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Ingrid Sykes, *Society, Culture and the Auditory Imagination in Modern France: The Humanity of Hearing*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. x + 169 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$90.00 U.S. ISBN 978-1-137-45534-5.

Review by Alexandra Kieffer, Rice University.

In recent years, topics falling under the umbrella of “sound studies” or “auditory culture” have boomed in the academy in a variety of fields—media studies, film studies, history, English and literature, ethnomusicology, musicology, music theory, and art history, to name a few. Ingrid Sykes’s *Society, Culture and the Auditory Imagination in Modern France: The Humanity of Hearing* contributes to this ever-growing field of research, undertaking a history of hearing in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France that addresses such diverse topics as medical treatises, small claims courts, hospital practices, and musical instrument design. For Sykes, the thread uniting these topics is their shared cultivation of an “auditory imagination” which could be a site of transformative social change. She argues that “hearing might have acted as a catalyst for the construction of ‘humanity,’ that broader social realm of compassion and social cohesion which shaped social practice within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French society” (p. 13). The book encompasses an admirably wide scope, inviting readers to consider the ways in which ideas of hearing manifested in diverse cultural spheres in modern France.

Alain Corbin aptly noted that a history of the senses “represents for the historian a project—or rather a gamble—which is risky but fascinating.”[1] While Sykes’s project comprises a collection of highly compelling historical case studies, as a whole it succumbs to many of the shortcomings and pitfalls that make sound studies a risky, and difficult, scholarly undertaking. Sykes’s book often falls into conceptual slippages and reductive historical generalities. At the start of the introduction, for instance, she writes that “At this stage in history [the late seventeenth century], hearing was about connecting to another reality, one of higher purpose” (p. 1). Surely, at any particular point in history, hearing is “about” many things, constructed and re-constructed in myriad ways by the many different kinds of people who inhabit historical worlds. Discerning meaningful historical shifts and trends from within this on-the-ground complexity is one of the most difficult tasks that the historian of hearing or auditory culture faces. *Who* is doing the hearing, in what historical setting, for what purpose? When a historical text makes a claim about the nature of hearing, for whom does this text speak? Sykes’s case studies encompass an admirable variety; nonetheless, they are all marshaled into a single narrative of “social transformation” in a way that irons out much of what is interesting about them and, further, that extends its generalizations to include populations of French citizens that fall outside of her case studies.

There is also, relatedly, a question of historical agency in Sykes’s work. She writes that “There is a growing band of work demonstrating the unique capacity of sound as opposed to the other senses to influence culture and to shape society” (p. 7)—citing such well-known scholars as Jonathan Sterne, Michael Bull, and Veit Erlmann, among others.[2] Setting aside that “sound” is not a sense (but the perceptible object of the sense of hearing), how does a sense (in isolation from the other senses) acquire the historical agency to “influence culture and shape society”? Certainly this question has not been settled by the scholars that Sykes invokes in the way that she suggests. Sterne, for example, understands the senses as manifesting only through historically situated subjects: “Before the senses are

real, palpable, concrete, or available for contemplation, they are already affected and effected through the particular historical conditions that also give rise to the subject who possesses them.”[3] For Sykes, in contrast, hearing is itself an agent. Her book, she writes, “suggests...the ways in which hearing might have shaped modern French society from the Enlightenment to the modern industrial age at its deepest level” (p. viii). The book’s big-picture claims tend to efface the roles of individuals, institutions, and cultural processes in favor of nebulous “transforming” and “shaping” performed by the sense of hearing itself.

To be sure, Sykes clarifies that “hearing” in her understanding involves an active individual through what she calls the “auditory imagination.” “Hearing might involve actual sounds in...places [such as courtrooms and hospitals], but it was not ultimately dependent on them. Rather, hearing in these sites occurred through the positive activation of the human imagination” (p. vii). She reiterates a number of times that hearing was “not simply the activation of a specific physiological human ‘sense’ but a specific stance or posture that caused the redefinition and reshaping of social, political and cultural boundaries and their spaces” (p. vii). The question left unanswered in these formulations is what exactly this “auditory imagination” or “specific posture” comprised in addition to the physiology of hearing—and, concurrently, what exactly is doing the causative work. At times, she suggests that it is the nature of sound itself that makes possible the transformational qualities ascribed to it in her readings of eighteenth-century texts on hearing: “The nuanced model of the individual who engages with his auditory imagination...relied on sound’s potential to enact exactly what vision cannot: to cultivate audition as a means of situating the self within a broader collective site of social experience” (p. 7).

The ways in which sound accomplishes this feat, however, are bound up with ideological and transhistorical ideas about sound and hearing (e.g., that hearing is immersive whereas vision imposes distance) that recent sound studies scholars (particularly Sterne) have thoroughly debunked.[4] In her conclusion, Sykes turns to recent neuroscience and global health initiatives, writing that “hospitals and citizen-patients were originally some of the most significant and powerful listeners because they relied on the message of hope that was intrinsic to listening’s design” (pp. 117-18). “There is a resurgence of recognition,” she goes on, “that sound is what draws us together as healthy beings and that sound must be attended to, protected and preserved at all costs” (p. 118). Sykes appears uninterested in a question that has preoccupied many sound studies scholars: the ways that hearing, as a physiological faculty, is mediated by culture. Instead, she takes hearing as a physiological faculty as a transhistorical given, presenting historical evidence that seems specifically calibrated to support the transformative powers that she attributes to sound as an entity in itself.

In a broader sense, Sykes’s book spurs us to question the advantages, and limitations, of interdisciplinary scholarship. Sound studies, almost by necessity, has been a highly interdisciplinary enterprise, not only because of the diverse fields of those scholars who have participated in it but also because of the generally interdisciplinary nature of any particular topic of study: to take “sound” as an object of inquiry crosses over entrenched disciplinary boundaries that differentiate such categories as “noise,” “music,” or “technology.” Undoubtedly, this interdisciplinarity has been one of the great strengths of sound studies work in recent years. Nonetheless, interdisciplinarity comes with challenges. For instance, Sykes’s final chapter, “Sound, Health and the Auditory Body-Politic,” includes a substantial discussion of early nineteenth-century experimentation in musical instrument design. This is a topic that, of late, has been increasingly studied by musicologists, particularly Emily Dolan, and Sykes’s account suffers from its apparent unawareness of this work.[5]

Sykes maintains that a kind of bird’s-eye interdisciplinary viewpoint is precisely what enables her to make broad claims about social change: “To study such a history of hearing is not to undermine the significance of music, art or science, disciplines which intersect with hearing in important ways. Rather, it is to reinterpret and highlight these disciplines and their languages as key tools in contributing to a more powerful social metalanguage that had the capacity to create change entirely on its own” (p. vii). It

is, of course, undeniable that a history which takes the sense of hearing as its primary object will “intersect” with topics that fit into a number of scholarly disciplines (like musicology and the history of science). Nonetheless, positing a “social metalanguage” that transcends them and that uniquely drives social change serves to institute a highly generalized historical narrative disconnected from the necessary, and necessarily messy, engagement with sources (“facts on the ground”) which, in my view, argues for the continued relevance of disciplinary scholarship (even as we must continue to pursue topics that cross the boundaries of disciplines). Sykes has brought to light a fair amount of interesting, diverse, and often obscure source material on hearing in various segments of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French culture. That her source material coheres in such a way to as to offer a definitive history of hearing and social change in France in this period is, however, open to doubt.

## NOTES

[1] Alain Corbin, “Charting the Cultural History of the Senses,” in *The Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p. 129.

[2] Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003); Veit Erlmann, ed., *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004); Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[3] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 5.

[4] Sterne refers to this construction of hearing vis-à-vis vision as “the audiovisual litany” (Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 10-19).

[5] See in particular Emily Dolan, “E.T.A. Hoffman and the Ethereal Technologies of ‘Nature Music,’” *Eighteenth-Century Music* (March 2008): 7-26; Dolan and John Tresch, “Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Sound and Science,” *Osiris* (2013): 278-98; Myles Jackson, *Harmonious Triads: Physicists, Musicians, and Instruments Makers in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006); and Carmel Raz, “The Expressive Organ Within Us: Ether, Ethereality, and Early Romantic Ideas about Music and the Nerves,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* (2014): 115-44.

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