

MECHANICAL SOUND

TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE, AND PUBLIC PROBLEMS OF NOISE
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

KARIN BIJSTERVELD

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PREFACE

One Sunday afternoon in 1994, I sat down in my garden and began thinking about my future research. Wiebe Bijker, head of the Department of Technology and Society Studies at Maastricht University, the Netherlands, had just offered me a job. His only condition was that I would focus my research on technology studies and come up with an appropriate topic. I had difficulties concentrating, though. I blamed the roar of aircraft, lawnmowers, and radios around me for disturbing my train of thought and I decided to go inside. On entering the house, I suddenly realized what the topic should be: noise! Wasn't it related to technology and a key phenomenon of modern society? And wasn't noise the perfect chance to combine my interest in sound and music with technology studies?

At that moment, I did not know that my blaming noise for interrupting my contemplation was part of a long tradition of complaint. Nor did I know that the people who had studied noise were, at times, like me, deeply involved in music. I would soon learn about these similarities, however. The many occasions for identification with those writing in regret or praise of the sounds around them have contributed to my great pleasure in doing the research for this book. Equally significant to this pleasure have been my visits to the libraries and archives that stored sources on the history of sound and noise in Western society. I will never forget my stay at the archives of the World Soundscape Project in

Vancouver, Canada. The room with the project's files was close to a composition studio where people were experimenting with the intriguing sound of a spinning wheel—a sound that I still hear when recalling that memory.

Ever since I started my research, and even in the years when a history of noise was just a research plan, colleagues within and outside of Maastricht have been extremely helpful in pointing out newspaper items, papers, books, reports, stories, poems, web sites, and conferences related to noise. Even now, not a week passes without a colleague's note in my pigeon hole or my email inbox about something relevant to my research. I would therefore like to begin my acknowledgments with simply thanking *all* my colleagues, including former ones, at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University for being so helpful, most notably Jos Perry and Jack Post, who have been especially active in keeping me posted on sound and noise. Friends like Helma Erkelens, Maloeke de Groot, Dorien van Rheenen, Annet Perry-Schoot Uiterkamp, and Jeroen Winkels also came up with documents on noise once in a while.

Moreover, many of my Dutch as well as foreign colleagues have commented on the proposals, papers, articles, and chapters that I wrote along the way, as editors of journals, special issues, and books, experts in acoustics, or in other roles. I am deeply indebted to their critical remarks on and interest in my work. These commentators include Jan Baetens, Wiebe Bijker, Hans-Joachim Braun, Christian Broër, Michael Bull, Howard Cattermole, David Edge, Sven Dierig, José van Dijck, Ernst Homburg, Frank Huisman, Arnold Labrie, Jens Lachmund, J. Andrew Mendelsohn, Kathryn Olesko, Harry Oosterhuis, Joy Parr, Peter Peters, Trevor Pinch, Jan de Roder, Fort de Roo, Pieter Jan Stallen, John Staudenmaier, Manuel Stoffers, Emily Thompson, Rienk Vermij, Ginette Verstraete, Gerard de Vries, Jo Wachelder, Rein de Wilde, and many anonymous referees.

Yvette Bartholomé, Marten Schulp, and Ragna Zeiss assisted me, as student assistants or trainees, in finding relevant sources. Siegfried Böhm, Ivo Blanken, Hans Cauberg, Jef van Dongen, Amanda Engineer, Michael Fahres, A. C. Geerlings, Bert Hogenkamp, Ronald de Jong, Marnix Koolhaas, Jan Kuiper, Chris Leonards, Karljosef Kreter, Marianka Louwers, Hugo Paulissen,

Hillel Schwartz, Floris van Tol, Barry Truax, Lia Verhaar, Ludger Visse, Michael Voegele, Robert Vrakking, Peter Wakeham, Valerie Weedon, and Hildegard Westerkamp provided me with access to archives, libraries, catalogues or electronic sources. Ruth Benschop, Ton Brouwer, Geert Somsen, and Joke Spruyt corrected the English of single papers, while Margaret Meredith edited the full manuscript attentively, and Margy Avery advised me on how to transform the manuscript into a real book. I sincerely thank all of them for being so involved. I am also grateful to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Maastricht University for funding part of the editing of the book, and to NWO for providing both a substitution grant and a language correction grant.

A grant awarded by the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO), for the academic year of 2000–2001, allowed me to concentrate on noise, to write several articles, and to write the first draft of the book. Portions of chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 have been derived from the following articles: Karin Bijsterveld, “The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age: Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaigns, 1900–40,” *Social Studies of Science* 31, no. 1 (2001): 37–70; Karin Bijsterveld, “A Servile Imitation: Disputes about Machines in Music, 1910–1930,” in *I Sing the Body Electric: Music and Technology in the 20th Century*, ed. Hans-Joachim Braun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002); Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, “Should One Applaud? Breaches and Boundaries in the Reception of New Technology in Music,” *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 3 (2003): 536–559; Karin Bijsterveld, “The City of Din: Decibels, Noise and Neighbors in the Netherlands, 1910–1980,” *Osiris* 18 (2003): 173–193; K. Bijsterveld, “Listening to Machines: Industrial Noise, Hearing Loss and the Cultural Meaning of Sound,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 31, no. 4 (2006): 323–337. I thank each of the publishers (Sage Publications, Johns Hopkins University Press, University of Chicago Press, and Maney Publishing, respectively) for permission to reproduce relevant parts of these articles.

Once fully concentrated on research and writing, I tend to hear hardly anything anymore. Yet my daughter Sarah reminded me to keep listening. I

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expect her to enter the iPod mode soon, but when younger, her positive attitude inspired her to point out the “nice” and “funny” sounds surrounding us, such as those of our bicycles. Rein de Wilde, my partner and colleague, has been, as always, enormously important for discussing lines of arguments and for making research travels feel like holidays. What’s more, he e-mailed the excerpt from Van Schagen’s poem in 1994, now this book’s epigraph, which stimulated both my research and my life at large.