

Research Article



Listening to Social and Spatial Change in the 19th Century City

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Building on the overall themes of urban transformation and urban histories, this article explores the aural aspects of urban change during the massive urbanisation and industrialisation of 19th century Europe. The article springs from the larger research project *Lyden af Hovedstaden (Sound of the Capital)* that joins urban historians and sociolinguists in a study of Copenhagen's sonic and aural history and heritage and has resulted in numerous publications and a recently opened special exhibition at the Museum of Copenhagen (Parby 2025; Quist and Hansen 2025; Museum of Copenhagen 2025). How did urbanites and Copenhageners in particular experience the massive urban transformation aurally? And how can focusing on historical soundscapes and listening practices improve our understanding of urban change?

During the 19th century, urbanites became exposed to a host of new sounds and intensified soundscapes that redefined spaces and everyday life within the urban fabric. The era also gave rise to specialised listening practices, creating *virtuoso listeners* among doctors and telegraphists, for whom aurality and the vocabulary to describe and decode sound took on a new significance due to inventions like the stethoscope in 1816 and the telegraph in the 1830s (Sterne 2003, 137–140). A growing interest in sound, noise, and aurality even spread beyond these professions and created a more widespread devotion to sound and listening, an “auscultative age” that comes alive in the sources, music, literature, and media of the time and demonstrates an increasing obsession with sound and noise as a condition of and challenge to modern (urban) life (Sterne 2003, ch. 2–3; Picker 2003, 4–6). *Aural flâneurs* proliferated among writers, composers, and journalists of the age alongside the prototypical *visual flâneur* (Boutin 2015, 17f; Parby 2024). Aural flânerie can be defined as an ability to assemble and translate the cacophonous soundscape of the city into an orchestrated and meaningful composition. The increasing preoccupation with sound and aurality was driven partly by the sheer increase in the volume and variety of sound in the modern metropolis and partly by the invention of the abovementioned new aural technologies and sound recording devices, like the phonograph and the gramophone, that transformed sounds into portable objects that could be listened to in detachment from their source and time of production and exposed a broader spectrum of society to a more specialised form of listening (Hui 2012). Sound recordings, in turn, played an important role in the formation of new listening regimes based on “focused” listening and a more private consumption of music and sonic experiences (Hui 2014; Thompson 1995; Sterne 2014). But the obsession with aurality was also the result of a growing noise sensitivity connected to new ideals of privacy and home and increasingly diverse sleeping patterns among citizens. Noise sensitivity became a mark of distinction and education, and hearing too much of the outside world, not least the crowd in the street, was increasingly problematised as a moral concern. Noise levels and certain types of noise, like dogs barking, street urchins swearing, street vendors and night watchmen yelling, and street musicians performing poorly, were identified as specifically problematic and used to distinguish classes, sexes, races and occupations (Corbin 1998; Bailey 1996; Llano 2018; Simpson 2016; Parby 2025).

As the century progressed, the preoccupation with sonic and aural phenomena turned into more fundamental concerns about the sensory overload of urbanites, identified as a

significant threat to their mental and physical health (Beard 1880; Pontoppidan 1886; Parby 2025, 136–140, 220–223). The popularity of books like the Italian neurologist Paolo Mantegazza's *Il Secolo Nevroso* (*The Neurotic Century*) and the spread of concerns over neurological disorders among urbanites is a testament to this. In his book, Mantegazza juxtaposed the sensory impressions of the city with those of the countryside. Rural sounds were fundamentally regarded as being more soothing and natural than city noise and thus the recommended treatment of nervous distress and illness (neurasthenia) often involved retreats to health sanatoriums along the coast to get a break from urban noise (Mantegazza 1887, 110, 115–16). Early in the 20th century, the German sociologist Georg Simmel expanded this theory and saw alienation as a product of life in the industrialised city and the necessity for inhabitants to detach themselves from the multitude of encounters with strangers and impressions of city life. To live in the city largely meant the same as distancing oneself from other people and impressions in order to survive, which in turn led to both alienation and a dulling of the senses (Simmel 1903).

Newspaper articles, novels, letters, and memoirs of the age are often remarkably rich with detailed descriptions of urban soundscapes in which individual sounds, such as the cries of street vendors or whip cracking of coach drivers and later on factory whistles and tram bells were dissected, analysed, and ascribed symbolic meanings beyond their basic configurations (Parby 2025, 38–43, 87–90, 122–128). An aural perspective on the dramatic changes of urban life in 19th century Europe thus opens a gate into a new understanding of a well-researched topic. In this article I look particularly at the case of the Danish capital, Copenhagen, and more specifically at transitions in noise complaints and understandings and regulations of noise, from the preindustrial fortified city to the boundless, industrialised metropole.

Noise and privacy

The advent of the bourgeoisie as the dominating class in the late 18th and early 19th century was accompanied by a new understanding of family, home, and the public sphere, in which the home was increasingly separated from the workplace both in physical terms and as a symbolic configuration that reevaluated notions of privacy, silence, intimacy, and care, in contrast with the intrusions, dangers, and noises of the outside world. This notion of the home as a sanctuary that protected the virtue and community of the immediate family was in stark contrast to the extended household of the Early Modern era with family members, servants, coworkers, and tenants all more or less included, sharing physical space and commodities as well as reproducing the hierarchy of urban society as a whole (Calder 1977; Picker 2003; Boutin 2015, ch. 2; Llano 2018).

The arrival of this new configuration of the home was a long and tedious process, with the new notions of home, family, and privacy constantly beleaguered by the intrusive bodies, smells, and sounds of other citizens, animals, and industries. Fostering the notion of a “right to silence”, this development became a great engine for noise complaints and was accompanied by an understanding of the bourgeois's, particularly the bourgeois male's, right to intervene and improve his fellow citizens by meddling in their (mis)behaviour (Corbin 1998; Picker 2003; Payer 2018; Parby 2025, 42–47). Ironically, this began *before*

industrialisation took on significant proportions in many cities, and made one contemporary author claim that “no age since the creation of the world has made so much and so egregious noise as ours” (Dincklage 1879, 413). The sensitivity to noise was already on the rise and industrialisation just made it worse.

Noise complaints in early 19th century Copenhagen

In Copenhagen, industrialisation, understood as the mechanisation of industries, took off from the 1840s onwards. Between 1839 and 1873, the number of industrial steam engines in the city rose from 15 to 210 and the share of the total population employed in industrial production from 5 to 9 percent. Both the number of factories and the number of industrial employees increased dramatically and transformed the urban soundscape, as we shall see and hear. In the early 19th century, however, complaints over noise focused on more traditional sounds.

Unlike elsewhere in Europe, street musicians were not a major focus for noise-sensitive citizens in Copenhagen. The noise complaints printed in the newspapers of the city between 1795 and 1850 focused more on animal sounds, streets vendors’ cries, noisy crafts like boiler-making in the streets, and children and young people playing and making inappropriate shouts and sounds in public space (swearing, playing, begging, whistling). Other complaints focused on whip cracking and sound signals made by coach and – in the winter – sleigh drivers to attract new customers. Another important source of complaints in this period was the voices and noises of the night watchmen. Their cries were too shrill or out of tune and they used their whistles far too often and not only in case of fire, thus scaring those who had earlier been traumatised by urban fires (Parby 2025, 48–52).

The complainers did not simply complain. They also came up with more or less ingenious solutions to the problem they addressed. For instance, would it make sense for the city to employ a singing master to improve the voices and the musicality of both street vendors and night watchmen (*Kjøbenhavns Aftenpost*, 1776, 102, 109–112)? Or would it be an idea to settle all the mobile street vendors around the Royal Garden to remove their noise from residential areas? This suggestion obviously disregarded why it made sense to walk around the city shouting or singing to attract customers – e.g. to offer people goods and deliveries near their homes (*Kjøbenhavns Aftenpost*, 1788, nr. 86).

Some complaints were abusive and almost derogatory: “No one blames these people [street vendors] for crying out to sell their goods, but their terrible bellowing that rushes through all the nerves of the ear and hinders any thought [...] is intolerable. How many sick and bedridden people might endure this terrible noise? [...] Were they at least educated voices with a pleasant presentation... But these bellowing voices! It is pure torture” (*Politivennen*, August 6, 1842).

Or this one from the 1820s regarding a specific sand seller roaming the streets of Copenhagen, nicknamed the “Sand Howler” due to his particularly nerve-wracking voice. He walks through the city together with a boy drawing a small wagon full of floor sand for sale:

“Although it is convenient for the citizens of a capital to have sand, so necessary for the cleaning their apartments and houses, brought to their home – just as unpleasant is the sale of the sand. With two shrieking voices the cry ‘Sand, Sand’ is repeated [by the man and his accompanying boy], as if it was only deaf people buying; not to speak of the sufferings of the ill and weak residents of the street. [...] a gong or a bell – like the one used by Fodposten (lit. Postman on foot), could improve the public sale of sand in a way that would relieve both the citizens and the sellers” (*Politivennen*, January 18, 1823).

These and other complaints of the early 19th century often combine a mixture of *aural flânerie* with concerns for one’s sick and bedridden neighbours in a sort of by-proxy culture of complaints. And they are carried by a conviction of the need for education as a primary means to resolve the issue. Understanding noise as “sound out of place” and noisy behaviour as uncivilized and uneducated runs through most of the 19th century. Sound and technology historian Karin Bijsterveld has demonstrated the longevity and perseverance of this trope’s way into the 20th century (Bijsterveld 2001 and 2008). However, the focus on education is gradually complemented with other, more technological and planning-based strategies of noise abatement and a broader critique of the conglomerate of noises of the urbanising and hastily growing city in the latter part of the 19th century (Bijsterveld 2001; Parby 2025, 259–264).

Rush hour and industrial noise

The increased sensitivity to noise among the bourgeoisie to some extent preceded the much more intensive soundscapes created by industrialisation and the modern metropolis that emerged as the ramparts were forfeited and the demarcation zone around the city released for intensive urban development. This process of suburbanisation not only augmented the size of the city and created new local neighbourhood- and classbased identities. It also gave birth to a new phenomenon – rush hour. In the morning and early evening, workers and office employees would hasten from their workplace to their home in the new suburbs, giving rise to a traffic boom dominated by the thunder of metal wheels and iron-clad hoofs of horsedrawn carriages against the pavement. The architect Alf Cock-Clausen described the sound as a “constant boiling” (CCA, *Memoirs* from 1969, nr. 1873; Alf Cock-Clausen, b. 1886.). The gradually refined system of public transportation with trams, omnibuses, and interurban train connections came with its own signal sounds (bells, horns, whistles) and more involuntary sounds like the shrieking and clanging of wheels against the metallic tracks. Their repetitive spatial and temporal rhythms configured by time schedules, tracks, waiting halls, and tram depots became a characteristic soundscape element in many European cities. The sound of tram bells intersecting in the city became an acoustic symbol of the modern metropolis, that in four or five-minute intervals “saluted the city” from early morning to late night (Payer 2007). This kind of sonic emblem of urbanity found its way into the novels and newspaper reports of the time as a defining characteristic.

According to the author Gustav Wied, passengers arriving at the central station in Copenhagen were bombarded with “the noise and rattling of trams, omnibuses, and the ringing and clanging of bells – laughter and footsteps and voices and yells, the barking of

dogs and the stomping of horses. A confusing, bubbling, sound of life [from] a Copenhagen, that never sleeps!” (*Kjøbenhavn*, December 11, 1892). Another author, Martin Andersen Nexø, developed how the sound of hundreds of clogged feet passing the Queen Louise Bridge across the Lakes created a feeling of camaraderie and social and political cohesion as workers returned home to the working-class district of Nørrebro from their workplaces in the city center (Andersen Nexø 1906–10, III, 23–24).

Noise complaints remained in the latter part of the 19th century. But they were directed at new types of noise and gradually acquired a more multi-voiced shape. Bourgeois males were still the major complainers, but voices from other social classes increasingly appeared in newspaper articles, memoirs, and other sources. Some loud sounds, like the bells of the many new churches that were built in this period, did not carry over in noise complaints. Perhaps because they were regarded by most as positive sounds that were recognisable and created a community among the many newly urbanised rural migrants settling in the city. Even industrial noise was not only cause for complaints but was also heralded by some citizens and commentators as harbingers of progress and their promise of an abundance of cheaper goods and a rise in living standards. This perception was not completely without merit, even if the rise in living standards for the growing middle classes was accompanied by a drop in living standards among the industrial proletariat and the working poor.

In the foreword to the celebratory publication description of Denmark’s industrial establishments (Danmarks Industrielle Etablissementer) published 1888–90, we learn that the 19th century was dubbed “the century of steam and electricity” in which the monasteries and castles of old were replaced by the castles of industry “with their skyward, smoke-breathing chimneys” and with the “piercing sound of the steam whistle” replacing “the ringing of vester and ave church bells” (Danmarks Industrielle Etablissementer, I, 1888, foreword).

Other media coverage similarly celebrates the productivity of industries with a certain aural flânerie, as seen in this description from a bicycle factory in Nørrebro in 1901:

“It is early morning. From the labyrinth of streets that is Nørrebro, busy workers haste to their duties of the day. At Meinungsgade part of the stream of people bends off and through the gates in no. 10, 12 and 14 that closes behind them, when all 250 workers have arrived. The factory whistle sounds and hundreds and other hundreds of wheels begin to turn, drive belts to hum and the blow of hammers to mix merrily with the piston-strokes of the steam engine” (*Illustreret Tidende*, 1901, nr. 33).

New concerns

Alongside this air of optimism, concerns over noise circulated. From 1875 and onwards, homeowners and rentiers complained increasingly in the press about the lack of public and municipal control of backyard industries that popped up in many neighbourhoods, often without warning or any legal options for the neighbouring rentiers and landowners to limit or stop their noisy presence that immediately devalued neighbouring apartments and made renters move out (*Dagbladet (Kjøbenhavn)*, August 14, 1894). This becomes even

more explicit when we study the archives of the municipal health commission, now kept in the Copenhagen City Archive. The archive contains hundreds, if not thousands, of complaints expedited by the commission that dealt with hygienic complaints from neighbours to backyard industries, stables, or noisy or smelly productions. Some describe the “incessant and unbearable” noise and even physical rumbling of the neighbouring buildings to certain industries. This is a particularly rich and nuanced material as it often allows for a multivocal perspective on sonic experiences. In one case, we found that the complaining neighbours to a backyard industry that produced upholstery material described the noise of a newly-installed spinning machine as unbearable and nerve-wracking. The policeman investigating the site to measure the noise level found that the noise was similar to the sound of a sewing machine and thus could not be regarded as a severe nuisance. Based on this report and different measures applied by the factory owner, this case ended without intervention by the commission. The complainants and the owner of the industry settled the matter privately. In other cases, however, the noise levels of industry were harder to solve, although the commission was generally biased towards keeping industrial production in the city. Some cases were solved through mediation by engineers advising the noisemaking industries on how to reduce noise by adjusting the machines and exhaust pipes. Others dragged on for years without any final resolution. In many cases, one might conclude that the authorities’ slow intervention could be seen as a recognition of the fact that industrial noise was an inescapable part of life in the metropolis (Parby 2025, 141–151).

Noise, nerves and democracy

As we approach the 20th century, this position is gradually transformed. Particularly important was a growing understanding of the risks of sensory overload and mental and physical disease caused by the increasing noise pollution, and a growing attention to the long-term effects of noise on the mental health of citizens. While the diagnosis of neurasthenia was first suggested by American psychiatrists, it quickly entered Europe and created an obsession with nervous illnesses and conditions produced in part by the complexities and sensory impressions of urban life. In the words of the Danish psychiatrist Knud Pontoppidan:

“To understand the unnatural conditions that mark the life of the population of the capital, one only needs to compare life in the big city as it appears in streets and alleys to life in the countryside. For one used to the latter, the confusion, the sight and noise of people and horsedrawn carriages rushing by offers a downright complexing impression. It is not only necessary to take care of the multitudes passing, but also to note whether some of them are acquaintances to greet and be greeted; not only suffer the noise of the wagons, but also avoid the danger of their wheels. In this way passing a street can turn into a whole piece of nerve work” (Pontoppidan 1886, 5).

The neurasthenia diagnosis was very rapidly imported from the specialised psychiatric literature to more popular reports on the conditions of industrialised urban life. In Copenhagen, the diagnosis of neurasthenia was also democratised at a surprisingly early date, as evident in these examples about Ruben’s Cloth Factory. The first quote is from a

publication listing and celebrates the progress and individual splendor of Danish industries during the 19th century, and the second is from a left-wing newspaper criticising the working conditions in the weaving hall of another similar factory elsewhere in Denmark:

“Finally, one arrives in the great weaving hall that holds no less than 400 looms. The simultaneous operation of all 400 shooters creates a deafening noise; it is impossible to have any conversation even when shouting at the top of one’s lungs. At most one sees only the lips of one’s companions silently moving. Newcomers to the places pass the narrow isles between the looms sideways and with a continuous Fear of getting hit by the clattering and spinning parts of the looms [...]” (*Danske Industrielle Etablissementer* 1888, I, 10).

“In columns without end the machines were squeezed together as close together as possible and hugged over them sat men, women, young and old, some with greying hair and others barely past their childhood. Seen from one end of the hall it all melted together into chaos. An infinity of drive belts running and crossing, wheels and pulleys spinning, bars moving up and down, back and forth, 300 rattling looms creating the most incessant noise [...] Ask a doctor what it would mean to be exposed to such an immense noise from morning till evening and he will most likely tell you that it is the certain route to the destruction of all nerves” (*Socialdemokraten*, October 30, 1889).

The international scholarship on neurasthenia from 1870 onwards generally agrees that it was the middle classes, particularly the middle-class women of the era, that were disposed to neurasthenia due to their strained lives and social ambitions to rise in society combined with the “pressure of bereavement”, “sexual excesses”, and “business and family cares” (Beard 1880, 218). But as seen in the critique of the working conditions at cloth factories, we find an increasing number of reports and newspaper articles from Copenhagen from the late 1880s and onwards that suggest that the concern over nerve diseases and mental issues caused by the urban sensorium were gradually democratised and understood as broader social and medical challenges to urban society.

After 1900, this created a shift in urban noise abatement strategies, from targeting specific sounds identified as noise and viewing education of the noisemaker as the main tool of improvement, to a more planning-oriented mapping of the sources of noise and a more structural abatement through for instance traffic diversions, noise regulation, and material changes like new road surfaces. In 1901, the Danish doctor Poul Hertz argued that “the noise of vehicles in relationship to traffic is worse in Copenhagen than in many other capital cities, where asphalt and woodblock paving moderate the rumbling”. He mentioned how the main streets of London “with their endless lines of vehicles” did not suffer the deafening din of Gothersgade or Frederiksborggade and demanded that the city authorities provide the same sound-absorbing paving to alleviate the noise. To give the citizens’ “tired nerves the quiet they are entitled to” it was even necessary to improve the planning of new neighbourhoods and “create residential areas with streets of a width and direction” that would deter dense traffic. This was not “a matter of aesthetics”, he continued, “but of preserving a healthy nervous system among urbanites, particularly

those involved in intellectual toil". In the end, a less noisy city would improve the capacities of citizens and lead to fewer admission to the insane asylums, according to Hertz (Hertz 1901).

Hertz's opinion piece on noise reflects the arrival of the above-mentioned new attitudes to noise that would flourish in the early decades of the 20th century and gradually increase the municipal involvement in noise abatement. Later in that century this became an incremental part of welfare state policies. It also reflects how studying sound and noise can not only give the historian a better understanding of the cultural history of a specific society, but also offer a unique path into the understanding of societal change.

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Exhibition:

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The cover image shows Copenhagen seen from the top of Christiansborg Castle, 1907. The chimneys and smoke hovering over the city indicates the noisy environment of the industrialized city. Unknown photographer. Museum of Copenhagen.

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Jakob Ingemann Parby is a senior researcher and curator at the Museum of Copenhagen with a long and diverse engagement with urban history, primarily the history of Copenhagen since 1750. He has published extensively on urban infrastructures, as well as the history of urban migration and identity and is currently working on the subjects of urban sensorial history and the everyday life of urban monuments. As PI of the research project, The Sound of Copenhagen, he has been working extensively with the aural history of the 19th century European city since 2020. In May 2025, he published the monograph *Lyden af Hovedstaden* at GADs Forlag, which offers a thorough and opened the related exhibition *The Sound of Copenhagen – noise, voices and silences*. Among his most important exhibition projects are *Becoming a Copenhagener* (2010–15), *The WALL* (2010–15) and the permanent galleries of the new Museum of Copenhagen (2021–).