Between Noise and Silence: Listening to the Modern City

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**A few years ago, I took a month-long artist residency in Vienna, where I was living in the city centre with a window facing busy Burgstrasse. I was working on a sound piece, ‘Kraków to Venice in 12 hours’, compiling field recordings from 12 different cities across Europe. After the residency, I returned to my parent’s house on the outskirts of a small town in Poland. Having just stayed in a busy city and having been immersed in my sound work, my parent’s house sounded alien and almost too quiet. One evening when I was alone, I decided to capture that silent ambience. As I sat in the room on this summer evening before I switched on my recorder, I started to listen. I heard, not silence, but instead the rhythmic purring of the cat, the distant ticking of the clock above the fireplace that I had never noticed before, and, eventually, I felt my own heartbeat. I then tried to shift the focus of listening from close, almost claustrophobic sounds, to the ones further away. As I opened the terrace doors, the cicada sounds flooded in. While listening to the quiet my mind amplified the subtle sounds around me. I recorded all the elements of that evening, including my heartbeat, in this case using my mother’s doctor’s stethoscope. From these elements, I created the work ‘Inside Outside’, in which I explore the process of deep listening and the relationship between the recordist and her acoustic surroundings.**

As a field recordist and artist, Magda Stawarska-Beavan’s approach to sound could not be more different to my own. As an historian, I listen to the past by reading written accounts of the encounter between hearers and their auditory environments. Yet when the Practising Place programme invited us to collaborate, we quickly found common ground. Both of us, in our different ways, were seeking to recover something of what Georges Perec would call the sonic ‘infraordinary’ (Perec, 2002), the mundane sounds surrounding us every day which, although we might not always notice them, have a role to play in producing and connecting us to place. By paying attention to the undulations of these sonic rhythms and vibrations, both of us were seeking new ways to engage with questions of identity and affect. We were interested in how sounds situate us as certain kinds of selves. When we first met, I had just finished a book called *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity* (Mansell, 2017a) which traces reactions to the mechanical sound worlds of the early twentieth century. It argues that complaints about everyday noise, spear-headed by organisations such as the Anti-Noise League founded in 1933, indexed a range of anxieties about what it meant to be modern in this period. Attempts to re-shape the auditory environment, to provide spaces of auditory refuge in the modern city, were intended to secure the very future of civilization, such was the urgency attributed to the ‘noise problem’ at this time.

Magda had also been specialising in recording and presenting urban sounds in works such as ‘East {Hyphen} West: Sound Impressions of Istanbul’ (2015). But what, we wondered, might there be to hear in a city beyond its strident, complained-about, noises? For centuries, towns and cities have been characterised, auditorily, as places of unruly and intrusive sound. Historians and theorists of auditory culture have dedicated voluminous attention to noise in this sense, to the point where it has become difficult to imagine the audible city in any other way. The sonic dimensions of urban identity have also been tied quite tightly to the category of noise: who is said to make it, who deserves respite from it, what it tells us about power and resistance, and so on. What if we were to set out in search of urban quiet, instead? The noise abatement advocates I had researched certainly promoted it. In his 1916 book *City of Din: A Tirade Against Noise*, Dan McKenzie described concert halls as ‘sanctuaries’ for the ‘philosopher of Quiet’, a place where the sensitive soul could rest their noise-jangled nerves (McKenzie, 1916, p.67). Not silence, but *quiet*. That was the ideal. Does quiet have a history? Can we record it and use it as an artistic resource? These were the questions that we set out to investigate in a shared project. Above all, we wondered: if quiet has been such a highly-prized resource in the modern urban environment, what does it sound like, and what role does it play in the politics of identity and place?

**Reading about the rapidly changing city soundscape of early twentieth-century Britain in *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity*, I started to reflect on the role of the quiet place in the contemporary city. As we learned from John Cage, experiencing silence, even in an anechoic chamber, is impossible, but surely within the complexity of the urban matrix we should be able to hear numerous levels and qualities of soundscape. After several conversations, we decided to examine the sound space of Manchester Central Library – both protecting and controlling – and its relationship to the city whose voices it reverberates. Libraries, as ‘sanctuaries’ of quiet, are unique places, both culturally and acoustically: they soundproof our thoughts from the distraction and the noise outside their walls. But they also coerce us into behaving quietly, amplifying the sounds we make beneath their domed acoustic chambers. However, today's library – embedded with technology – is full of discreet, barely audible sounds, which reveal its inner life. Using audio-visual recording, I planned to investigate how the acoustic environment and the architecture of a building can affect our behaviour in a public space.**

Magda’s planned new work on Manchester Central Library offered me the opportunity to think afresh about the question of quiet. While writing *The Age of Noise in Britain*, I had spent a long time thinking about what noise is and how we define it. I realised that I had barely stopped to consider quiet in the same way. Yet writers on noise such as McKenzie had clearly valued it. He wrote, for example, that ‘The world outside the walls of the City is full of pleasant sounds, bringing joy, health, and quiet breathing. And were these all the sounds that this world would contain, how placid would our natures be!’ (McKenzie, 1916, pp.24-25). The Anti-Noise League called their quarterly magazine exactly that, *Quiet*. It was what they were promoting, even if they spent most of their time trying to suppress its opposite. Opened on 17 July 1934, Manchester Central Library was the centrepiece of the city’s modernist regeneration. Its showpiece, a magnificent domed reading room, provided just the kind of sanctuary from city noise that McKenzie and the Anti-Noise League were calling for. In fact, the League was busy at the time of the Library’s opening having just held its inaugural conference at the University of Oxford. The city of Oxford had famously first introduced the 30mph speed limit to combat road noise and encouraged its milk delivery vans to use silenced pneumatic tyres to avoid waking its citizens up early in the morning. The choice of Oxford as a location was no coincidence for other reasons, too: supporters of noise abatement thought of quiet as especially important for thinking people; professionals, leaders of industry and scholars. The ‘age of noise’ was a threat to such people because it threatened to remove the acoustic conditions necessary for their thought-work. It threatened, in fact, the norms of quiet that, it is evident, had deep roots in nineteenth-century middle-class culture. Quietness was being defended by middle-class activists in the early twentieth-century city because it had long been carefully crafted and entwined within the bourgeois auditory habitus. It was essential to the temples of middle-class culture founded in the nineteenth century – the concert hall, the art gallery and the public library – where McKenzie’s ‘philosopher of Quiet’ could find peace but, more importantly, where all kinds of visitors, including those who were not pre-disposed to seek out respite from noise, could learn, among other things, the *rules of quiet*.

Indeed, public libraries tell us a good deal about the auditory ideals of urban elites as they evolved over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Public libraries were provided in order to extend the quiet culture of the middle classes to the less well off. Kelman (2001) and Joyce (2003) both view them, additionally, as spaces for disciplining bodies. Joyce (2003) points out that the Library Act (1850) made money available not for books, but for buildings, and argues that public libraries such as Manchester’s, first opened as the Manchester Municipal Free Library in 1850 (Joyce, 2003, p.129), were built by civic leaders who believed that ‘the physical environment had a direct impact on perception and behaviour’ (p.131). Public libraries were to be places where all the citizens of a locality could gather and generate shared understandings of citizenship and public norms of behaviour. They reproduced middle-class ideals of civilized behaviour in the bodies of their working-class visitors. Joyce (2003) points out that readers in a library were rendered visible to the gaze of the disciplining librarian, who could regulate behaviour as in a panopticon. Kelman (2001) argues, alternatively, that libraries were not so much places of visual discipline, but places where one learned *how to be quiet*. ‘Anyone who would like to may enter the library,’ he explains, ‘but once inside, behaviour is quietly regulated and carefully choreographed’ (p.25). Not panopticism, Kelman argues, ‘but panauralism…The librarian can always hear you’ (p.38). Indeed, Kelman concludes that ‘Controlling noise at the library was a critical feature of its civilizing ideals’ (p.38).

Public libraries, including in Manchester, had, since the middle of the nineteenth century, provided spaces for quiet, self-improvement. As Kelman (2001) has interestingly pointed out, public libraries are the urban epicentres not of silence, but of quiet: readers are disciplined there into a culture of silent reading, but the library itself has to make sound in order to function. Were the library ‘too silent – no footsteps, no pages turning, no pencils scraping – we could not be certain that the machine was working’ (p.38). Silence, then, is not a particularly useful category of social analysis in this case, because the word implies an idealised absence of sound that was never in fact in operation in the disciplinary spaces of the modern city. Instead, in concert halls, art galleries, and in public libraries, visitors learned *how to sound*, how to behave in the auditory habitus of bourgeois urban space. This begs the question to the historian and artist of what quiet does and what quiet means. If noise has been so heavily invested with significance and social power, might it not be worth pausing to ask similar questions of the social functions of quiet as we do of the social functions of noise? Gallagher (2011) has done so in the case of the primary school, a space in which quietness, he argues, is a central affective resource for producing self-governing subjects. Quietness enables auditory surveillance, according to Gallagher, enacted both by the teacher on the pupils and from one pupil to another.

**Equipped with binaural microphones and a discrete recorder, I set off to visit Manchester Central Library. I started my walk from Albert Square. Walking through Mount Street, I realized that although I have lived in the North West for the last 20 years I had recorded Manchester very little in the past. I stood outside the Library on St. Peter’s Square listening and absorbing the vibrant ambience; the sound of a nearby building site, the voice of the Big Issue seller calling the same words like a mantra prayer, punctuated by a tram signal echoed by the façades of the iconic Midland Hotel. Manchester, the birth city of the Industrial Revolution, to me is a city that keeps changing and constantly adapts to the fluctuating socio-political situation. The hum of building machines is almost constant, shifting through various parts of the city centre.**

**I approached the columned portico of the library and walked up the steps towards the sliding automatic doors of the main entrance. The whoosh of the doors followed by the hum of the overhead heater, created a sonic threshold between the outside and the inside. The hall was full of people, a visiting school group with their teacher explaining the history of the place. I took a quick look at the main ground floor, where the new café, archive and media pods are placed. It felt like a spot to hang around; people of different generations were talking, browsing, reading. The clutter of the coffee cups, frothing milk machines, nobody particularly kept their conversation quiet, everyone felt confident to create sound without bothering others. Manchester City Library reopened to the public in 2014, after four years of refurbishment. The ground floor was previously used mainly for storage with little access granted to the public. The new open plan design with many interactive screens and media pods is the result of recent investment and it seems to appeal to the present demands of the public.**

**I took the main staircase to the first floor, the sound of my heeled shoes echoed by the stone floor. Outside the door of the reading room I passed other relaxed readers reading from their tablets and laptops on comfortable, lounging, grey felt chairs. Walking past a large window I could still hear the sound of the trams, traffic and building site seeping in from the outside. As I opened the heavy, wooden door of the reading room, I became aware that I had stepped into another acoustic territory.**

**The reading room, placed in the heart of the building on the first floor, is filled with natural light, making it the perfect environment for the reader. The room is designed on a circle plan, with 28 neoclassical columns supporting the dome. Painted in gold below the dome is a text, which reads: ‘Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.’ As I walked towards one of the free reading spaces, the sound of my heels was muffled by the soft grey carpet but still audible in this beautifully echoing chamber. I sat down and as I opened my bag to get my notebook out I became even more aware of the sound I made. The structure of the dome ceiling creates echoes; the sound reflected by the curved surface travels with a delay and changes direction, making it difficult to tell where the sound comes from. The room seems quiet compared to the ground floor of the building. However, it is filled with the amplification of subtle personal sounds; a pencil against paper, the turning of the page, shuffles of a chair, sniffling and coughing. As the personal sounds are mixed and displaced, losing their origin, they become a joint experience that turn the reader, engrossed in the private reading experience, into a performer within the public space of the library. This is even more profound when local tourists visit the space.**

**Refurbishment has not changed the room that much. The symmetrically spaced long wooden period desks ray from the central mahogany information point, much as they do in an archival photo from 1934 displayed on the ground floor. The architecture of this room, the wooden chairs which make us sit in a very formal way together with the acoustics of the space, make us behave so differently. There is no need for someone in the central information point to control the level of noise, as the readers hear amplified sounds and control themselves. Reading in silence is such a private experience; each reader is absorbed in their invisible space, but as the sound of the reading reverberates, it becomes a shared practice.**

More than eighty years after it first opened, the main domed reading room of Manchester Central Library still has the desired effect. The acoustics of the room amplify the smallest sounds, making one acutely aware of oneself as a sounding subject. Kelman (2001) suggests that this was a deliberate feature of nineteenth-century American libraries, such as the New York Public Library. There, he says, ‘It does not matter if one is actively being listened to. Instead, those large white marble halls amplify even the smallest sound and betray one’s “uncivil” behavior immediately’ (Kelman, 2001, p.38). This was part of the nineteenth-century public library’s function to actively cultivate its readers as civilized auditory subjects, argues Kelman. This is the kind of power that Foucault describes in relation to vision as panoptical; the very architecture of a space can inculcate self-regulation, leading to the situation that Joyce (2003) describes as the ‘rule of freedom’. The architect who designed Manchester Central Library, E. Vincent Harris, drew his inspiration from American public libraries such as the one described by Kelman, so we can conclude that the domed reading room was intended to shape the auditory behaviour of its readers, even if Harris did not realise it.

In fact, the story is more intriguing than that. When it first opened, visitors immediately commented on the interesting acoustics of the main reading room at Manchester Central Library. The *Manchester Guardian* explained that ‘The echo in the Great Hall of the new Central Library is somewhat disconcerting at first. It is a ubiquitous echo, stronger in the centre than under the shallower rim of the dome. At the centre one can even hear the echo of a footfall on the rubber carpet. A cough uttered anywhere, it seems, returns to the utterer’ (*Manchester Guardian*, 20 March 1934, p.13). Not everyone welcomed these acoustic effects. One newspaper article commented that ‘The reading room of the new building was not a bad place in which to work if one did not mind strange noises, draughts, and uncomfortable chairs’ (*Manchester Guardian*, 22 June 1934, p.12). Care had been taken in the original design of the reading room to stifle *too much* reverberation, hence the rubber carpet. The *Manchester Guardian* explained that ‘Mr Vincent Harris has domed the ceiling with acoustic tiles, and it was to be expected that the bookcases, other furniture, and people would absorb unwanted sounds’ (*Manchester Guardian*, 20 March 1934, p.13). This was not to prove sufficient, however. Over the years, readers still complained of what were termed the ‘library flutters’ (*Guardian*, 29 September 1967, p.4), and library management sought out ways to lessen the distracting reverberance.

In 1946, with peacetime normality returning after the Second World War, thoughts turned to how the Manchester Central Library reading room might be quietened. The *Manchester Guardian* reported that ‘There might have come a time when the echo peculiar to Manchester’s Central Library…would have attained as great a fame as the whispering of the gallery under St. Paul’s dome. This, we are told, will not happen, for the echo has been traced to its origin and can soon be suppressed. These voices, now thunderous, now sibilant, seemingly from nowhere, might have been kept as a marvel if distractions could be tolerated in libraries. As it is, there are far too many temptations to the wandering mind in most modern libraries without echoes being added’ (*Manchester Guardian*, 10 June 1946, p.4). Only minor adjustments, such as adding silencing tips to chair legs, were ever made in 1946, however. In 1968, renewed efforts were made to control the unruly echo. The *Guardian* reported that the Library was still ‘probably the only one in the country where a library attendant cannot say “shh” without being “shh’d” back’ (*Guardian*, 7 August 1968, p.14). The new answer to the problem, as the same article reported, ‘involves spraying the inside of the library’s dome with a thick coat of asbestos solution’ (it was not uncommon to use asbestos for this purpose in the mid twentieth century). Although some concerns were raised about the potential health hazard of this path of action, the treatment went ahead.

What these examples show is the extent to which the acoustic territories which Magda describes are shaped consciously for social purposes. The noticeable change in sonic atmosphere when one enters the reading room of the Manchester Central Library is deliberate. The lengths that the Library management went to over the course of the twentieth century to perfect the ideal acoustics for the reading room testifies to the importance of quiet as an affective resource in the production of a certain kind of public culture. Magda describes and captures in her recordings a palpable sense of auditory togetherness and responsibility in the Library reading room. One is aware of oneself as a sounding body in this soundscape, but one is aware, too, of the shared activity of reading and information exchange, which generates a sonic life of its own. In his book, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (2010), Brandon Labelle argues that ‘Sound conditions and contours subjectivity by lending a dynamic materiality for social negotiation’ (p.xix). The public library is a prime example of the kind of space where sound plays this role. Quiet, in the library, is not disinterested, nor inactive. It is actively produced to generate public behaviour. That is not to say, as Magda points out, that these sounds and social negotiations do not shift over time. Magda’s recordings and observations highlight parts of the Library now alive with more hubbub than would have been imaginable in 1934. As Mattern (2007) argues, ‘today’s libraries are not as hostile toward noise as their recent ancestors were’ (p.286) because of shifting notions of participation in heritage and education. As the social field shifts, so too does the auditory atmosphere which holds it in place.

**> With the change of the city’s soundscape and the introduction of technology to the library, the ambience of the library evolved. But sitting and listening in the reading room for over an hour, I feel that to some extent, the original quality of the acoustics have been preserved here. It is remarkable how many acoustic territories we can explore within this one building.**

**It is clear to me that the demand for public reading spaces in the city is still strong. Manchester Central Library has adapted to the new style of learning, reading and researching. Offering multisensory media interaction, it is appealing to a contemporary generation, creating a wide range of places and giving the patrons their choice of experience.**

**The sound work that has resulted from my exploration of Manchester Central Library, ‘Resonating Silence’, is a brief exploration of the acoustic fabric of the Library. The composition starts with sounds recorded outside the building, as I was approaching the library from Albert Square, followed by recordings of the reading room, which is the focal point of the piece. The recordings are accompanied by a series of images incorporating a text by artist Heather Ross, who has never visited Manchester Central Library, but responded to the audio using textual descriptions of what she had heard in my recordings. The text has been superimposed on to the architectural plans of the building to create a visual impression of the rich acoustic fabric of the building. *6’5* and *10’8*are visual records of subtle movements of visitors, which are captured in the sound piece. Still images of the library interior, taken every 5 seconds by GoPro camera, are placed on top of each other with 10% opacity to illustrate that movement.**

**In my work, I usually wander around a city and in the new and unfamiliar urban setting I search for familiarities, trying to find a sense of belonging in an unknown context. I record the place from a very personal perspective, later trying to share my experiences with the audience. For this project, I was invited to collaborate with James, whose socio-historical research and analysis of sound provided me with excellent food for thought. After reading James' extensive research in *The Age of Noise in Britain*, I reflected on how our ideas of what quiet means and what noise represents have changed and evolved during the last century with the rapid development of technology and increasing dominance of media. Working with James on this project I appreciated much more that to fully understand the acoustics of the Manchester Central Library building alongside the activity of intensive listening we need hear the building historically. I tried to imagine and understand through his writing how cities, such as Manchester, sounded and were heard a century ago.**

**In this project, I captured the shared yet inherently private soundscape of the library. I listened to the reverberated sounds of the readers engrossed in their reading experience and I tried to imagine their personal narratives, embodied in the sounds they created, which were layered, reflected and merged almost into one. Ultimately, as James emphasises, sound as an acoustic phenomenon cannot be perceived by listeners without the filter of their knowledge and acquired experience: ‘…when we hear, we do so as particular kinds of subjects living in particular times and places. How we hear is shaped socially as well as biologically’ (Mansell, 2017b). As an artist, I see my work as filtering surrounding soundscapes into personal narratives, which can become points of departure for other personal and subjective experiences.**

With her binaural microphones and GoPro camera, Magda can enter into the dynamics of urban sound in quite different ways to those that I usually deal in as a historian. Searching for traces of hearing and listening in the historical record reminds us that our sound environments are social products, shaped over time, but Magda’s work as a recordist and artist demonstrates that these sound environments continue to shift and evolve with the changing norms and ideals of public culture and public space. To hear with past hearers we should also listen carefully in our present. Magda’s recordings draw us into the intimacy of sound spaces and remind us of the importance of what we hear to who we are. In this shared project, we have attempted to show what might happen if a historian and an artist came together to consider a topic such as urban sound. Listening in two different registers, we have shown that sound is both a deeply personal but also a powerfully social force in our everyday lives.

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Captions for ‘Inside’ and ‘Outside’ illustrations

*I claim my usual seat, at the windows in LCC library. They meet and point like an arrow to the almighty blue and cream Goldfinger buildings, just off the roundabout at the Elephant and Castle. Here is the beating heart; my* London Symphony ...*I'll miss you when I leave. And in my ears, the sound of Manchester (or so I'm told), from one city to another, one library to another. My future points North. Information rich surroundings - a time based proposition - overlapping events, objects and descriptions - to begin. Then sounds scribbled vertically down the page; a list, a cue sheet of foley* – one at a time please*...as they enter and exit*. Heather Ross, 2017.