

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who Owns the Distant Sound? Auditory Authority in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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Abstract

The distant breaking string in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is frequently treated as an atmospheric symbol. This article relocates it within the play's wider system of offstage sound. Using Julius West's public-domain translation as a controlled reading text, it maps six auditory events: the arriving train, the breaking string in Act II, Epikhodov's guitar and Varya's calls, the offstage band and interrupted recitation in Act III, the locked-house departure, and the final alternation of string and axe. Each event is coded for source visibility, causal certainty, distribution among hearers, attempted explanation, and practical consequence. The analysis shows that Chekhov repeatedly separates audibility from authority. Characters hear together but cannot secure one cause; they explain a sound without changing the action it announces; or they fail to hear consequences that the audience can already interpret. The breaking string is most powerful not because it has a fixed symbolic referent but because the play stages rival claims over its source. At the close, Firs has almost no interpretive agency, while keys, carriages, axes, and the repeated string compose a sequence the audience must judge without dialogue. The article calls this structure *auditory jurisdiction*: the unequal right to name a sound, connect it to change, and make others act upon it.

Keywords: Chekhov; *The Cherry Orchard*; sound design; offstage sound; dramaturgy; listening

1 Introduction

When the sound of a breaking string is heard in Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*, several characters offer causes. Perhaps something fell into a well; perhaps the sound came from a bird. Firs attaches it to an earlier historical rupture. None of the explanations can be verified onstage. The cue is shared, but authority over it remains unsettled. When the sound returns near the end of Act IV, almost no one remains to interpret it. The audience has acquired a history of possible meanings while losing the community that first debated them.

The breaking string has understandably attracted symbolic readings and source research [3, 8]. Yet isolating it from the play's other sounds risks making ambiguity an exceptional poetic ornament. Trains, music, calls, billiard balls, locks, carriages, footsteps, and axes continually connect the visible room to action elsewhere. Some sounds report what characters already know; others reveal what their speech avoids. Some are immediately explained; others become powerful because explanation does not produce agreement.

This article asks who is entitled to name an offstage sound and what fol-

lows from that naming. It proposes the term *auditory jurisdiction*: the practical authority to identify a sound's source, relate it to a change in the stage world, and induce others to act on that relation. Jurisdiction is not the same as accurate hearing. A character can identify a source correctly yet remain unable to alter its consequence. Conversely, a speculative explanation can dominate because social position makes it available to others.

The argument is that Chekhov distributes audibility more widely than authority. Many characters hear, but few can convert hearing into effective knowledge. Across the play, this gap shifts from comic mistiming to historical dispossession. The final soundscape no longer asks characters to choose among causes; it places the audience inside a sequence whose consequences continue after speech has nearly ended.

2 Text and auditory-event method

The controlled reading text is Julius West's English translation in *Plays by Anton Chekhov, Second Series*, first published by Chatto & Windus and available through Project Gutenberg [1]. Translation matters because the lexical image attached to the distant sound varies across

versions, as do details of distance, sadness, and possible source. The present claims therefore concern the structural placement of cues preserved in West's text, not every semantic nuance of the Russian original.

An *auditory event* is defined as a stage direction or spoken act of listening that introduces consequential information from outside the currently visible action. Six variables are recorded: (i) whether the source is visible; (ii) whether its cause is certain; (iii) which characters hear; (iv) who offers an explanation; (v) whether the explanation changes conduct; and (vi) what the audience can connect across scenes. Ordinary dialogue is excluded unless its offstage location is structurally important.

This method draws a distinction between source and consequence. Michel Chion's work on unseen sound in audiovisual media demonstrates how a sound without a visible source can acquire particular spatial and interpretive force [2]. Theatre differs because live production does not fix a recorded relation between image and sound, but the distinction remains useful: an offstage cue expands the dramatic world while making its cause a production choice. R. Murray Schafer's

soundscape vocabulary likewise encourages attention to figure, ground, distance, and community, although this article treats the play's sonic environment as a designed dramatic system rather than a social soundscape recorded in the field [6].

A character possesses auditory jurisdiction only when an interpretation of sound is treated by others as a basis for action. Hearing, naming, and being correct are analytically separate. The test makes room for failure. The characters' inability to agree about the breaking string is not absence of meaning. It is evidence that meaning has been socially distributed without a procedure for settlement.

3 Arrival before appearance: the train in Act I

The play begins in the room still called the nursery, before Ranevskaya and her party appear. Lopakhin has overslept instead of meeting the train. Dunyasha listens and believes she hears the travellers approaching. Arrival is first an auditory inference. The household mobilizes around people who remain briefly outside the visible room.

This opening establishes a practical form of jurisdiction. The train's lateness can be measured, and the approaching group is soon verified by entrance. Sound coordinates labour: doors, luggage, greetings, and domestic roles activate. Yet Lopakhin's missed obligation complicates the apparent certainty. He knows the timetable but fails to align his body with it. Acoustic evidence repairs what clock knowledge did not accomplish.

The train also introduces external modern time into a house organized by memory. Its schedule will return forcefully in Act IV, when the group must leave. At the start, the train delivers the past back into the estate; at the end, it removes that past under a countdown. The sound or invocation of transit thus frames the house without belonging to it.

James Loehlin's account of Chekhov emphasizes the coexistence of comic detail and consequential historical change [5]. The missed train meeting is a small failure, almost farcical, but it establishes a pattern: characters recognize signals while failing to act at the time those signals require. Auditory jurisdiction will become increasingly detached from effective response.

4 The breaking string in Act II: shared hearing, rival causes

In Act II, thoughtfulness and quiet prepare the first breaking-string cue. Firs's indistinct mumbling remains as a low human sound before something distant, seemingly from the sky, interrupts. The cue is perceptually specific enough to invite analogy—a string breaking—but spatially uncertain. Its apparent origin above and far away conflicts with the ordinary causes proposed in dialogue.

The responses separate sensation, cause, and affect. Ranevskaya asks what it is and later registers discomfort. Lopakhin suggests an object falling into a well. Gayev and Trofimov suggest birds. Firs recalls hearing a comparable sound before “the trouble,” which his historical perspective connects to emancipation. No character demonstrates a source; no proposal becomes authoritative enough to prompt investigation.

This is not a contest that the most convincing symbol wins. Each explanation locates the sound in a different world. A fallen bucket places it within estate work and material accident. A bird places it within landscape. Firs places it within remembered social rupture. The stage direction's sky-like distance makes all three possible without confirming any. Auditory jurisdiction fragments because the group lacks a shared scale on which causes could be judged.

A. G. Cross traced the breaking-string image in relation to Turgenev, showing that the cue has a literary history beyond an isolated theatrical effect [3]. Source history is compatible with the present reading but answers a different question. Whatever its intertext, a production must still decide how the sound occupies the auditorium and how actors respond. The cue becomes dramatic through the interval between hearing and failed settlement.

The absence of practical consequence is itself consequential. Conversation resumes; the estate's approaching sale remains unresolved. The characters can interpret the sound aesthetically, emotionally, or historically without allowing it to reorganize conduct. They have audibility without jurisdiction.

5 Calls and guitar: sound as unequal access

Later in Act II, Epikhodov is heard playing a sad song on his guitar while Varya calls for Anya from near the poplars. These sounds have identifiable human sources, but their functions differ. The guitar supplies an offstage emotional

continuity without making Epikhodov a participant in the visible conversation. Varya's calls attempt direct control: they name Anya and ask her location.

Trofimov recognizes Varya's voice and reacts with irritation. Accurate identification does not grant Varya success. Anya and Trofimov leave toward the river rather than answering the supervisory call. The offstage voice crosses space but cannot compel the bodies it addresses. Here auditory jurisdiction fails not because cause is ambiguous, but because the hearers refuse its claim.

The contrast with Trofimov's rhetoric is pointed. He imagines happiness approaching and says he can hear its steps even if it cannot yet be seen. Metaphorical hearing grants him confidence about an abstract future while an actual voice calling in the present is dismissed. The play places visionary audition beside selective practical deafness. Authority is claimed for the sound one wants to interpret and denied to the voice that asks for response.

This episode broadens the model beyond sound effect. Offstage location changes the social weight of a voice. Varya is audible but deprived of reciprocal visibility; Anya and Trofimov can continue their chosen trajectory. A production can intensify or soften this inequality through distance, vocal effort, and the timing of departure.

6 The Act III band: music that prevents speech

Act III opens with a band playing in another room while dancing crosses the visible reception area. The estate's auction occurs elsewhere, but the party continues as organized sound. Music does not conceal uncertainty by becoming inaudible; it makes avoidance public and rhythmic. The household has hired a sonic structure that can continue even when the economic basis of the household is collapsing.

The band's offstage position is important. Characters enter and leave its field, and the visible room becomes a threshold between participation and commentary. The music can be heard without its players being seen, just as the auction can determine the estate without occurring before the audience. Two absent systems—entertainment and sale—govern the room.

Later, the Station-Master begins to recite, but a waltz from the adjoining room interrupts and stops the recitation. This event presents auditory jurisdiction in direct competition. A single speaking voice is formally listened to, yet collec-

tive dance music determines what can continue. The waltz need not refute the poem; it defeats it temporally. Its authority lies in organizing bodies already committed to the party.

The comic fall of Trofimov on the stairs offers a contrasting offstage sound with rapid verification. Noise prompts alarm, then laughter and explanation. Cause, identity, and consequence converge quickly. Placed beside the unresolved string and the socially dominant band, the fall shows that offstage sound is not inherently mysterious. Chekhov calibrates how long causal uncertainty lasts and who benefits from clarification.

7 Locks, carriages, and axes: the final transfer of authority

Act IV reverses the opening. The train no longer announces arrival; its timetable compresses departure. Lopakhin repeatedly converts minutes into commands. This is effective temporal jurisdiction: others pack, search, interrupt farewell speeches, and move toward the station. The authority does not come from superior listening but from alignment with the external schedule and the new ownership of the estate.

After the company exits, the stage is empty. The sound of keys turning in locks and carriages departing makes closure audible before Firs re-enters. These sources are not shown, but their causes are readily understood. Unlike the breaking string, they do not invite several explanations. Their uncertainty is ethical: did those who locked the house know that Firs remained inside?

The axe begins in the silence. It has a clear practical source in the felling of the orchard, even though the workers remain unseen. Earlier plans have become acoustic fact. When Firs enters, finds the door locked, and recognizes abandonment, his speech cannot reverse the sequence. The person most deeply attached to the old estate order hears its dismantling with the least power to intervene.

The breaking string then returns, followed by silence and the distant axe. Repetition grants the audience a relation the characters never settled. In Act II the cue was heard collectively and discussed; in Act IV it occurs beside the motionless Firs, with no reliable interpreter remaining. The audience now holds the memory of earlier explanations, but this enlarged knowledge does not confer practical jurisdiction. No one can enter the stage world to unlock the door or stop the axe.

The ending therefore does more than attach a symbol to social change. It trans-

fers interpretive labour outward while withholding action. Keys, carriages, steps, string, silence, and axe create a causal gradient. Some sounds have evident sources, one remains uncertain, and all converge on an irreversible condition. The final authority belongs neither to a character nor to a single sound. It belongs to sequence.

8 Auditory jurisdiction as dramaturgical structure

The six events distinguish four relations between hearing and power. In *coordinating sound*, as with the arrival and departure timetable, a signal changes action. In *contested sound*, as with the breaking string, several causes are proposed and none governs. In *refused sound*, as with Varya's calls, the source is known but the addressee declines its authority. In *overriding sound*, as with the waltz and axe, an organized activity continues regardless of competing speech.

These relations show why volume alone cannot explain dramatic force. Varya may call loudly and remain ineffective; the distant axe can dominate the end because nothing in the room can answer it. Nor does certainty guarantee power. The characters know what the train timetable means but repeatedly need reminders; they know the orchard may be cut but fail to prevent the sale.

Elinor Fuchs's invitation to examine the whole world of a play before reducing it to individual psychology supports this shift toward environmental structure [4]. In *The Cherry Orchard*, sound makes that world exceed the room. Rail infrastructure, agricultural labour, neighbouring music, domestic supervision, and historical memory enter through the ear. Characters occupy different positions within those systems, and their right to name sound reflects those positions.

The model also offers a concrete vocabulary for production analysis. A review can ask where a cue appears to originate, which spectators can localize it, how actors' response distributes attention, and whether the sound returns with altered timbre or distance. Laurence Senelick's performance history demonstrates how profoundly staging traditions reshape Chekhov [7]. Auditory jurisdiction provides one feature through which such variation can be compared without ranking a single sonic realization as definitive.

The breaking string should therefore resist over-resolution. If a production makes it unmistakably a snapping cable, gunshot, musical string, or supernatu-

ral signal, it may grant the audience a causal certainty denied to the characters. That can be a legitimate intervention, but it changes the structure. The cue's distinctive force in the text lies in offering enough resemblance for recognition and enough distance for jurisdiction to remain contested.

9 Limitations and future study

The study uses one English translation; it does not compare the Russian text, manuscript variants, promptbooks, or specific productions. The words "sadly," "from the sky," and "string" carry translation histories that may alter interpretation. A printed stage direction also cannot specify loudspeaker placement, live or recorded source, reverberation, frequency spectrum, or the actors' exact listening behaviour.

Future research should compare translations and production recordings through an event-level protocol. For each cue, researchers could document source placement, duration, loudness relative to speech, actor orientation, and whether programme material assigns a cause. Audience interviews could then test not what the sound universally symbolizes but who spectators believed had authority to explain it. Comparable analysis of *Three Sisters* and *The Seagull* would show whether auditory jurisdiction is a broader Chekhovian pattern.

10 Conclusion

The Cherry Orchard repeatedly lets sound arrive before, beyond, or after visible action. The train coordinates imperfectly; Varya's call is recognized and refused; the Act III band organizes bodies while excluding speech; locks and carriages announce abandonment; the axe gives postponed action a material rhythm. Within this system, the breaking string is not a solitary atmospheric emblem. It is the clearest test of a larger inequality between those who hear and those whose hearing can govern consequence. By the final cue, interpretation has passed to the audience while action has passed elsewhere. The distant sound belongs to no single character because the world it announces no longer waits for their agreement.

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