

Introduction

It's a sunny summer afternoon in 2007, and I am a tourist strolling alone through the streets of Paris. Perusing my map, I see that I'm not far from Notre Dame Cathedral, so I decide to wander over. The scene is pretty much as I expected. The famously imposing edifice—already familiar from so many photos—towers over a large pavilion accented by low hedges. The hedges are filled with chirping songbirds that some of the other tourists are feeding. It's crowded today, which fills the air with the chatter of multiple languages. It also makes the line to enter the church longer than I am willing to wait. So, after a few minutes of enjoying the scene, I take out my map once again to plan my next destination.

It's about now that the first bell begins to toll, marking the top of the hour. *Oh, what a nice coincidence!* I think. *I'll stay for a few minutes to listen.* The sound gradually swells as more and more of the massive bells lend their heft to the soundscape. To my surprise, though, they don't seem to evoke pleasant consonance or divine harmony so much as a cacophonous raw power. The bells seem to have very little connection in their harmonies or overtones, creating an unexpectedly chaotic and increasingly terrifying effect. It builds and builds, filling the pavilion with an ominous, seemingly unstoppable accretion of energy.¹ I didn't know it at the time, but this was a frequent criticism that had been made of the Notre Dame bells since the nineteenth century. It eventually led to most of them being replaced in 2013.² On the day of my visit, however, the discrepancies between their overtones create a palpable beating, which resonates not only in my ears but throughout my whole body, especially my chest and teeth. The sound envelops me, overwhelms me, fills my consciousness and takes away my breath. I have the thought that if this is supposed to invoke an image of God, this is no God of gentleness and compassion but a towering Old

Testament deity of awe-inspiring, earth-shaking power. The thunder of the skies. The crush of waves against seaside crags.

As the toll reaches its height, a totally unexpected thing happens. Seemingly out of nowhere, a bird of prey—perhaps one of the kestrels that nests in the cathedral—sweeps out of the sky and plunges into one of the hedges a few feet away. Its target is the same flock of songbirds that had, moments ago, been chirping so delightedly. The birds take flight in a panic, adding their rush of tiny flaps into the already saturated soundscape. I duck my head to dodge their escape. One of them is not so lucky. As I peek back up, I see a bird pinned under the talons of the kestrel, which savagely tears into it with beak and claws. I wonder whether the kestrel was waiting for the bells to disorient the birds, masking its approach and allowing it to attack undetected. After about thirty seconds of gore, the kestrel flies off with the songbird clenching in its claws. The bells thunder on.

Eventually—you could convince me it has been one minute or ten—the bells start to recede, fading one by one as their beating echoes decay. I stand there, trembling for quite a bit longer. My afternoon of pleasant diversions has been wrested from me, transformed into an overwhelming and entirely unexpected frenzy of sound and power, touch and death. I feel changed, moved, entirely against my will. It is quite a while before I am able to continue my journey.

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When I think back to that afternoon at Notre Dame, my encounter with the bells feels like something very different from anything that I might describe with the word “listening.” To be clear, an experience of listening was certainly what I expected when the bells first began: *Oh, what a nice coincidence! I’ll stay for a few minutes to listen.* But what I ended up undergoing felt like a decidedly different mode of experience. Instead of me orienting myself toward the sound—offering it my attention and seeking to understand it—the feeling was one of sound acting on me. I found myself moved before I could process what was happening. This disorientation was heightened by many factors, including a distinct cross-wiring of the senses (sound becoming touch in the bells’ vibration), the gravity imbued by my own narrative interpretations (the power of an Old Testament God), and the unexpected addition of non-sonic addenda (the dramatic death of the bird). Rather than recalling these as discrete elements, all of them closely intertwine and interfere in my memory. I should note that I don’t suggest that these responses were universal or “correct” interpretations in any way, but ones that were thoroughly informed by my limited subject position as the

individual experiencing the encounter (as a white cisgender American male, as a tourist in Paris enjoying a pleasant sauntering afternoon, as a student of music attuned to the sonic landscape, as an ignorant novice regarding the history or sound of the Notre Dame bells, as a lapsed Catholic hazily recalling biblical tales, and so on).

I offer this vignette as an example of what I refer to in this book as a sonic encounter. I define this term as an affective interaction between an observer and a sound—often supplemented by other inputs—whose impact overflows outside of the realm of what would generally be considered “listening.” The act of listening (i.e., the close attention paid to a sonic experience) can certainly be a crucial part of this process. But in various ways I argue that the mode of focused reception implied by the term “listening” comprises only a fraction of the dense network of affective relationships that we can form with sound in a particular moment. Listening processes are constantly rubbing against other inputs that contribute to the totality of an encounter. These might include other sensory data (sights, smells, touches), the residues of pre-listening preparation (texts, memories), notions of expectation (confirmation, surprise, absence), forms of cultural training (sonic syntax or musical languages, systems of meaning, privilege and bias, discourses of race, gender, class, etc.), and so on. Importantly, I argue that discursive interpretations and other non-sensory inputs do not exist in a different realm from the affective reception of sound. To the contrary, these inputs can substantively alter the affective power of a sonic encounter at the moment of impact.

My use of the term “sonic encounter” aligns in most respects with that put forward by James G. Mansell in his chapter “Hearing With: Researching the Histories of Sonic Encounter,” which defines it as “a socially shaped and culturally specific affective relationship between hearer and heard.”³ Mansell uses the concept as a way to move toward a historically situated understanding of sonic affect, one that rejects the universalism of the so-called “ontological turn” or “vibrational” approaches to sound studies. Instead, he follows other scholars in treating sonic affect as a concept that is always informed by historical and cultural positionality. To this end, Mansell quotes Marie Thompson’s insight that “situating rather than simply dismissing sonic ontologies enables us to ask how ‘the nature of the sonic’ is determined—what grounds the sonic ground—while remaining open to how it might be heard otherwise.”⁴

Two additional inspirations for this project have been the writings of Nina Sun Eidsheim (her books *Sensing Sound* and *The Race of Sound*) and Anthony Braxton (his three volume *Tri-Axium Writings*).⁵ In various ways both of these authors consider the impact of sonic encounters as what

Eidsheim refers to as a “thick events” that carry myriad layers of multisensory, social, and intermaterial complexities. They demonstrate that comprehending a sonic experience is impossible if one restricts their analysis to sound alone, a narrow viewpoint that Eidsheim refers to as “sonic reduction.”⁶ Quite to the contrary, parsing the significance of any sonic encounter (musical or otherwise) requires ongoing attention to the many factors that underlie how that encounter resonates. Braxton, for example, uses prose and schematic diagrams to interrogate the wide range of forces (individual, social, historical, vibrational, spiritual, functional, discursive) that can contribute to the impact and reception of a creative work.⁷ Both authors also pay close attention to the relationships between sonic practices and histories of race, racism, and sonic control. This topic resurfaces repeatedly throughout this book, primarily informed by my background and training as a white scholar of Black American music. This focus builds upon a growing wave of sound studies scholarship that extends beyond white European and American case studies and pushes further to consider the many interrelationships between sound, sonic regulation, and cultural practices in the aftermath of the institution of slavery and colonial encounter, and/or in the contemporary global south.⁸

Just Beyond Listening draws deeply on the insight that there is no such thing as “listening to the sound alone”—no form of sonic encounter that can exist outside the sensory and cultural networks that we live within. These points, however, manifest very differently in various chapters. I intentionally leave the title phrase “beyond listening” ambiguous and capacious, at least at this point. In some chapters I explore forces that emerge diachronically before or after listening, altering one’s engagement with sonic substance through non-sonic or metasonic supplements. In others, I describe synchronic interference—sensory inputs that happen alongside and simultaneously with listening. And in still others, I refer to modes of engaging sound that don’t fit neatly into any definition of listening whatsoever (remembering sound or imagining sound, for instance). Many of the case studies draw from affect theory as a framework to consider the impact of a given encounter. Indeed, a useful definition offered by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describes affects as “forces of encounter” that can move across and/or in between disparate bodies, discourses, or realms.⁹ I should be clear that although several examples include autoethnographic accounts of sound described from my own subject position, these are not intended as definitive readings of any given phenomenon. They are offered only as individual interpretations of one possible network of forces, which may or may not resonate with how others experience similar encounters.

The impact of a sonic encounter never exists in isolation. Affects are always moving and oscillating between multiple experiential frames. One of the goals of this book is to take those oscillations seriously. To borrow a phrase from Brian Massumi, the case studies attempt to consider sonic encounters via a “logic of mutual inclusion,” in which multiple forces (senses, affects, memories, discourses, etc.) coexist within a single moment. Rather than attempting to explain away contradictions, I aim to consider how these forces “overlap in the unicity of the performance, without the distinction between them being lost. They are performatively fused, without becoming confused. They come together without melding together, co-occurring without coalescing.”¹⁰

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The chapters that follow offer a varied selection of case studies. They are divided into three thematic sections. Part I, “Loudness and Silence,” comprises the first three chapters, which consider the two dynamic ends of the hearing spectrum: the very loud and the very soft. Chapter 1 focuses on extreme loudness, using various descriptions of loud sound to consider what kinds of impacts loudness can have on the hearing body. These observations are distilled into a selection of three “loudness effects,” which I name imagined loudness, noise occupation, and listener collapse. I apply these effects to two theoretical texts about listening, asking how a consideration of loudness can enrich our affective understanding of certain sonic encounters.

Chapter 2 turns to questions of silence, beginning with an account of US military acoustics research in the 1940s that led to the creation of the world’s most silent space: the so-called anechoic chamber. This same chamber would later be the site of an endlessly retold visit by the composer John Cage, who cited the story as a pivotal inspiration for the composition *4’33”*. While Cage framed his methods as being in contrast to the pragmatism of the scientists who built the chamber, I argue that much of Cage’s theory of silence relies on scientific ideas, ultimately producing a somewhat limited account of silence’s potential power. Chapter 3 continues this discussion, shifting from “silence” (as noun) to the verb “silencing,” or creating silence. I begin by tracing how Cage sometimes used his theories about silence as a cudgel with which to silence other artists (particularly Black improvisers). I then consider two other aesthetic applications of silence that differ in crucial ways from the Cagean model: Wadada Leo Smith’s composition titled *Silence* and Pauline Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations* and her ongoing practice of “Deep Listening.”

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise Part II, “Textual Interference.” Both deal with the potential of reading practices (either before or alongside an act of audition), to substantively alter what we experience during sonic encounters. Chapter 4 examines a flare-up in the early 1980s surrounding the adoption of supertitles (written translations of sung texts, projected in real time above the stage) in opera houses. Though the titling was enormously successful, a small but highly vocal group of detractors bemoaned the ways that supertitles changed their sensory experience of the genre by imposing a textual presence. Many of these objections were rooted in elitist forms of gatekeeping. In this chapter I consider the arguments made both for and against titling, both of which hinge on the premise that textual superimposition materially alters the way an audience must engage with live opera.

Chapter 5 turns away from textual engagement in the present and instead considers archival engagements that precede acts of listening. Specifically, I consider my own work in the personal and professional archives of a composer and an instrumentalist from the late twentieth century, both of whom I leave anonymous. Drawing from literature on archival empathy, I consider ways in which my process of listening to the pair’s music was altered through my intimate engagement with their possessions. I argue that such changes resulted not from increased understanding or insight but instead through affective changes to my own listening apparatus through processes of proximity, intimacy, and empathy. I focus on the ways in which this empathy itself relies on structures of privilege and systemic inclusion/exclusion that undergird the creation of many archives in the first place.

Part III, “Death and Deadness,” turns toward perceptions of death and how these perceptions can alter particular arenas of sonic encounter. Chapter 6 considers the way sound is curated at the Louis Armstrong House Museum, a national historic landmark preserved in the trumpeter’s longtime home in Corona, Queens, New York. Drawing from my own experience as a tour guide at the museum in 2005–2006, I focus on the way that the museum incorporates private recordings of Armstrong’s voice, which are placed strategically throughout the tour and tend to elicit powerful reactions from visitors. I argue that the recordings can be understood as evoking a process that I refer to as “antischizophonia,” an acousmatic (but not schizophonic) phenomenon based around creating the impossible impression of *returning* recorded sound to its point of origin. This technique is used to stage a form of haunting that relies on interpenetrations of sound and space as well as the resurrection of dead labor that has been referred to under the rubric of “deadness.” The chapter is structured as a soundwalk that guides the reader through the house tour itself.

Finally, chapter 7 considers a phenomenon I refer to as “tape death,” a process of mourning the loss of recorded sounds that recurs in many journalistic accounts of audio archives. The chapter begins by considering a form of archival decay called “sticky shed syndrome,” a type of degradation in archived tapes that plagues many tape stocks manufactured in the 1970s and 1980s. I then shift to consider the story of a massive fire at the vault of the Universal Music Group in 2008, an event chronicled in a widely circulated news story in 2019. In both examples I contemplate how the responses to these events can be read as a type of mourning for lost sounds, even in cases where those sounds have never actually been heard. The chapter questions how we might think about the status of commercial recordings held in record company vaults, arguing that they constitute a form of stored labor that is detached from the bodies of the artists and stockpiled for corporate profit.

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As these descriptions make clear, the chapters function largely as stand-alone entities that differ in their approach as well as in the tone of the writing. Each begins with an evocative prologue that sets the stage and introduces some aspect of the discussion. It goes without saying that these are by no means the only topics that could have been chosen. Rather, they offer a collection of examples that I found illuminating in regard to particular sonic relationships.