

Institution: University of Sussex

Unit of Assessment: UoA 36 Media Studies

Title of case study: Enriching public appreciation of the role of sound in society, and generating new artistic artefacts and national cultural resources

1. Summary of the impact

David Hendy's 30-part series for BBC Radio 4 (broadcast March–April 2013) and the accompanying book, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening*, have had two main impacts. In offering a widely disseminated history of sound that places social history at its centre, *Noise* stimulated public discussion about, and public and personal appreciation of, the role of sound and listening in history and contemporary life, especially with regard to contemporary attitudes to what is and is not counted as noise. Hendy's research on *Noise* has also materially contributed towards the creation of new artistic artefacts and national cultural resources by supporting and inspiring further creative commissions in sound and in bequeathing to the British Library a new permanent holding of field-recordings.

2. Underpinning research

Key researcher: *Professor David Hendy, Professor of Media and Communication at University of Sussex, 2012–present.*

Previous 'histories' of sound focused largely on sound as a sub-category of acoustics, or on literary or physical responses to it. Hendy's research on the role of sound and listening in social history over the past 100,000 years took the model of cultural historians who have studied the role of sound in particular times and places, and developed it by linking relatively atomised work into a significantly broader account (geographically and chronologically), drawing on work in archaeology, ethnography, musicology and mainstream social history, as well as on primary written sources and original field-recordings. Its overarching theme was the way in which, across history, arguments over sound – e.g. what constitutes 'noise' and should be silenced, or how some ways of listening have more perceived value than others – have been symbolic (and sometimes constitutive) of broader power struggles and desires for sociality. Using cross-disciplinary sources and original field-recordings to 'recreate' past soundscapes, Hendy's work develops an immersive approach that provides an understanding of how past events and processes were *experienced* subjectively by ordinary people, thus demonstrating that hidden social tensions within particular eras can be 'unlocked' through study of the 'soundworlds' of past everyday life. Further, his research posits that social 'soundproofing' between cultures and classes repeatedly leads to spirals of mutual misunderstanding – a finding with implications for contemporary urban life and debates over multiculturalism.

Hendy was commissioned by BBC Radio 4 to research and present a series on the role of sound in the making of the modern mind, structured around 30 historical case studies. The radio series places rare archival recordings in the public domain.

Archival/book research was conducted from April 2012 to January 2013. Primary sources (e.g. early-18-century accounts of slave culture) were read at the Bodleian Library, and suitable sound archives identified at the British Library (BL), Pitt Rivers Museum and elsewhere. The BL collaborated with the project, its curators assisting in identifying and clarifying the provenance of recordings. Between September 2012 and April 2013, Hendy conducted fieldwork in France, Orkney, the USA, Ghana, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Belgium, England and Scotland. This included testing/recording the acoustic properties of sites (e.g. Neolithic monuments, ancient Greek theatre). Book chapters and preliminary radio scripts were completed by February 2013. Some further location recording and research into sound archives took place during March/April as the series was transmitted. In May 2013 the series was made permanently available globally as a download on iTunes and the process of depositing field-recordings with the British Library was begun.

3. References to the research

Impact case study (REF3b)

- R1** *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening*: 30-part series, broadcast BBC Radio 4, 18 March–26 April 2013, and available as free downloads or podcasts during the same period.
- The radio series was formally commissioned by the BBC at a cost of £100,000 (including £10,000 for fieldwork), after a highly competitive bidding process for programmes in Radio 4's 'Narrative History' strands, a slot widely recognised within the BBC and among historians as highly prestigious. The Radio 4 *Commissioning Guidelines, Spring 2011* defines this as a space for displaying work of 'creative and intellectual ambition'.
 - Written and presented by Hendy, produced by Matt Thompson for Rockethouse Productions with the collaboration of the British Library Sound Archive.
 - Episodes, 15-minutes in length, were broadcast at 1.45pm each weekday. There was also an 'omnibus' compilation broadcast each Friday evening at 9pm on BBC Radio 4.
 - Episodes were 'stacked' on BBC Online, so all 30 could be listened-to until 3 May, and were available as podcasts for up to 7 days after broadcast.
 - Since 6 May 2012 the entire series has been available globally as a download from iTunes and AudioGo.
 - This output is listed in REF2.
 - The British Library acknowledged the importance of the series by agreeing a formal contract of collaboration on it signed in August 2012 – the first one with an independent production company.
- R2** Hendy, D. (2013) *Noise: a Human History of Sound and Listening*. London: Profile Books. By June 2013, translation rights had been sold to Korea, Turkey and Estonia (a US edition was published by Ecco Books in October 2013).

4. Details of the impact

- The first impact of this very widely reviewed [see Section 5, C1] research was to stimulate and enrich public discussion and understanding of the importance of sound as an aspect of history and of contemporary social relations. The radio series brought the research to a wide audience. RAJAR figures for Q1 of 2013 indicate that, in a typical week, programmes in this slot (i.e. 1.45–2 pm weekdays) got 2.4 million adult listeners (9.8 per cent of the available national audience). Programmes from the *Noise* series were listened to online at the BBC website 312,000 times, and downloaded as podcasts 41,000 times during the first two weeks alone. In March, the series was in the top 12 podcasts on iTunes in the UK. The series was a 'featured' item on BBC iPlayer and trailed on BBC national television channels at peak time between 21 and 28 April. One episode was re-broadcast on the New York radio station WNYC (the country's 'most listened to public radio station' with a weekly reach of over 1 million listeners), and extracts twice re-broadcast on BBC Radio 4's *Pick of the Week*. From May 2013 it was made available as a commercial download via iTunes and AudioGo – becoming, in its first week of sales, AudioGo's 4th most popular download in the UK [C2, C6 – Hutchings, BBC]. The book was also sold prominently in high-street bookshops, through newspapers and via iTunes, selling approximately 4,000 copies in the first two months. It was selected by the national 'Prison Reading Group' in May 2013, with copies distributed to inmates of HMP Bullingdon in Oxfordshire, as part of a scheme to 'encourage links between formal and informal education' within prisons [C3]. Hendy's research led to interviews on the historical role of sound in *BBC History Magazine* and *The Wire* (an online music magazine with a large international reach). He was also commissioned to write an article for *The Scotsman* (on how his research suggests histories focused on sound create a more 'decentred' narrative than those produced by traditional political studies) and for the *Independent* (20 March), in which he drew on fieldwork in Greece and Ghana to argue for the potential restorative effects of sound for travellers. Hendy also presented his research at the Brighton Science Festival, the Bath Literature Festival, Field Day in London, the Bristol Festival of Ideas, and the Dartington Ways With Words Festival, as well as on many local, national and international radio programmes (e.g. RTE's, *Arena* programme, the World Service's *Newshour*, BBC Five Live, BBC London, BBC Radio Scotland, BBC Radio Ulster, BBC Sussex, BBC Newcastle, WNYC in New York and News Talk Ireland) [C1, C4].

Radio interviews frequently acted as a stimulus for public comments and interaction. For *Newshour* on BBC World Service, Hendy drew on his research to discuss sound and memories of place, while

listeners in Asia and Africa emailed/tweeted on the role of sound in their own memories. Hendy's interview on BBC Radio Scotland's flagship arts show, *The Culture Studio*, centred on his research on the class-based soundscapes of Edinburgh in the 18th century, with listeners invited to submit sonic impressions of the city. His appearance on WNYC in New York framed a week-long sequence of items about urban sound pollution, with New Yorkers invited to describe their own experiences and the Mayor's Environment Committee invited to respond: the station website noted that it had 'received an overwhelming response to our segment on the effects of urban noise' [C4]. Influential blogs from around the world reflected on the implications of Hendy's research for their own special interests. For example, the blog of the Council of Ex-Muslims discussed Hendy's argument about the role of rhythm in ecstatic religions; a cycling blog drew on Hendy's explorations of Dutch urban noise-reduction strategies to argue for a rebalancing of the rights of cyclists and motorists within British cities, concluding that 'noise and danger go together' and prompting one commentator to claim 'It gave me an entirely new way of thinking about cycle helmets'. Phil Evans, a Music Therapist blogging at the *Huffington Post*, wrote about how the series had prompted his reconsideration of the relationship between music and silence in music therapy [C4]. A sample of over 900 references to the series on Twitter includes a large number of references to it being a culturally enriching and, at times, personally inspiring experience [C3].

The main research theme amplified in public discussion was Hendy's contention that the process of defining what is 'noise' and what is not has frequently represented the play of unequal power relations in society. This was the focus of an article commissioned by the main BBC News Online website (18 March 2013: 'The Dark Side of Silence'), where Hendy presented evidence in support of his argument. This included a film on how sounds get amplified in city environments, links to articles about noise abatement and an invitation for public comments. The article was the third most 'shared' BBC news item on social media that day, with 1.2k of 'shares'. It was also translated for the BBC's Mundo website serving Latin America [C1]. The same research theme was also aired when the *Big Issue* published 'Is Silence a Virtue?', a centre-page spread in its 25–31 March 2013 issue, to discuss the relative merits of silence and of noise in forging sociality, and in a similar discussion for BBC Radio Ulster's Sunday morning religious programme. The *Daily Telegraph* devoted an editorial/leading article to the subject of 'Sounds and silence', using Hendy's work as a prompt, and posing the question 'Is it noisier in our lives than in past centuries?' (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 2013). Several newspapers suggested that *Noise* had encouraged a subtle change in attitude towards sound. A reviewer in the *Irish Times* said the book was 'opening our ears and our minds to the sound worlds of other lives and times, and perhaps encouraging us to listen to our own familiar soundscapes with fresh ears' (6 April 2013); a reviewer for the *Daily Express* concluded that: '[t]he aural soundscape connects us to our ancestors in much the same way as the physical landscape does. *Noise: A Human History* made me feel quite silly for not having thought about this much before. I expect many other listeners felt the same' (24 March 2013) [C1, C4].

- The second major impact of the research was the creation of new artistic artefacts and national cultural resources as a result of Hendy's work, stimulating further creative commissions in sound and in bequeathing to the British Library a new permanent collection of field-recordings. This is particularly evidenced in three instances:
 - First, field-recordings and sound archives, featured in the programme and selected under the guidance of Hendy's research, were used in the creation of new musical works. Jo Acheson of the Hidden Orchestra received a £2,000 commission to compose 30 different signature tunes for the series, each based directly on the content. The musician and Head of the New Radiophonic Workshop, Matthew Herbert, received a £2,500 commission to create a 14-minute musical work, based on the *Noise* series and following the overall narrative structure and themes established by Hendy's research. Hendy's notes and field-recordings in Edinburgh were also used by American composer, Tod Machover, to assist in the creation of a new 'city symphony' inspired by soundscapes of the city (premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2013, but composed April–June). Machover wrote to Hendy on 5 May saying, 'If I manage to convey anything useful about Edinburgh through this new piece, much of that will be because of what I have learned from you and your work' [C5, C6 – Machover].
 - Second, in May 2013, by agreement made in 2012, the first of a series of recordings for the series was handed to the British Library, to be part of a new permanent holding accessible to

Impact case study (REF3b)

the public and future researchers. Hendy's research on Noise has therefore led to an enhancement in the national corpus of sound archives [C6 – Thompson]

- Third, *Noise* has contributed towards the goal of two national institutions – the BBC and the British Library – to enhance, as the BBC puts it, 'the art of listening'. At the BL on 20 May, in a joint event organised by the University of Sussex and the Library, 'Sound Archives and the Listening Public', the Library's Chief Executive Roly Keating said the series had been 'one of the most fruitful encounters between the Library and the BBC' in his time at the BL. In noting its creation of a strong narrative framework for archive recordings, he said, one could 'begin to find new forms of broadcasting' [C6 – Keating, BL]. The Commissioning Editor for Arts and Documentaries, BBC Radio 4 and World Service, Tony Phillips, stated that, in providing listeners with a 'sensorial and global experience that emerges organically from the thesis of the narrator', *Noise* provided 'a big gauntlet that's been thrown down to other producers in radio'. Specifically, it helped to 'reinforce and draw attention to the unstated intention of the network [Radio 4]: to encourage the art of listening' [C6 – Phillips, BBC]. The BBC's Head of History, Robert Seatter, said that Hendy's work offered 'a model' for academic–broadcast partnerships and 'a paradigm that can be replicated in other ways' [C5 – Seatter, BBC].

The BBC's website for the series also reflected this broader cultural agenda, by linking to a range of other sites related to listening – e.g. a permanent link on the series' homepage to other major BBC series, such as *Open Air* (a series of audio interventions by five artists) and *The Listening Project* (a series 'to capture the nation in conversation' produced in collaboration with the BL) and a rotating menu of other programmes such as *In Our Time*. A section of 'Related Links' allowed users to link directly to the BL's Sounds collections and its 'Sounds' blog. The BBC also commissioned a series of 6 special blogs written by curators at the BL, discussing the radio programmes in the broader context of other archives of relevance (see, for example: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio4/posts/Noise-A-Human-History-Week-3-The-Bells>).

Additionally, BBC webpages devoted to each individual episode included links to archives and resources of particular relevance to that day's broadcast. BBC data record 312,000 online requests related to the series [C4]. The BL's curator, Janet Topp-Fargion, states that during the series the BL 'clearly noticed some spikes in the use of our online sound collections'. She argues that the sheer scale and duration of the series was a factor in stimulating public interest: 'it becomes part of the discourse' [C5 – Topp Fargion, BL].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

The evidence here has been made available for audit online at <http://www.davidhendy.co.uk/ref-data/> [password available upon request]:

- C1** Press reviews, and newspaper/online articles by Hendy based on research;
- C2** Radio series audience data;
- C3** Correspondence from listeners (including Tweets), and prison reading-group feedback;
- C4** Key references to series/book online, including blogs and radio interviews;
- C5** Interviews with attendees recorded at the British Library–University of Sussex event on 'Sound Archives and the Listening Public event', BL, 20 May 2013;
- C6** Correspondence with Hendy from those named as auditable sources for main impact claims: R. Keating, Chief Executive, BL; T. Phillips, Commissioning Editor, BBC Radio 4, Arts, and World Service, Documentaries; C. Hutchings, Research Manager, BBC Marketing and Audiences; M. Thompson, Director, Rockethouse Productions; T. Machover, Composer, Director of Opera of the Future Group, MIT, Boston. (Available for audit).