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***The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life*- Niall Atkinson. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016**

by [*Tiffany Ng*](#)

Niall Atkinson's work continually challenges the field of art history to expand analysis of the urban sensorium beyond the visual, with particular emphasis on the intersection of architecture and sound. *The Noisy Renaissance* constructs histories of tower bells and public voices in early modern Florence to bridge multiple gaps: between society and space, between built environment and ephemeral social practice, between city and church, between government and *popolo*, between order and rebellion, between night and day.

Through an introduction, five chapters, an epilogue, and moderately detailed footnotes, Atkinson's handsomely illustrated book makes the case that bells in early modern Florence were dialogic instruments that constructed authority relations, social space, and multiple simultaneous layers of time through a carefully orchestrated series of daily hocketed responses between towers. Working from legislative documents, he reconstructs the gradual *crescendi* and *decrescendi* of these daily performances over the course of the liturgical year, as if the textual records were musical scores. Likewise, he argues that Florentines were skilled interpretive listeners who used their voices and even rogue bells to exercise their own sonic agency, whether they were affirming city decisions, calling for justice, or rioting. Besides legislation, Atkinson draws on a broad variety of sources, including art, literature, chronicles, sermons, synodal law, legal documents, and his own site observations and photographs.

Atkinson's contention that bells constructed meaning through dialogue with each other and with public sounds such as voices and city trumpeters poses a challenge to traditional campanology, which has often treated individual bell towers as discrete soundmarks for analysis. Likewise, architectural history has neglected the acoustic strategies of the government, community, and individuals and the syntax of their sonic communications across space. The interactions between sound and architecture structured urban life, and their study illumines social relations otherwise not recorded in text by everyday illiterate Florentines.

The first chapter, “The Acoustic Art of City Building,” introduces Atkinson’s interpretative strategy through his analyses of four stories. In 1498, controversial firebrand preacher Girolamo Savonarola flees an angry mob to San Marco, where friars ring their Piagnona bell for help. His supporters (*piagnoni* or “wailers”) fail to answer the alarm, and he is burned as a heretic while the convent is shuttered and the Piagnona bell is confiscated, publicly shamed, and exiled. In 1307, the Benedictine monastery known as the Badia refuses to pay a new military tax. The monks ring their bell, summoning a crowd to menace the collectors. The government cuts the tax in half, but also cuts the bell tower in half. These accounts illustrate the symbolic and tactical power of bell-ringing and the concomitant logic of subjecting bells to punishment. In particular, Savonarola had mobilized a powerful public auditory culture of voices and the Piagnola for his growing reform movement. The final two stories concern the circulation, regulation, and interpretation of speech and noise, highlighting the sonic agency of Florentine characters and setting the stage for Atkinson’s examination of institutional and individual acoustic strategies in the city.

The second chapter, “Florentine Soundscapes,” details how the establishment of popular governments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries relied on the campanological soundscape for urban planning and propaganda. Listeners were already skilled at interpreting church bell ringing, listening for the way bells were struck, the number of strikes, and the sequence in which they were rung across the city. The government used the reach of ever larger and higher bells to reconfigure the city without physical intervention at times of crisis and regime change, and it strategically interlocked its bells into daily dialogues with older church bell sequences in order to perform a demonstrative harmonization of city and church authority. The chapter ends with an impressive reconstruction of the campanological sound of a typical Florentine day, a series of meaningful choreographed dialogues between government and church that bridged the physical space between them.

Chapter 3, “Sound, Space, and Meaning in Renaissance Florence,” argues that the cultural construction of time and space was largely accomplished sonically, using bells. The time by which Florentines lived was unequally measured, varied across seasons, and audible as simultaneous streams of time for labor, justice, worship, and more. Bell-ringing also constructed and measured space: the socially distinct space of the evening, the boundaries of legal territories, the city’s extramural presence in the battlefield. By contrast, the nascent sound of mechanical clock time existed apart from these dialogues.

Chapter 4, “*Suoni, Voci, Rumori*: Listening to the City,” explores the relationship between bells and verbal culture in the circulation of information. The government constructed an acoustic regime in which bells, surrogate government voices, and people’s spoken words played prescribed roles in producing the regime’s authority, for example through the call-and-response *parlamento* process of public legislative validation in

the piazza. This sonic regime was vulnerable to misunderstandings and silences that raised suspicions in attentive listeners, who used verbal strategies to undermine the city's control over sonic circulation routes. The chapter does not deal with the voice as sound, but rather as a medium for the flow of information, linking architecture, sound, writing, and memory.

The final chapter, "Sonic Discord, Urban Disorder," adds an auditory dimension to the 1378 Ciompi revolt. The disenfranchised Ciompi wool workers were subject to a locally embedded bell that segregated them from citywide labor rhythms. Their revolt was ignited by a chain of responses between parish bell towers, calling people to arms and encircling the center of power with the sound of insurrection. While Florence's everyday communication hierarchy led from center to periphery (cathedral to town hall to parish bells), the Ciompi temporarily internalized that representational system to earn short-lived guild representation.

The Epilogue elaborates on Atkinson's disciplinary critique of architectural photography, which has traditionally relied on depopulated silent images, themselves highly staged performative gestures. This critique has the unintended effect of highlighting the disciplinary limitations of the book itself as sensory history. Chapters are richly illustrated with contemporary photographs, but do not refer the reader to contemporary recordings of Florentine bells. The text generally treats sound as a *fait accompli*, detached from the sonorous object; of 154 figures, there are only two photographs of bells, and the mechanism of bell-ringing (presumably swinging) is never named or clarified. Yet sound does not supersede materiality. How did the differing sonic affects created by physical variations between bells (such as pitch, amplitude, timbre, duration) influence the interpretation, dialogues, and hierarchies studied? Moreover, the people who rang bells are erased by passive voice constructions or by descriptions of bells as having social agency and factional sympathies. In turn, towers are often used as a stand-in for bells, subsuming their differences.

The Noisy Renaissance presents a refreshing architectural response to musicological and sound studies approaches to the city that can often treat space and place as indistinct aesthetic entities, rather than as specific material configurations, conduits, and barriers that shape sound and social circulation. However, an inverse shortcoming is sometimes apparent: sound is assumed to have "wantonly annihilated" architecture and boundaries, as if sound were not a physical phenomenon whose propagation is subject to the built environment (p. 197). Rooftop photographs illustrate sequences of ringing without qualifying that most people did not listen from an all-hearing bird's-eye perspective. Sound interacts with material reality in highly localized ways, and insights from acoustics could help bridge that gap. Atkinson's separate project to digitally map the early modern Florentine soundscape may later address these questions, pointing towards the "fuller urban sensorium" (p. 207) for which he advocates.

Atkinson's book is a rich contribution to art and architectural history, campanology, sound studies, and the growing literature on the urban sensorium, offering a methodology for studying how exchanges between bells, voices, and other city sounds worked to construct meaning. It builds a fascinating foundation for the writing of future histories of listening, bells, and bell ringers in early modern Florence.