized. From that result (almost self-expressively) extended possibilities of sonic heritage; at the same time, the question arised if soundscapes for the time previous to Edison can be reconstructed. Even if history as a cognitive notion of organizing past data will never be audible but only readable in complex textual argumentation (or be listened to by tellers of tales or lectures by historian), the historical method will certainly be extended to sonic articulation as well – and even be pushed to its margins.

##### **Holger Schulze (Universität der Künste Berlin)**

The Sound and the Senses. Historical Anthropology of Sound

Sound is a rather young scientific entity. But since the beginning of this century we witness the construction and emergence of a new research field called Sound Studies. This presentation gives an overview on current international, intercultural and transdisciplinary developments in Sound Studies – sounded out from the hearing perspective (Sam Auinger) of a Historical Anthropology of Sound and the Senses: What terminological concepts are currently discussed to construct sound adequately as a scientific entity? What research methods would be auditorily as well as sonically appropriate to explore culturally and historically diverse ways of hearing and sounding? What elements in the Sound Studies imply a profound science critique regarding concepts of the human sensorium and the specificity of the auditory?

##### **Mark M. Smith (University of South Carolina)**

Futures of Hearing Pasts

Part historiographical reflection, part meditation, this address traces the genealogy of the writing on the history of sound, sound studies, and historical acoustemology, assesses the current state of the “field”, and suggests what writing on sound studies might look – and sound – like a decade or more from now. I stress the largely underappreciated “deep” origins of the field, trace its growth in the 1990s, and try to account for the veritable explosion of studies in the past decade. The address also argues that the field is better understood as a desirable “habit” of historical inquiry

and ends by considering the best metrics for evaluating the success of sound studies in future years. How will we know when the “field” is no longer “new”? How do our colleagues working in other areas of historical inquiry use, perceive, and understand sound studies? What are the particular intellectual and interpretive dividends of a matured historiography? And what are the barriers to that maturation?

**Karin Bijsterveld (Maastricht University)**

Auditory Topoi in the Representation of Urban Soundscapes

This paper reports on the Maastricht research program *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*. This program studies how the dramatization of urban sounds has articulated changing identities of both the city and its inhabitants between 1875 and 2000. It starts out from the observation that we do not have direct access to the soundscapes of the urban past. Apart from a few occasional anthropological recordings, we only have knowledge of these soundscapes through the staging of sound in historical texts, radio plays and films: our mediated cultural heritage of sound. Studying this cultural heritage, however, opens up a unique entrance into the changing representation of cities and its inhabitants. The city, with its high population density, has been *the* locus of clashes over sound between inhabitants, which vary from conflicts about bells to debates about traffic noise and amplified music. These clashes expressed the cultural meanings these sounds had to city dwellers, as well as their views on the character of urban life (dynamic, alienating) and their position in it. In radio plays and films, the sonic representation of cities has even been partially canonized. The program’s scholarly aim is therefore to study dramatizations of sound in historical documents, radio plays and films – as mediated cultural heritage – in order to enhance our understanding of the continuity and change in representations of the city. This paper zooms in on one form of dramatization in particular: the use of “auditory topoi”.

**Annelies Jacobs (Maastricht University)**

Analyzing the Dramatization of Sound in the Urban Past

This paper examines the historiography of urban sound in order to find approaches that would enable my research on dramatizations of sound in texts as an expression of urban identities. I will discuss three perspectives that can be distinguished within this historiography. I also argue that it would be unhelpful to exclude either one of these perspectives when analyzing urban sound. In the first approach to studying the sound of the past, sound is perceived as an environmental and given quality; an “ecology of sound” affecting human life and human behavior in a rather unmediated way. Applying this approach means scrutinizing texts for hints about (changes in) the sounds produced at the time studied. The second approach understands a soundscape as a kind of information system operational within a specific time period and location. Here the focus is on what texts can reveal about the information citizens deduced from the sounds they heard, and the meaning they attributed to these sounds. These can be meanings intentionally communicated through sound, like the tolling of bells, or unintentionally – like the sounds produced by a gathering crowd. The third approach narrows sound down to a political and societal issue. Its focus is on texts in which sounds are judged and evaluated, and on the manner in which this is accomplished. Combining the three approaches can support the analysis of past sound without violating its complex character. The problem we have to face is that we do not know exactly how the physics of sound and its cultural meanings interrelate. We can therefore neither do without knowledge of the construct and the physics of sound. Together, these approaches aim at capturing shifts in the relationship between the sounds that could be heard, sounds that were reported to be heard, their meaning, and the way they were evaluated.

**Sven Oliver Müller (Bielefeld/Firenze)**

Suspense, Ennui, and the Invention of Silence. Berlin, London, Paris, and Vienna 1850-1900

**Philip V. Bohlmann (University of Chicago)**

**Sebastian Klotz (Universität Leipzig)**

**Lars-Christian Koch (Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin)**

Berlin, Chicago, Kolkata. Urban Auditory Cultures in Historical and Comparative Perspective

The role of music in urban space has primarily been assessed in terms of a *reflection* of urban life. In our project, dedicated to the auditory cultures and musical practices of three metropolitan areas in Europe, North America and India, we examine a different view: music and auditory cultures are *sites of negotiation* for urban identities to the extent that they anticipate urban change and could be used to analyse urban transformations. By combining empirical, historical and conceptual perspectives, the Berlin, Chicago, Kolkata project, initiated in 2008, seeks to develop a methodological framework in which urban auditory cultures can be accessed as an active means of social agency. This agency emerges out of the interplay among traditions, site-transgressing technologies and very site-specific effects of globalisation. It affords urban areas a specific auditory *habitus* that apparently is not controlled by a single social actor. The comparative perspective yields discoveries that point towards area-specific self-images and towards complex filtering effects for globalisation: Kolkata's dense and cacophonous auditory intercourse in public, and its high-profile classical music tradition that resonates in current Bengali rock contrasts with Chicago's segregated auditory expressions of its various neighborhoods that are being transgressed during public parades, lending the metropolis an integrative auditory image, whereas Berlin prides itself on its electronic music culture flooding out of the mobile DJ decks and celebrated in make-shifts clubs in uninhabited inner city spaces, culminating in an event culture that represents large portion of Berlin's tourism industry. The project pleads for a reassessment of auditory cultures as tools of social enquiry.

**Anthony Enns (Dalhousie University)**

The Human Telephone. Physiology, Neurology, and Sound Technologies

With the help of Clarence Blake, a Boston ear specialist, Alexander Graham Bell constructed an improved version of Édouard-Léon Scott's phonograph that employed a severed human ear to make visual inscriptions of sonic vibrations. Although this device did not help deaf students to see speech, which was its original purpose, it eventually led to the invention of the telephone, and one of Bell's earliest prototypes was a "human ear telephone" that similarly employed an actual human ear. These devices have often led historians to conclude that the telephone represented a prosthetic device that simulated and extended the functions of the ear, but few critics have attempted to connect these early sound technologies to the broader crisis in perception that occurred in the nineteenth century. Jonathan Crary points out, for example, that the rise of new media technologies in the nineteenth century was closely related to the scientific study of human physiology, which introduced a mechanistic understanding of the perceptual apparatus. Just as the development of new optical media was based on studies in physiological optics, so too was

the development of new sound technologies inspired by the study of physiological acoustics, which conceived of the ear as a technological device for receiving and relaying acoustic information. Bell's "audiometer," for example, was designed to measure the hearing capacity of the ear by applying the same technical principles and standards used to measure the strength of telephone signals, and because the ear was thought to provide a direct conduit to the brain Blake also claimed that the telephone could be employed to study cerebral functions. Through a close examination of the history of the phonograph, the audiometer, and the telephone, this paper will examine the connections between the development of these early sound technologies and the study of physiological acoustics and neurology. In both of these closely related fields, the perceptual and psychic apparatus were conceived in technological terms, which effectively made the ear and the telephone indistinguishable.

### **Alexandra Hui (Mississippi State University)**

#### Noteworthy Neighbors? Hearing in the Laboratory and Listening on the Street at the End of the Nineteenth Century

In an 1884 article, "Ein Brief über die 'Clavierseuche'," the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick decried the scourge of the modern city: the piano playing of the neighbors. The errors and missteps of "tinkling dilettantes" and "practicing students" assaulted the poor, defenseless ear of the city-dweller. Hanslick lamented the anxiety of awaiting the well known but inevitably mis-executed chord of the neighboring Fräulein and the permanent dulling of the ear perpetrated by the daily cacophony of the "piano epidemic." The torments to the refined listener, according to Hanslick, were both psychological and physical. Six years later, the physiological psychologist (though he could also be termed psychophysicist, philosopher, and/or ethnomusicologist) Carl Stumpf engaged in a vicious polemic with Wilhelm Wundt, also a physiological psychologist, over their respective tone-differentiation studies. Repeatedly, in the series of articles that constituted the exchange, Stumpf insisted on experimentation that accounted for the bias of "music-consciousness," even "music-*infected*-consciousness." He criticized Wundt's disregard for the role of musical expertise in psychophysical studies of sound sensation. The language employed by Hanslick and Stumpf is provocative, and implies that musicianship was a disease or at least a pre-existing condition that left its victims susceptible to torments fueled by, say, the growing popularity of the pianoforte. Musical expertise manipulated one's aesthetic experience, both on the city street and inside the lab. And yet, certainly neither Hanslick nor Stumpf would have condemned musicianship itself. Hanslick explained that the only possible means of preventing further psychologically nervous, physiologically dulled victims of the "piano epidemic", would be a reduction in piano students. So, sacrifice the performers for the sake of the listeners. For Stumpf, the bias of "music-consciousness" allowed for better insight into sound sensation, indeed such a bias in the experimental subject was ideal. Stumpf claimed musical expertise was a necessary component of scientific expertise. In this paper I explore the ways in which the changing status of musical expertise informed and was reinforced by two significant shifts in the psychophysical study of sound sensation. First, as evidenced in the Stumpf-Wundt debate, there was a narrowing of the conception of hearing. Second, the uncertain status of musical expertise reflected a similarly uncertain role for subjective, individual musical experience in the laboratory and, ultimately, a decoupling of musical aesthetics from psychophysical studies of sound sensation. I examine how Stumpf and Hanslick's varied efforts to defend the status musical expertise both inside the laboratory and on the streets of the modern city reflect the inversely related conceptions of hearing and listening – as the definition of hearing narrowed, the understanding of listening widened and became increasingly layered – at the end of the nineteenth century.

## **Stefan Gauß (Universität der Künste Berlin)**

### Listening to the Horn. On the Cultural History of Phonograph and Gramophone

At the end of the 19th century phonograph and gramophone realised the possibility to reproduce sound technically. The „phonoobjects“ widened the range of what we can hear through reproducing the reality with its own sound. In only a few years the phonoobjects were offered on the market as technical apparatus and were obtained by the contemporaries. As a media for recording, storing and reproducing the phonoobjects transformed the dissolving sound to a material permanence. Within this process the sound split away from its relationships with space and time. With this view the phonoobjects are linked in the case of the history of civilisation with other new objects of modernity, which had a basic effect on the relation and the reception of space and time. To start with this adds up to the automobile, the train, the telegraph and the telephone. My analysis is based on my research on the history of the phonoobjects: *Sylus, Groove, Tube. Cultural History of Phonograph and Gramophone in Germany between 1900 and 1940*. The aim of the analysis is to bring up those aspects of the research with a factual and methodological link to the higher interest of knowledge of the conference and to a common history of listening in the modern age. The first part of the analysis shows the phenomenon's place in history, draws the scientific perspective with the methodological approach. In the second part it will show the conditions under which a recording was produced, the factors which determined the tube's sound, the perception of the listeners, the normative imagination about “correct listening” in its mutual relationships to the capacities and characteristics of the phonoobjects. A third part shows with selected examples the acquisition and usage of the phonoobjects as new cultural practices, the forms of hearing and perception and how the forms were being filled with meaning by the contemporaries. The analysis connects empiricism with methodological reflection.

## **Christine Ehardt (Universität Wien)**

### Phones, Horns, and Audio-Caps. Listening in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

1883, at the first international „Electric Exhibition“ in Vienna, many telephone companies created music and theatre performances to present their products. The audience could follow those acts with headphones and so called audio-caps. Along with the invention of the radio, headphones became the iconographic symbol for the new media. In the first ten years of broadcasting, the audience used the radio as a distinguished attraction-medium. Listening to the radio was a byword for being part of an event. The attraction value of talking machines, such as telephone, radio, gramophone and phonograph and their public circulation as a new form of amusement are the starting point of this analysis. The listening experiences go along with headphones and horns. Both were symbols for the new technical acoustic inventions, until the loudspeaker becomes part of the talking machines in the late 1920s. Pictures of listeners in magazines and newspapers illustrate this alteration. In relation with this iconic change also the way of listening changed and media of attraction turns to mass media.

## **Axel Volmar (Siegen)**

### In Storms of Steel. Staging the Soundscape of World War I in the Weimar Republic

Auditory cultures in the first half of the 20th century seem to be highly shaped by the massive transformations of *urban environments* that brought with them entirely new soundscapes due to engine noises and technologies of sound reproduction. Despite of sharing this view, I nevertheless would like to draw the attention to yet another sound environment, the *battlefields of World War I*, because it may be regarded as being equally influential to the formation of the

modern sonosphere. Bound to the trenches of positional warfare, a whole generation of soldiers developed auscultatory survival skills that allowed for an (often life-saving) interpretation of and a decision-making within their extremely noisy and loud surroundings. Meanwhile, scientists conduct experiments to enhance the detection and ranging of sound sources on the ground, in the air, and under water by technological means. After the war, yet another technique of auscultating (= actively listening to) the world emerged: the detection of far away stations in the electromagnetic ether at the dawn of radiotelephony. Thereby, the listening practice of distinguishing signals from noise that was trained during wartime, was transformed and diffused into a cultural practice. Listening experiences from the battlefield also resound in the cultural memory of the interwar period. Prominently, they become part of stories staging the war in novels, radioplays, movies, and new approaches in music. But transformed into artistic concepts, they also take on a life of their own. As the paper intends to show, the sonic dispositive of WWI – with its sound technologies, auscultatory techniques, and experiences of listening – diffused into civil cultural contexts in the 1920s. On a methodological level, the paper aims to discuss the possibilities of *Hearing Modern History* on the basis of multimedial sources (e.g. texts, sound recordings, movies) in order to reconstruct auditory cultures of the past.

### **Carolyn Birdsall (University of Amsterdam)**

#### The Documentary Ear? Sound Aesthetics and the Auditory Imagination in Interwar Germany

Much has been written on early radio, sound film and avant-garde experiments in interwar Germany (most recently, for example, by Douglas Kahn, Wolfgang Hagen). In response, this paper will acknowledge a range of medial efforts to render urban soundscapes and their rhythms in the 1920s, particularly against the background of ongoing technological and political restrictions. As I will argue, a distinct auditory imagination can be traced within this emerging documentary aesthetic: from the acoustic metaphors and implied sound of silent films to radio plays, sound collages and early news programs, along with lesser-known sport and regional broadcasting (for example, Bernhard Ernst). I will take note of the exchanges between cinema and radio that negotiated both the place of mediated sound within society and the aesthetic organisation of urban sound within narrative (predominantly with montage techniques). The notion of the ether or “world ether” provided an impulse to reach beyond the urban setting to a notion of a global soundscape, if not a “tuning of the world,” such as in Walther Ruttmann’s *Melodie der Welt* (1929) or Fritz Walter Bischoff’s “Hallo! Hier Welle Erdball!” (1928). This presentation will thus consider the specific types of sounds used to represent or approximate the urban soundscape in the 1920s, and will also engage in broader historiographic reflections on the sources employed for present-day scholarship. Kate Lacey (2008) has set an important agenda in calling for a cultural-historical understanding that engages media-specific analyses with the aural culture at large. I will ask how such an approach may also question the retrospective fixity of terminology (such as “radio”), along with the analytical categories that have emerged in sound studies and related disciplines since the 1970s.

### **John M. Picker (MIT Boston)**

#### Aural Anxieties and the Advent of Modernity

This paper seeks to trace nineteenth-century auralities as it became newly industrialized, urbanized, and commercialized, that is to say, newly modern. Hearing often has been relegated to the margins in discussions of the Victorian age, overshadowed – or drowned out – by the emphasis on the visual, the spectacle, and the gaze. Studies of the period typically have been deaf to the ways that organized as well as ambient sound shaped individuals and communities, and how responses to it amplified Victorian concerns over identity and self-definition. As I hope to

discuss, the invention of the phonograph in 1877 was in a sense the culmination of the Victorians' impulse to archive, analyze, and manipulate the sonic experiences that their era was making more rich and complex. If the phonograph is an end point, then modern aurality begins with the stethoscope. This technology, as Jonathan Sterne has demonstrated, was the Enlightenment's response to the mystification of sound and the body. By rendering corporeal listening into the basis of medical diagnoses, by establishing in its basic design a clinical distance between doctor and patient, the stethoscope represented, on the one hand, the rational conquest of previously undetected sound and led to the rise of the clinically skilled listener. On the other hand, such a development had a more problematic aspect, creating an environment in which newly amplified sound demanded attention and could become impossible to ignore. Stethoscopic auscultation did not just have an impact on trained medical professionals, but also more broadly valorized the activity of intense close listening. I will consider the ways that this condition of the mid- and later-nineteenth century created new kinds of hypersensitive hearers and aural anxieties in Britain and America.

### **James Mansell (University of Manchester)**

#### Sound and Selfhood in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

In this paper I will discuss the theoretical and methodological approach taken by my forthcoming book *Sound and Selfhood in Early Twentieth-Century Britain*. This book traces the ideas, feelings and representations prompted by life in the sonic maelstrom of mechanised modernity in early twentieth-century Britain, examining how and why the modern self was shaped by this experience, and the role played in the process by various kinds of sound expertise. My approach lies at the intersection of cultural and intellectual history. I analyse the meanings that were attached to different types of sound, why these typologies were created and by whom, and how they were linked to debates about social modernity. Creating a network of telephone users, investigating the occult properties of music, or campaigning for less street noise are on one level unconnected, but I argue that each one invested sound with significance as part of a quest to understand and manipulate the modern self. What it meant to be an individual in a complex modern society, I argue, was often negotiated through hopes or fears about sound.

### **Uta Kornmeier / Gaby Hartel (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin)**

#### SFX and the City. The Perception of Urban Ambient Sound in London

Big cities are traditionally perceived as great spectacles. When it comes to atmosphere, however, auditory impressions usually take over from the visual. Working on a sub-conscious level, the soundscape of a city is as important to its inhabitants and visitors as its visual aspects. Although it is common knowledge that city soundscapes have become louder, more stressful and monotonous, we are often not aware that it is the sounds, sometimes even what we call the noise, of the city that make us feel at home, alive, and at the centre of a happening world – as has become clear to us when researching for our WDR radio feature "London Calling. Im Klangnetz einer Metropole" (September 2009). Taking this contemporary diagnosis as a starting point, we want to look at the changing tune of urban ambient noise from Orlando Gibbons's "Cries of London" to Iain Sinclair's psychogeographic writings, and see how auditory experiences can work as emotional memory and epistemic systems. A natural focus in our research is the time around 1900 when not only the very nature of sounding and hearing was transformed by new technologies such as the telephone and the phonograph, but also writers such as Leonard and Virginia Woolf worked explicitly with acoustic sensations in their biographical and fictional writings. At the same time, we want to examine evidence that since at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century city dwellers have become aware of such changes in their acoustic environment as can be seen,

for example, from the fact that antiquarians and historians noted down the cries of the London streetsellers in order to preserve them before social change made them disappear. Rather than following the cultural criticism of for example Theodor Lessing and his Anti-Noise Club, we are interested in the emotional, creative and cognitive potential of environment sound during the past 200 years. While mainly working with a corpus of literary and historical texts, we also want to draw on interviews and recordings from our radio programme, and would like to present some audio material in our talk.

**Valeria Merlini / Olaf Schäfer (UdK Berlin)**

*Symphony of a Metropolis – A Dualistic Listening Experience*

The study is an artistic research that deals with the sound of Berlin. It focuses on the thesis that certain awareness of the sound of the city is raised by a confrontational juxtaposition of contemporary sounds with historical – but inaudible – sound settings. *Symphony of a metropolis* provides an aural experience of the polyphony of both the historical and the contemporary Berlin with its clamour of the inhabitants and the machines, vehicles and devices they use. It starts from the silent movie “*Sinfonie einer Großstadt*” of the German artist, architect and director Walter Ruttmann that documents and stages visually one day of the life in the city of Berlin. Recordings of today’s sounds of the city of Berlin are being opposed to the films visual staging of historical streets, trolleys, buses, pedestrians or dogs. The silent movie of 1927 gets a soundtrack from 2010. The modality of the film now facilitates two contradictory listening attitudes: for one thing up to the actual contemporary sound layer of the film and for another thing down to the silent sounds that come inevitably up with their elision. Thereby the sounding silent film serves as an integrating tool both forming an historical consciousness and sensitising for the present soundscape.