

EDITORIAL

Listening Infrastructures and the Case for Acoustic Justice

Marguerite Johnson^{1,*}

¹Classics and Ancient History, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia

Correspondence: marguerite.johnson@uq.edu.au

Every city, campus, and neighborhood has rules about sound, whether written into ordinances or enforced through custom. Traffic is tolerated at levels that would make a nearby musician unacceptable. Commercial audio may be treated as ordinary while a community celebration is classified as disturbance. Quiet can signal rest and safety, but it can also be maintained through exclusion.

Soundscape scholarship has taught researchers to attend to the relationships among listeners, environments, technologies, and signals. Acoustic justice adds a distributive question: who receives the benefits and burdens of these relationships? It asks not only what is loud, but who is exposed, who has alternatives, whose sound is interpreted as meaningful, and who has authority to decide.

Acoustic measurement is indispensable for identifying harmful exposure, comparing interventions, and enforcing standards. Yet equal decibel levels do not always produce equal experience. Duration, frequency, predictability, control, time of day, building insulation, health, work schedules, and cultural meaning all matter. A brief festival and continuous mechanical noise should not be governed through context-free equivalence.

This is not an argument for replacing evidence with preference. It is an argument for plural evidence. Sound maps, exposure measurements, complaint data, observation, interviews, and participatory listening walks can reveal different dimensions of a problem. Complaint records alone are especially unreliable because the ability to complain depends on

knowledge, time, confidence, and institutional responsiveness.

Stoeever's account of the "sonic color line" demonstrates how listening practices can racialize voices and sounds. Similar processes can operate through class, migration status, age, disability, and assumptions about legitimate culture. Some sounds are heard as art, heritage, or commerce; others as disorder. These classifications should be examined rather than treated as natural responses.

Music institutions have a role in this examination. Venues can reduce spill through design and scheduling, but they can also work with neighbors instead of treating them as obstacles. Schools can teach sound citizenship: the right to expression accompanied by responsibility for shared environments. Musicians and sound artists can contribute to planning by demonstrating how acoustic design affects communication, orientation, and belonging.

Acoustic life is shaped materially. Building envelopes, road surfaces, ventilation systems, public-address equipment, green space, room geometry, and transit routes determine what people hear and whether they can escape unwanted sound. Blesser and Salter describe acoustic space as part of architecture rather than an accidental aftereffect. Planning should adopt the same premise.

New housing near established venues creates a familiar conflict. A justice-centered approach would not automatically privilege the older use or the newer resident. It would disclose acoustic conditions, require appropriate construction,

establish predictable operating agreements, support mitigation, and preserve accessible complaint and mediation procedures. Responsibility should be shared according to capacity rather than placed entirely on the least powerful participant.

Quiet spaces are equally important. Libraries, parks, prayer spaces, classrooms, and rest areas provide forms of acoustic refuge. Their distribution should be considered an accessibility and public-health matter. People who cannot purchase private quiet should not be left with constant exposure.

Policy can be guided by five questions: Who produces the sound, and who receives its benefits? Who bears exposure, and what alternatives or protections are available? How do timing, duration, meaning, and control affect experience? Which groups are heard as legitimate or illegitimate, and on what evidence? Who participated in defining the problem and selecting the remedy?

These questions do not eliminate conflict. They make the conflict more honestly describable.

Acoustic justice is not a demand for universal quiet or unrestricted sound. It is a demand that the distribution of audibility, exposure, and authority become part of cultural and urban decision-making. Measurement protects communities when it is combined with context; listening becomes democratic when it includes people whose environments are being designed. Music and sound studies can help policy move from treating sound as a residual nuisance to governing it as a shared cultural and material resource.