

# Prelude

## I.

This is a book about the meaning of sound. The rise of sound studies across the humanities has drawn welcome attention to the material dimension of sound and to the technologies that shape auditory culture. These advances need to be complemented by a new examination of how sound is represented and imagined. *The Hum of the World* conducts such an examination across a wide range of sources, including artistic and conceptual sources from classical times to the present. Its purpose is to outline the fundamental character of auditory experience in the Western world as we describe or narrate or record or interpret it—generally speaking, as we apprehend it.

To that end, the book's segments gravitate around two core ideas. The first is that sound is the measure of life. Sound is the primary medium through which the presence and persistence of life assume tangible form. The sense of life spreads outward from sound, which conveys it as feeling and imparts it as meaning. This relationship is primary. The positive experience of aliveness is not merely in accord with sound, but inaccessible and perhaps inconceivable without it. The second idea is that this animating power of sound acts as a general background to sense perception. But it does not always remain in the background. The diffuse hum of the world can also become audible its own right. It has made itself heard in numerous venues from classical times to the present. When that happens, animation and the potentiality of sound fuse into a positive form capable of changing the apprehension of anyone who hears it.

These features of sound are both sensory and symbolic. They rank among the foremost means by which sound acquires a history. They also give listening the power to observe and reflect on itself—to become

self-aware. Recognizing them makes possible a philosophy of listening that greatly expands the scope of what sound, as sound, can tell us. The sense of hearing grounds the sense of being.

## II.

In form, this book models itself after some of my favorite texts, each composed in the spirit of textual and conceptual adventure: Montaigne's *Essays*, Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, Derrida's *The Postcard*. In other words, *The Hum of the World* is an assembly of varied but interrelated reflections, set out in an intuitive sequence meant to suggest flow rather than structure. The flow also belongs to the auditory phenomenon that gives the book its subject and to the conceptual process that the book seeks to embody. The associative form deliberately avoids chronological or topical arrangement. It seeks to create a kind of soundscape in words, a loosely bounded multiplicity full of overlaps, cross-references, echoes, and intimations. Once past the first few sections, which introduce a number of key concepts, the vignettes and short essays that compose the book may equally well be read consecutively or piecemeal, in no particular order. Even segments that overlap may be read independently; cross-references are noted in the text. The freewheeling organization is meant to be reader-friendly, as is the writing, which aims to be evocative but is jargon-free.

To give sound its due, to recognize that experience is more essentially auditory than we may have supposed, is to listen widely. Both the topics to be addressed and the means to address them may belong, together or separately, to philosophy, aesthetics, music, media, literature, science, and history, on the understanding that the divisions between these fields of inquiry are more apparent than real, or at least thoroughly permeable. In recent years the boundaries between speculative and empirical thought have become the subject of renewed debate between those who want to harden them and those who want to break them down. It should already be obvious which side I'm on.<sup>1</sup>

What follows will divide, with inevitable overlaps, between speculative passages and passages of what would ordinarily be called readings,

but here might be better identified as soundings. The rest is up to you. Treat, if you will, this book as a sounding board. Please scribble in the margins.

## Sound and Knowledge

*The world is alive with sound.* The aim of this book is to gloss this deceptively simple sentence. The gloss is cumulative, a resonance produced by the series of segments conceived as an extended polyphony. The topics vary widely, but certain themes keep returning, as they might in a piece of music: what sound makes known, what listening reveals, what music conveys, what hearing promises, and one thing more, held by all these in common, which will take some explaining: a phenomenon I propose to call *the audible*, or the hum of the world.

In recent years hearing has come to rival sight, even to equal it, among the principal means by which we make sense of things. To a large degree this change has been driven by technology. We live (at any rate in “advanced” societies) in a world saturated by recorded and transmitted sound, by ringtones and notifications and voices on mobile phones, by music and media everywhere. These sounds no longer seem to strike us as noisy; they have become the very sound of the ordinary. Our nineteenth-century forebears heard a similar change in the once-obtrusive sounds of modern mechanical technology. Our saturated sonic environment has, like those mechanical sounds, become second nature.

In this context, the development of a new academic field, sound studies, was inevitable. Cultural history is in part being rewritten as auditory history; our heightened awareness of the soundscape of modern life extends retrospectively to its predecessors. In one respect, however, this auditory turn is still incomplete. It has left unanswered, has perhaps barely even asked, a fundamental question. How does finally learning to listen change our conception of the world? In other words, what does sound, *as* sound, contribute to the production of human knowledge?

By “knowledge” here—and the point is essential—I mean neither sense experience nor empirical understanding. The knowledge in question is

the extrapolation from experience that constitutes the work of the modern humanities, the knowledge produced by critical thought, interpretation, representation, narration, imagination, philosophical reasoning, and so on. The value of this knowledge has always been subject to debate. It has most recently been challenged by cognitive science on one hand and information processing on the other. The survival of humanistic knowledge can no longer be assumed. In asking its question about the work of sound, this book seeks simultaneously to practice, extend, and ratify the mode of knowledge that it examines.

To that end the book draws attention to a phenomenon that we know well from experience but have never named. The first step, then, is to name it. The name it will go by here is the *audiable*. That sounds like *audible*, and so it should, since sound is very much the issue. But the audible and the audiable are not the same, and the difference matters. What, then, is the audiable, and why does it matter? That question will require more than one answer, but one will have to be enough to start with.

## The Audiable

### AN INTRODUCTION

#### I.

The simplest way to characterize the audiable is as the material promise of sound. This definition comes with a proviso that enriches but also complicates it. The promise of sound is not made in silence. It is a threshold phenomenon with its own audibility. The audiable is the precursor of sound to come, yet it is also experienced through hearing, as if auditory sensation had a future tense. The audiable is the hum of the world. One has to listen for it. But how can that be done? How *has* it been done, and to what effect?

A host of instances will follow these introductory passages, but here, itself a kind of promise, is just one. *In Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard describes how she, and how anyone, can come to discern what I

call the audible.<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to do. In her case it requires a certain asceticism; mingled with a refusal, at long last, to be distracted:

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is silence.

What Dillard hears is that silence is not the absence of sound. It is the sound one cannot yet hear, but which, paradoxically, can be heard in advance. This hum that is silence is the near-sound of life in motion, ebbing and flowing, or exposed to what ebbs and flows. It is also, and this is something we will return to often, apprehended as a kind of music, here a choral monotone (though in other testimonies it is something far more prismatic). The audible is not always benign, but here it repays the emptying of the self that full attentiveness requires with the fullness of created objects, a rich immanence that is above all heard.

## II.

The audible is the undertone of auditory culture. That last phrase, like "visual culture," has become familiar. The concept of auditory culture emerges from the awareness, also familiar, that the kingdom of the text has been steadily shrinking since the Enlightenment, a process accelerated by the evolution of visual and digital media in the past hundred years and more. The rivalry of text and image is well known, and the role played by sound in modern cognition is becoming so. But the realm of the audible remains to be fully explored, along with its repercussions for the realm of the auditory.

Chief among those repercussions is that the recognition of the audible permits, and more than that, it mandates a broadening of the boundaries of auditory experience. The gamut runs from the almost impalpable vibrancy of that choral monotone, to the humming and thrumming heard

through touch, to words or music echoing inside one's head. Sound is not quite borderless, but its edges are fluid. The heard world is a plenitude.

The audible is the felt basis of audibility as such. It becomes perceptible on the fringes of meaningful sound, whether sensory, tonal, or verbal. It includes everything in sound that is outside and around language, including those aspects of language that hover behind the silence of writing and sometimes pierce it. Opening the audible to the ear is a constant effort. For the audible is incessantly being reduced to something ancillary, something distracting or subsidiary, despite its omnipresence and its frequent power. Why should this be? And should it be at all? Is sound shushed to preserve the opposition of the verbal and the visual as the basis of representation? Sound troubles representation, but is that a good reason to trouble sound? The auditory has in recent years wanted to become more audible. Some thinkers have listened to it. I want to ask what is lost when we don't hearken to the audible, and what might be gained if we do.

### III.

But lost or gained by whom? Just who, exactly, can hear that the world is alive with sound?

It has become imperative to ask this question because of the dawning recognition that even sensory experience is distributed unevenly both within and between cultures, that there are privileges involved in seeing, hearing, and feeling the world as a scene of knowledge and pleasure. There is a practical and an ideal answer to the question, and I would like to say that this book offers both. The practical answer is that the person for whom sound brings things to life is the one, whoever it may be, who has recorded the experience for others to grasp. The rest is a question of empathy. Not simple, not easy, and sometimes a question of forbearance. One reason for the very broad range of this book under the rubric of Western experience is that the experience of sound as sound does not, or should not, adhere to any norms. The very dissemination of this experience across cultures, times, and languages testifies to a certain inherent generosity in experience itself. The persons involved, the subjects who apprehend the world, are heterogeneous in principle, whatever historical inequities (not to say iniquities) may have confounded practice. In princi-

ple, there is no normative subject. And that principle supplies the ideal answer to the question. Anyone who wants to *should*—and I emphasize the word to bring out all its fraught meanings—*should* freely be able to share in the world of the audible.

## Some Leitmotifs

Although the topics in this book flow freely, three streams of thought run throughout: of sound as a source of engagement with life in what might be called the practices of sentience; of music as the original recording device for those practices, an art immanent in speech, and shared with the songs of birds and cetaceans, in which auditory knowledge and feeling become storable and retrievable; and of language as the means of reshaping auditory experience in the process of describing it. Each of these topical areas carries a thesis: that hearing (understood in its own right rather than as the other of sight) is the sensory form of promise and one capable of self-reference; that music is the means of giving auditory experience durable form, drawing pattern, shape, and movement from the whirligig of sound; and that when language, especially writing, addresses these sensory phenomena it not only records and describes them but also partly constitutes them, places them in historical time, and may change them.

And the links among these three? Sound, in the listening ear and the bodily interior, is in the first instance the medium of self-aware sentience, the mutual sensory opening of life and the world. Sound in this aspect makes imminence a sensory reality; it finds a means to preserve and extend that sense in music, both formal and informal; and it finds the means to interpret, develop, and recreate that sense in the language that constructively describes our experiences of sound.

Together with these theses, three parallel principles will govern much of what follows, which in turn aims to validate the principles.

First, the study of the audible understands sound as a source of humanistic knowledge in a very strong sense: as primary, creative, constructive, and intelligible. In a trilogy on understanding music that immediately precedes this book I sought to show the same of music in

particular.<sup>1</sup> Here the field of inquiry widens to include the experience of auditory sentience in all its forms. Some of those forms will be material, some conceptual, some musical, some verbal, but all, in some way, will be imagined—imagined necessarily, impossible to experience otherwise, not subject to measurement, and not reducible to anything else.

Second, mood and affect must be reconceived in terms that allow us to affirm the condition of “attunement”—the resonant mutuality of mental, material, and sensory states of being—without separating it from meaning and in particular without making the separation in order to produce a surrogate for transcendence. The surrogate is not needed because the experience of meaning as and in resonance is transcendence enough.

Third, it is necessary to distinguish between language as statement, “heard” without reference to its sound, and language as utterance, heard as fully sounded. The distinction does not establish an opposition—either term is rare in its pure state—but its historical practice has been marked by a bias in favor of statement that is long overdue for correction. The fluctuation between statement and utterance is as basic to language as words are.