

## *Introduction*

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Writing about the effect of inhaling nitrous oxide (laughing gas) in 1800, a young Humphry Davy described the experience by appealing to the ideas of the ‘immortal’ philosopher and physician David Hartley (1705–57). Likening the muscular actions induced by nitrous oxide inhalation to ‘common pleasurable feelings or strong emotions’, Davy ascribed the generation of these to what he called Hartley’s category of ‘mixed automatic actions’, wherein a ‘series of motions formerly voluntary, but now produced without the intervention of ideas: as when a person accustomed to play on the harpsichord, from accidentally striking a key, is induced to perform the series of motions which produce a well-remembered tune’.<sup>1</sup> Davy’s comparison of the involuntary actions generated via a chemical influence with the automatic actions undertaken by a musician at a keyboard forges a rather unusual connection between sound and sense: rather than deciding to make music, Davy’s performer is *compelled* to play after unintentionally striking a key. Here, mind and body are inextricably linked in what seems to be a misprision of Hartley’s famous analysis of the stages involved in learning to play at a keyboard in his *Observations on Man* (1749). For Hartley, the example of acquiring skill at a musical instrument constituted a supreme case of the transformation of increasingly complex and rational sequences of intentional mental commands into involuntary physical movements, that is, the kinds of actions he deemed ‘secondarily automatic’. For Davy, rather, the sound of the harpsichord was prior: mistakenly hitting a key activated this complex chain of actions, without the performer’s desire or volition.

Davy’s appeal to Hartley’s keyboard player to explain the effects of mind-altering substances on his person constitutes an evocative encounter between an older, rationalist worldview and an emerging Romantic one. In the last few decades of the eighteenth century, Hartley’s associationist model of mind – and its attendant neurophysiological hypothesis of vibrating nerves – was challenged and ultimately displaced by writers

who lacked the scientist's faith in the triumph of mind over matter and reason over sensory experience. Sound played a pivotal role in many reactions to post-Lockean empiricism, as vibration, harmony, rhythm, and resonance became widespread models for unconscious mental activity, 'sensible' affective response, sympathy, and shared sentiments, or 'common sense'. Metaphors of resonance and attunement took on central importance in accounting for the stark physical and emotional vicissitudes newly identified with the cult of sensibility. Often depicted in aural terms – from thrumming harps to howling winds, from babbling brooks to chirping birds – these sounds became synecdoches for profound human experiences that could never be adequately accounted for in empiricist terms. Indeed, even Davy noted that, on taking doses of laughing gas in quick succession, he felt 'as if composed of finely vibrating strings'.<sup>2</sup>

Seen in this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that Davy's keyboardist is subject to strange, incomprehensible forces, impelled by an accidentally struck key to execute a series of musical actions in a kind of trance-like state.<sup>3</sup> Sound here is equivalent to nitrous oxide: a stimulus that takes charge of the mind and turns the body into a corporeal puppet, a Romantic trope that would become ubiquitous in subsequent decades as mesmerism, somnambulism, and later hypnosis supplied new frameworks for large-scale social fantasies of automatism and a loss of control.<sup>4</sup> We can perhaps find in Davy's account a reflection of the contemporary zeitgeist: at the same time as the phenomenon of sound was being reimagined from various angles – scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic – the notion of the subject was likewise undergoing a rapid transformation.

Just as the ocularcentrism associated with the Enlightenment gave birth to the notion of the self as rational compounder of ideas, the understanding of a porous, Romantic subject attuned to their surroundings was inextricably linked with the sense of hearing. Ironically, much of this was, again, based on a misinterpretation of Hartley, whose philosophical psychology rested on a neurophysiological hypothesis known as the 'doctrine of vibrations', wherein he ascribed the mechanism of sensory perception to the transmission of infinitesimal vibrations, or vibrating particles, which mediated between the experiences of the external senses and the sensations aroused in the brain.<sup>5</sup> While Hartley emphatically insisted that the nerves themselves did *not* vibrate like musical strings, his heuristic was quickly folded into existing (and often quasi-mystical) discourses around sympathetic resonance.<sup>6</sup> Given this philosophical and physiological background – Robert Miles compares the stature of associationism and vibrating nerve theory in the eighteenth century to

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the latter-day role of certain Freudian concepts<sup>7</sup> – the newly tenuous hold of sense on sound presented an epistemological challenge to many writers, one registered in scientific discourse as well as in literary and musical aesthetics. In the Romantic era, sound would emerge as a newly disruptive phenomenon, a philosophical and political problem, a force with the power to overwhelm the sensible subject.

The essays in this collection explore various approaches to the nature of sound and listening: one that emerged in Britain after the Hartleian notion that all sensation was comprised of various kinds of infinitesimal vibrations – whether material or electric – had coalesced into a submerged metaphor that underpinned nearly all accounts of human experience. Transformations in the domains of physiology, philosophy, and the arts reveal a radical re-imagining of the relationship between sound and sense during the decades around 1800. This new approach reconfigured sound as central to understandings of the natural versus the social, and helped to structure perceptions of time, from the diurnal rhythms of everyday life in the modern city to the ‘deep time’ of the natural world.

The contention of the present volume is that the specific circumstances that shaped understandings of the audible world in Romantic-era Britain present particularly compelling case studies for scholars interested in the reciprocal relationship between scientific, social, literary, and musical theories of sound. British culture in this period, moreover, significantly contributed to the formation of many of the foundational assumptions about sound and sense that still, for better or for worse, largely inform the world in which we live today. As a result, interrogating the ways in which historical actors in this period thought about a range of issues with and through sound can substantially enrich our view of Romantic-era British culture and its influence and afterlives. This helps to elucidate not only the role of sound in relation to ideas of the sensory and the Romantic and post-Romantic sensorium but also the bearing sound has on the realm of semantic meaning, on the ‘common sense’ tradition and the kind of rational good sense represented by Elinor Dashwood in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811).

Recent scholarship in the history of the senses has generally taken its cue from Marx’s 1844 suggestion that ‘the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present’.<sup>8</sup> According to this view, sensory experience is never innate or natural but always culturally constructed and historically determined. To take a case in point, the eighteenth-century sensorium is most commonly thought about in terms of the dominance of vision: ‘the eye’s clear eclipse of the ear’, as the

historian Leigh Eric Schmidt puts it, and ‘the decline of listening in the face of the ascendant power of vision in modern culture’.<sup>9</sup> In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), the foundational text of British empiricist philosophy, John Locke described sight as ‘the most comprehensive of all our senses’,<sup>10</sup> while in *The Spectator* (1712), Joseph Addison asserted that ‘our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses’.<sup>11</sup> Half a century later, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) held that ‘Of all the faculties called the five senses, sight is without doubt the noblest.’<sup>12</sup> Nobility, delight, comprehensiveness: the power of vision elevated and expanded human experience of the world.

During the Enlightenment, sight was positioned at the apex of the hierarchy of the senses, and associated with the power of reason itself. Jonathan Sterne has characterised the deep-seated opposition between seeing and hearing produced by Enlightenment ocularcentrism as ‘the audiovisual litany’. According to this set of assumptions, vision is exterior, intellectual, and primarily spatial, tends towards objectivity, and offers the subject a perspective on the world. By contrast, hearing is interior, affective, and primarily temporal, tends towards subjectivity, and immerses the subject in the world. For Sterne, the audiovisual litany ‘idealizes hearing (and by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority. It alternately denigrates and elevates vision: as a fallen sense, vision takes us out of the world. But it also bathes us in the clear light of reason.’<sup>13</sup> Many of the most ubiquitous visual tropes for modern culture date from this period: think only of the panopticon, the *flâneur*, the spectator, or the gaze.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the rapt listener, losing themselves in the contemplation of (typically instrumental) music, is generally linked to Romanticism: and while German-language accounts of the overwhelming power of music are perhaps most familiar today – the outpourings of Wackenroder’s ‘art-loving friar’ or Hoffmann’s critical effusions – British sources report comparably powerful reactions to the music of Handel and Haydn (adjusted, of course, for the British temperament). An example of these new modes of absorption can be found in Charles Burney’s *Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in Commemoration of Handel* (1785), which reports that ‘such a stillness reigned, as, perhaps, never happened before in so large an assembly . . . The choral power of harmonical combinations affected some to tears and fainting; while others were melted and enrapt by the exquisite sweetness of single sounds’.<sup>15</sup>

The shifting hierarchies of the senses are inseparable from the history of aesthetics and consequently the changing relationships among the arts. In

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many accounts, at some time around 1800, music went from being regarded as the lowest of the arts, owing to its lack of semantic meaning and clear mimetic function, to being held as the highest – and for much the same reason.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the absence of semantic coding was transformed from a liability to a source of aesthetic prestige: music was eloquent *because* of its lack of specificity. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge, perhaps the most influential mediator of German idealism in Britain, wrote in his notebooks, ‘The generic how superior to the particular illustrated in Music, how infinitely more perfect in passion & its transitions than even Poetry – Poetry than Painting.’<sup>17</sup> Much later in the nineteenth century, we find this sentiment echoed by Walter Pater, who famously declared that ‘all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’.<sup>18</sup>

These changing attitudes, which had an inevitable effect on the experience of musical listening, and indeed on auditory attentiveness more broadly, are prefigured in the aesthetic theories of the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, who praised instrumental music for its ability to ‘fill up, completely the whole capacity of the mind, so as to leave no part of its attention vacant for thinking of any thing else’.<sup>19</sup> In Britain, as on the Continent, the ‘problem of attention’ captured the imagination of artists, philosophers, and writers, giving rise to new theories about how one ought to read, listen, and behave.<sup>20</sup> The intense concentration now required for the contemplation of cultural productions – a desideratum hitherto largely associated with religious contexts – left the subject vulnerable to intrusion, particularly in the form of extraneous sounds (visual disruptions posed less of a problem, as the eyes could be averted). Accordingly, unwanted sounds would tend to be recategorised as noise, a trend perceptively foreshadowed in Hogarth’s renowned print *The Enraged Musician* (1741). By the last few decades of the eighteenth century, certain kinds of sounds – often those coded as new, lower-class, foreign – would come to be regarded as a perilous threat owing to their ability to overwhelm the mind: the materiality of their very vibrations forcing listeners, and thus their nervous systems, to resonate involuntarily in sympathy.<sup>21</sup> In certain ways, as John Picker has demonstrated, this trend would achieve its apotheosis in the Victorian era’s abhorrence of urban noise and campaigns against the scurrilous sounds of organ grinders and other street musicians.<sup>22</sup>

Our volume begins with a series of essays on audiovisual aesthetics and national identity. Lydia Goehr reads Hogarth’s *The Enraged Musician* – planned as the first of a triptych, but in practice complemented by only a single companion, *The Distrest Poet* – against the backdrop of strategies of

*paragone* and *ekphrasis* in order to investigate the depiction of the identities of the various characters in the image. In her contribution, Maria Semi places the late eighteenth-century vogue for collecting national airs within the universalising paradigms of Enlightenment conjectural history, showing how song collectors were at once inventing tradition and elevating a form of popular culture previously ignored by elites. Oskar Cox Jensen focuses on George Colman and Samuel Arnold's 1789 dramatisation of Hogarth's print as *Ut Pictura Poesis, or, The Enraged Musician*. Investigating the prompt copy of the play text, the published vocal score, and the Haymarket theatre space, Cox Jensen demonstrates how this hybrid work satirises national identity, drawing not only on Hogarth's print but also on the rich dynamics between actors, audience, and London street vendors.

The constantly shifting boundaries between noise and music lay at the heart of another late eighteenth-century interest, namely the relationship of music to the idea of place, a subject that had been brought closer by colonial, economic, and missionary ventures. In Britain, Charles Burney's accounts of his musical tours established the sounds of the Continent as a subject worthy of sustained exploration, while reports on the musical traditions of the peoples of China, India, North America, and the Friendly Islands were avidly read by travellers and armchair explorers.<sup>23</sup> At the same time and not unrelatedly, collections of national airs and melodies were becoming highly popular and commercially successful. Notable examples include Robert Burns's collaborations with James Johnson on *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803) and with George Thomson on *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (1793–1818), Thomas Moore's work with Sir John Andrew Stevenson and Henry Bishop on *Irish Melodies* (1808–34), Lord Byron and Isaac Nathan's *Hebrew Melodies* (1815), and Felicia Hemans and John Parry's *A Selection of Welsh Melodies* (1822). These collections served many purposes; Celeste Langan has described their paradoxical status as products of print capitalism, 'imported from the periphery' to metropolitan drawing rooms.<sup>24</sup> In the context of burgeoning Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalism, collections of national song could act as the vehicles of anti-English sentiment but could also reinforce internal colonialism through the appropriation and commodification of cultural identity.

The sonic experience of place is the subject of our next group of essays. Experiences of travel and colonial encounter were frequently mediated through sound, which, to use Pierre Nora's phrase, appears as a privileged *lieu de mémoire* across a wide range of places and texts. Familiar noises, tunes, and timbres could act as soundmarks that anchored an individual's

memory (and ultimately identity) across vast temporal and geographical distances. In her contribution, Josephine McDonagh focuses on what she defines as ‘the scene of aural recognition’ – the uncanny sense of having heard something before, often at a considerable temporal or spatial remove – across a wide range of early nineteenth-century English literary texts. Focusing on key moments in Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering*, John Galt’s short stories, and Reginald Heber’s writings about India, McDonagh foregrounds the affective charge that sounds carry within migratory culture, often crossing the threshold between intelligible and unintelligible sound as subjects move between more or less displaced states. As a counterpoint, William Tullett’s chapter traces the role of the news-horn in structuring the temporality of the city of London, showing how the urban soundscape was refigured in this period by the development of communication networks and the different rhythms of newspaper and postal delivery. Jonathan Hicks, meanwhile, homes in on a very different location: Fingal’s Cave, on the Isle of Staffa, a site that inspired the imagination of visitors from Samuel Johnson to Felix Mendelssohn, the latter famously memorialising the place in his overture *The Hebrides* or *Fingal’s Cave* (1829–35). The specific acoustic properties of the cave were replete with meaning for visitors in this period, in large part thanks to the fascination exerted by James Macpherson’s Ossian poems celebrating the ancient Scottish king Fingal. The endless re-sounding of the cave in early nineteenth-century oral, print, theatrical, and musical culture, Hicks argues, represents a case study in Romantic resonance, one that is intensely material and often mundane, but that amounts to an alternative story about aurality and the mediation of sonic objects in this period.

Sound and sense could be united in sublime experiences such as those afforded by Fingal’s Cave, or merged in the memory through the echo of sounds long past.<sup>25</sup> Yet the Romantic era also saw a renegotiation of the relationship between the two terms, famously linked by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), which mandates that ‘The *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*’, restricting the former to a supplement of semantic meaning.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, this traditional privileging of sense over sound was long invoked in musical and literary debates: as late as 1777, James Beattie categorically proclaimed that ‘He who in literary matters prefers *sound* to *sense* is a fool.’<sup>27</sup> The gradual inversion, or at least disruption, of the relationship between the sound and sense and the role of this change in the production of knowledge is the subject of the next two essays in this volume. Focusing on the parson-naturalist Gilbert White’s deployment of poetry as an instrument of measurement by

shouting lines of classical verse to measure the echoes around the village of Selborne in Hampshire, Courtney Weiss Smith's chapter reveals unexpected ways in which poetry came to be thought about not only as an expressive medium but as a material object, a construction of sounds and syllables, embedded in the natural world.

The precise measurements enabled by Gilbert White's classical verses bouncing around the rural soundscape were, in a sense, complemented by other kinds of sounds travelling through very different settings. The proliferating print culture of the late eighteenth century saw a flowering of ambitious writings on music and sound by British musicians and men of letters. Essays on acoustics, music theory, and various forms of music encountered by travellers in Europe and beyond regularly appeared in mainstream publications aimed at the general public, outlets such as *The Gentleman's Magazine*, as well as in more specialist venues such as *The Musical World*. Attempts to bring innovative mathematical, philosophical, or psychological ideas to bear on acoustic phenomena as well as on questions pertaining to the organisation of pitch and rhythm appeared in many proceedings of various learned societies. The effervescent culture around music and sound also extended to female writers and musicians, a group which had rarely before had an opportunity to publish in the public sphere.<sup>28</sup> This flourishing popular interest in music theory dovetailed with a related fascination with the science of sound. Here, too, women writers made important contributions, as Katherine Fry demonstrates in her study of Mary Somerville's scientific rhetoric. Primarily concerned with dissemination, rather than invention, Somerville offers an alternative perspective on sound and science in nineteenth-century Britain, one that foregrounds the role of sound as an essential component of a Romantic philosophy of nature and the senses.

This new Romantic philosophy of nature relied in no small part on the burgeoning culture of new musical instruments, an enthusiasm that reached unprecedented heights in the early nineteenth century. As John Tresch has compellingly shown, musical 'machines' were steeped in the ideals and values of Romanticism, and indeed the careers of many artists, artisans, and natural scientists spanned both the fine arts and the sciences.<sup>29</sup> In Britain, distinguished inventors such as James Watt and Charles Wheatstone designed and manufactured musical instruments, and natural scientists including the polymath Thomas Young, the physicist John Robison, and the geologist John Farey senior regularly contributed major articles on sound, acoustics, and the tuning and temperament of musical instruments to journals and encyclopaedias. The 1820s and 1830s



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saw the British public regularly enthralled with mysterious new musical devices: the glossophone, the celestina, the kaleidophone, and the ‘enchanted lyre’.<sup>30</sup>

The scientific and the popular culture involved in the design, manufacture, and reception of musical instruments produced both novel sounds and new modes of listening, the subject of the last two essays in our volume.<sup>31</sup> In Britain, many of these novel instruments were intended not only to generate new timbres, but also to demonstrate creative solutions to long-standing dilemmas related to tuning, as most musicians in the country did not adopt equal temperament until well into the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. One example is Robison’s invention of the instrument that would later, in 1799, be called a siren, a device that could be attached to an organ pipe to measure the precise flow of air required for a given pitch. Another is the euharmonic organ, an elaborate instrument devised by the Scottish minister and music theorist Henry Liston in 1810. This instrument is the focus of Daniel K. S. Walden’s essay, which explores the adoption by St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church of Calcutta of the euharmonic organ a mere seven years later. Working with sources in Britain and in India, Walden demonstrates how the reception of this unusual musical instrument, which offered a complex system of tuning that divided each octave into thirty-nine parts, participated in a specifically Anglo-Indian context in which Scottish and English colonists negotiated their relationship to British nationalism and empire.

An instrument that divided the octave into miniscule parts naturally encouraged listeners to develop a fine sensitivity to minute nuances of pitch. Other kinds of instruments made different demands. In her contribution, Melissa Dickson investigates the vernacular reaction in Britain to a new listening technology: the stethoscope, invented in France by René Laennec in 1816. Although this was not a musical instrument, the kinds of careful listening practices it demanded held considerable similarity with skills long honed within the musical domain. While the disembodied ear of the medical practitioner has been the subject of considerable study in the past few decades, most importantly by Jonathan Sterne, the experience of the people whose bodies were subject to auscultation is still to be explored. Taking this perspective, Dickson foregrounds the non-elite reception of an elite form of aural knowledge in examining how the deployment of mediate auscultation in medical contexts induced patient fantasies of super-sensory and extra-sensory hearing, as well as the penetrability and vulnerability of the human body.

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Two decades after Humphry Davy compared the experience of nitrous oxide to a harpsichord player, Thomas De Quincey published an account of opium addiction that has at its centre a strange and unexpected scene of enraptured listening:

I seldom drank laudanum, at that time, more than once in three weeks: this was usually on a Tuesday or a Saturday night; my reason for which was this. In those days Grassini sang at the Opera: and her voice was delightful to me beyond all that I had ever heard . . . The choruses were divine to hear: and when Grassini appeared in some interlude, as she often did, and poured forth her passionate soul as Andromache, at the tomb of Hector, &c. I question whether any Turk, of all that ever entered the Paradise of opium-eaters, can have had half the pleasure I had.<sup>32</sup>

The combined effect of the drug and the performances of the Italian contralto Josephina Grassini (1773–1850) were for De Quincey the ultimate opium high. Indeed, in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, opium and opera are aligned as cultural commodities, at once exotic and domesticated within the ‘world city’ of early nineteenth-century London, a place of ‘mighty labyrinths’, human suffering, and waking nightmares.<sup>33</sup> This opium-fuelled opera-going appears as the expression of pure hedonism, the hyper-sensuous enjoyment of Grassini’s voice and the spectacle of the Italian opera.<sup>34</sup>

De Quincey insists, however, that music (much like opium) ‘is an intellectual or a sensual pleasure, according to the temperament of him who hears it’. Far from being ‘purely passive’ to music, he argues, our response is shaped ‘by the re-action of the mind upon the notices of the ear . . . opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind generally, increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure’. De Quincey’s drug-taking is an experiment on the self, producing an altered or expanded sensorium that connects the music to a new understanding of his own life:

a chorus, &c. of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life – not, as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music: no longer painful to dwell upon: but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. All this was to be had for five shillings.<sup>35</sup>

These laudanum-influenced nights at the opera are both a way of exploring the workings of the mind and a relatively cheap, and endlessly reproducible, urban pleasure.