



**Acoustics'08
Paris**
June 29-July 4, 2008
www.acoustics08-paris.org

The soundscape of church bells - sound community or culture clash

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Since the Middle Ages, church bells have created sound communities. Church bells have provided information for the community, as well as communal identity. It is shown here that a city's history can sometimes be told through its soundscape. The city in this story is London; the soundscape is provided by the bells of St. Mary-Le-Bow, located on Cheapside, City of London. Since at least the 1600s, only those born within the sound of these bells, commonly known as Bow Bells, can call themselves Cockneys. Changing demographics can also change the cohesiveness of the sound community. The American city of Hamtramck, MI provides a contemporary example to show how changing demographics can be reflected in a city's soundscape.

Introduction

Soundscape may be defined as "An environment of sound ... with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society."¹ A society or community can be defined by the inhabitants' relationship to, and perception of, particular sounds, such as fog horns in seafaring communities.

The sound of church bells have since the Middle Ages been instrumental in creating Christian community. The bells were a form of communication, informing the community of significant events; for example, the time for church services; when a wedding was taking place, or a birth; the bells would solemnly toll for a death. They would summon the community in times of emergency – attack or fire, and they would signal victory.¹

Alain Corbin writes that church bells have "borne witness to a different relation to the world and to the sacred as well as to a different way of being inscribed in time and space, and of experiencing time and space. The reading of the auditory environment would then constitute one of the procedures involved in the construction of identities, both of individuals and of communities. Bell ringing constituted a language and founded a system of communication ... [giving] rhythm to . . . modes of relating between individuals and between the living and the dead. It made possible . . . rejoicing and conviviality."⁵

This paper discusses one of the most remarkable of the soundscapes created by church bells, that of the bells of the church of St. Mary-le-Bow in the City of London. Called the "very soul of London,"⁴ More than a soundscape, it is a *soundmark*, defined as "a community sound which is unique, or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community."³

This paper also discusses the difficulties of maintaining a sound community in areas of shifting populations and ethnicities. The American City of Hamtramck, Michigan where cultural change has resulted in conflicting soundscapes and soundmark exemplifies that changes in familiar soundmarks can bring dissension and conflict to a community.

The History of a City

St. Mary-le-Bow is located on Cheapside within the one-square mile that constitutes the original London. Originally Roman Catholic, the church has been Anglican since the English Reformation. The bells of this church, familiarly known as "Bow Bells," provide a most unique communal identity. For centuries tradition has said that a true Cockney is one born within the sound of Bow Bells. Cockneys have been associated with Bow Bells since at least 1600, when Samuel

Rowlands said, "I sorne to let a Bow-bell cockney put me downe."

The church of St. Mary-le-Bow dates back to the Norman Conquest. The name is believed to have been derived from the bowed arches of the Norman crypt. First mentioned in the nursery rhyme that told the tale of Dick Whittington, the church and its bells have played an important role in London's history and folklore.

According to the tale, in 1397, he "stole away from Leadenhall Street early in the morning of All Hallows Day and left the City behind him, but as he rested at Highgate he heard Bow bells ring out a merry peal, which seemed to say: Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London."⁹

Highgate Hill is six miles from London. Evidently the sound neighborhood was quite large!

The historical Sir Richard Whittington did in fact serve three terms as Lord Mayor of London.



Fig. 1 An 1836 engraving of Bow Bells

The first known historical reference to Bow Bells was in 1469 when the London Common Council ordered a curfew to be rung at 9 pm each evening.⁷ The curfew bell also marked the end of the apprentices' working day, but it would sometimes be rung late, prompting this rhyme:

*“Clarke of the Bow belle
With the yellow lockes,
For thy late ringing thy head
Shall have knockes”*

And the Clarke replies:

*“Children of Cheape, hold you all still,
For you shall have the Bow bells
Rung as you will.”⁸*

In addition to St. Mary-le-Bow, London had many churches, all with their own bells. The different sounds of each church’s bells probably prompted this familiar children’s rhyme:

*“Oranges and Lemons,
Say the bells of St. Clements.
You owe me five farthings,
Say the bells of St. Martin’s;
When will you pay me,
Say the bells of Old Bailey;
When I grow rich
Say the bells of Shoreditch.
When will that be
Say the bells of Stepney;
I do not know,
Says the great bell of Bow.”*

The church’s history mirrors that of London in many other ways. It was destroyed in the Great Fire of London of 1666 and rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren. Incendiary bombing during World War II again destroyed much of the church and shattered the bells. The church was again restored mostly to Wren’s specifications, between 1956 and 1964.

During the 20th century, long periods of time ensued when the bells were unringable; however, this soundmark is of such importance that modern Cockneys argue that if the bells could have been heard where a person was born, the individual would still qualify as a Cockney.¹²

During World War II, the local sound community became global. The BBC’s World Service began using a 1926 recording of the bells for their interval signal as a “symbol of hope” to all of Occupied Europe.¹⁵



Fig. 2: The tenor bell

Today, St. Mary-le-Bow remains an active presence in the community, and the bells are rung frequently for church feast days and special events, such as the Lord Mayor’s Parade and the opening of the City of London Festival. Bellringers who work in the City ring for the church’s main services. Members of the Ancient Society of College Youths, founded in 1637, regularly ring them, as well as other London ringing societies who also hold practices. Ringers from all over the world have rung on the bells. Adjustable sound control ensures that the bells are heard for service ringing but are much quieter for recreational ringing. Out of consideration for those who work nearby, nowadays, little ringing takes place during the working day.



Fig. 3. The church steeple in Hune 2006. [Photo by authors]

But the community has changed. The last maternity hospital in the City closed in the 1980s with the result that no one is born today within the sound of the bells. Furthermore,

because the City is entirely a business district, few, if any, permanent residents live there. On weekends the City is virtually deserted and the church does not hold Sunday services, only weekday services. In addition, although bell ringing guilds regularly practice in the church tower, the bells are muted so as not to disturb the populace. In fact, during a June 2006 visit to London by the authors, the noise of the traffic was so intense that the bells could not be heard more than a few feet from the church.

The authors visited the bell tower during a practice session by the Ancient Society of College Youths.



Fig. 4. A practice session by the Ancient Society of College Youths.

As immigrants from other countries and cultures continue to move to Britain, the ethnic profile of Greater London has changed. According to the 2001 census, London's East End is now 49% ethnic minority. New immigrants moving to the East End may not share the same feelings for the bells. To some, perhaps, the bells are a nuisance, or worse, a threat to their own traditional community.

Dueling Soundmarks

The city of Hamtramck, Michigan, entirely surrounded by Detroit, is a city of 23,000. It is a prime example of how a changing soundscape can result in culture clash. Once a community of Polish Catholic immigrants, the city is now home to immigrants from, Pakistan, Bosnia, Yemen and Bangladesh, among other countries. The 2000 census showed that 41% of Hamtramck's population were foreign-born.

The immigrants include a large number of Muslims. The populations reportedly coexisted peacefully until 2003, when the al-Islah Islamic Center petitioned the city council to amplify the 5-times-a-day call to prayer. In spite of emotional protests from long-time residents, the City Council unanimously approved the Mosque's request. However, although five 2-minute-long calls to prayer are made traditionally, the mosque agreed to withhold those at 5:30 a.m. and 10:30 p. m. Only the calls at 1:35 p.m., 7 pm., and 9:05 p.m. are broadcasted.¹⁸

Comments made to news media by non-Muslim residents reveal how the sound of the call to prayer is perceived by those not from that culture. One resident called the sound "a racket" and "just noise." Because the sound is from a (to them) alien culture and in a language not understood, it is perceived as intrusive and even offensive. Some feel their Christian religion is under attack, believing that the call would put Islam above their religion.¹⁹

Many of the city's Muslims see no difference between their call to prayer and the ringing bells of Hamtramck's many churches. In fact, St. Ladislaus Catholic Church is across the street from the mosque and, on some days, its bells ring at the same time as the call to prayer.

As an indication of the strong emotional reaction to the new soundscape, many non-Muslim residents said they got along well with their Muslim neighbors until the request to amplify the call to prayer.

Said one woman, "I don't want to be told that Allah is the true and only God 5 times a day, 365 days a year. It's against my constitutional rights to have to listen to another religion evangelize in my ear."²⁰

Many of Hamtramck's Muslims believe the problem is more about the insecurities of an older immigrant population feeling threatened by a newer one than it is about noise or the content of the prayer.

The amended Noise Ordinance reads that "The City shall permit "call to prayer," "church bells" and other reasonable means of announcing religious meetings to be amplified between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. for a duration not to exceed five minutes." In addition: "The City Council shall have sole authority to set the level of amplification, provided however; that no such level shall be enforced until all religious institutions receive notice of such levels."

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that a part of the history of London can be told through its soundscape. Surely there are other soundscape histories that can be studied. We have also demonstrated that soundmarks can be indicators or sources of social conflict.

Population change prompts us to ask questions. Is the Bow Bells sound community now defunct? Have the bells become a *sound romance* -- "a disappearing sound triggering memories of the past and creating nostalgia for a vanished and romanticized history"?¹⁷

A homogeneous population may be required to create an unconflicted sound community, as the Hamtramck example seems to indicate. If this is so, then soundscape can be a diagnostic signaling important cultural change.

On the other hand it is reported that the sounds of the call to prayer and church bells mingled amiably for centuries in Bosnia, with its mixed Muslim and Christian population. It would be interesting and even useful to study examples of homogeneous and inhomogeneous sound communities. The findings could be useful guides for planning community soundscapes.



Fig. 5. Cockney culture lives!. Cockney rhyme at a construction site near Bow bells. [Photo by authors]

However many the challenges though, the soundscape of Bow bells does form an integral part of London's history of its collective memory as the above photograph shows. The sign reads (using Cockney rhyming slang): "One Wood Street, a City Treat. An HQ within the sound of Bow Bells."

Although the old meaning may be lost to new generations of Londoners, for the present, the great bells of Bow continue to ring their message of community to all who care to listen.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the rector of St. Mary-le-Bow, the Rev. G. R. Bush, the Parish Secretary and Pastoral Assistant, Matthew Power, and the Verger/Administrator Nick Cressey.

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⁹ Mark Regan, past steeple steward of St. Mary-le-Bow and author of the church's web site www.stmarylebow.co.uk)

¹⁰ Ibid.

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¹² en.wikipedia.org

¹³ Regan, op. cit.

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