

BOOK REVIEW

James Q. Davies and Ellen Lockhart, eds.

Sound Knowledge: Music and Science in London, 1789–1851

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Reviewed by Erin Johnson-Williams

Sound Knowledge is a cutting-edge contribution to knowledge about the history of music and science—in particular, the interconnections between hearing scientifically and seeing musically—in London during the period 1789–1851. Although musicology is the book's primary point of departure, the expertise of its authors also covers the history of science, cultural studies, and sound studies. The book will be significant within all of these fields. It is refreshing to see a volume that departs from an over-reliance on the traditional narratives of the musical 'canon' or hierarchical musical genres as its starting point. Nor does the book limit itself, even, to a mainstream approach to what typically constitutes a musical instrument. Instead, *Sound Knowledge* creates a history of the senses in the early nineteenth century that is deeply invested in capitalist production, providing a framework for music within the history of science that is grounded in both aesthetic thought and material history.

Each chapter is rigorously written, and adopts an individual approach to its theme, from the culture of musical automata (Myles W. Jackson), to the intersections of music, vitalism and electricity (Sarah Hibberd), and the tuning of instruments designed for an imperial world (James Q. Davies). The research informing all of the chapters displays a vast array of original sources—indeed, the endnotes are in themselves rich examples of primary research into music, science, and material culture. As such, *Sound Knowledge* is a significant prototype of a book that brings scholarly disciplines together. Furthermore, it is a testament to the rich multiplicity of

domains in which music carried social, cognitive and material meaning in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London, from migrant barrel-organ players on the streets (Gavin Williams), through public lectures on scientific instruments (Dierdre Loughridge), to the ambiguous potentialities of music in the consumerist context of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Flora Willson). What emerges, then, is a remarkably diverse 'aural culture'—one specifically linked to scientific knowledge production and consumption.

The chapters are ordered roughly chronologically, with the opportune bookends of Emily Dolan's chapter on Charles Burney's cataloguing of musical instruments during his European travels in the late eighteenth century and Willson's critical account of the discourses of knowledge surrounding the presence of music at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The precise place of 'London' as a global centre of modern auditory culture, is, however, to some extent the elephant in the room throughout most of the book. While Williams's chapter deals directly with the physical space of the London 'street', many of the other chapters treat the rapidly evolving physical space of nineteenth-century London rather more peripherally to their main arguments. It is thus worth asking whether the physical centrality of London, and its growing population, is as integral to the book's organisation as are the themes of nineteenth-century music and science. Further, what could be theorised about nineteenth-century London more than about any other city—or, indeed, in contrast to less cosmopolitan locations—as the locus for all of these developments in acoustical knowledge?

There is, commendably, a robust level of cross-referencing between chapters, showing that the authors had a good acquaintance with one another's work and clearly benefitted from productive knowledge exchange. As such, the chapters share a consistency in outlook that is often rare in a collection of essays, and thus one can locate a compelling narrative if picking up the book and reading it from cover to cover. In terms of methodological emphasis, there is a heavy concentration on certain individual scientists, such as Wheatstone, who is discussed at length in the chapters by Melissa Dickson, Jackson and Davies. This raises the question of whether a history of music and science starts with white male individuals—Burney, Walker, Young, Sampieri, Wheatstone, or Babbage, as explored in the chapters by Dolan, Loughridge, Jackson, Dickson, and Williams—or whether the overarching framework might embrace a more varied cultural history of the senses as perceived by the general public, such as within theatrical re-presentations (Hibberd), or with the changing character of cultural anxieties in London about audiences and crowds. Williams attempts, productively, to trace the thought of an individual thinker to broader urban culture, relating Babbage's accounts of 'Street Nuisances' to the 'collective sonic force' of the migrant industry (p. 212); this blending of intellectual history with a social-historical account of public space stands out as particularly stimulating.

On the whole, the intersections of knowledge about music and science are convincingly given, even if they are at times somewhat one-sided in terms of a preference for focusing on individual figures rather than broader auditory and cultural contexts; Loughridge and Ellen Lockhart do, however, provide fascinating links between public events and acoustic theories. But relatively few chapters engage specifically with the diverse international potential of London as a city as offered up in the editors' outstanding 'Introduction': the 'cosmopolitan centrifuge' where Mendelssohn's 'giddy experience' of urban compression was 'intensified by the sight of so many immigrants—Irish, Africans, Indians, Chinese—and the experience of racial and gendered mixing on Regent Street' (p. 7). Indeed, the rich possibilities of empire,

class and race in the production of aural and visual knowledge in nineteenth-century London are areas that might have been engaged with more directly; the exception is Davies's chapter. Further, a critical assessment of how gender might have interacted with these themes is notably absent, particularly when considering the growth of scientific instruments that were often made to 'speak' as resonating and often gendered bodies. All of this happened in an era of the mass cataloguing of gendered knowledge when, as Dolan notes, Burney had helped to popularise the notion that even natural objects such as plants had gender (p. 32).

Nevertheless, the innovative elements of the volume—in particular, that it helps us rethink the aesthetic parameters of early musical Romanticism, and also firmly establishes London as a scientifically and musically progressive centre—will pave the way for more flexible and open-ended histories of nineteenth-century music and create room for even more diverse points of departure. In this way, the volume is certainly ground-breaking, and the clarity of professional writing present in all of the chapters will render it accessible across disciplinary boundaries.

About the Author

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