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*Listening to historical theatre sound recordings*

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## In and out of 'earsight' – listening to historical theatre sound recordings

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### ABSTRACT

This article sets out to explore theatre sound historically by engaging with archival recordings of theatre performances captured in a specific Dutch theatre collection. The usefulness, or aesthetic value, of these recordings for theatre historians has not been systematically explored before. This article examines historical conceptions of sound, both in theatre as well as in the documentary archival format. Departing from Mladen Ovadija's concept of the *dramaturgy of sound*, it combines observations regarding the aesthetic organization of performances with source-critical considerations. This article raises questions about archival research of theatre sound through the discussion of two production recordings: a 1966 production of Lewis Carlino's *Telemachus Clay* and a 1970 production of *De Spaanse Hoer* by the group Zuidelijk Toneel.

When on 3 February 1966 the Dutch theatre group Stichting Toneelgroep Studio premiered Lewis Carlino's theatre piece *Telemachus Clay*, the press was stunned by the voice and sound-centred performance. 'Compelling' (*Het vrije volk*, 28 March 1966, my translation), '[e]xcellent', 'skillful' (*De Waarheid*, 4 February 1966, my translation) were the judgements of reviewers at the time.<sup>1</sup> The performance was scripted as vocal collage accompanied by a soundscape, telling the story of a young film scriptwriter about his search for luck in Hollywood. It was performed with no motion on stage other than alternating spotlights illuminating whichever of the actors was speaking. The reduction of theatrical means to evoke a mainly acoustic experience is reflected in the reviews that remark on the blurred boundaries of theatrical genre and in the assessment that the performance 'might as well be played on the radio' (*De Telegraaf*, 4 February 1966).

Reviews of productions are among the sources available to theatre scholars in accessing past performance. However, reviews offer limited accounts. In the example above, while the critics agree on the centrality of sound for the performance, none of them provide further details on the sonic arrangement of the performance itself. The theatre sound archive currently hosted by the University of Amsterdam provides an alternative type of access to historical performances. However, this archive has not yet been added to the theatre and sound scholar's range of study objects.

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I propose to trace conceptions of sound historically by focusing on items from the theatre sound archive such as the recording of *Telemachus Clay*. Epistemological problems and categorical problems need to be part of this reflection: how can one discuss historical theatre sound through sound recording, given that it captures only one dimension of performance? How does the available material influence our knowledge of sound, given its disciplinary specificity? What kind of knowledge can be extracted from sound recordings? What kind of material traces are sound recordings? How do sound recordings relate to the original performance? I am interested in the inflections the material organization of the sound recording poses to the listening experience. In addition to the example mentioned above, I will discuss a second performance recording, Hugo Claus's *De Spaanse Hoer* (*The Spanish Whore*, 1970), produced by the group Zuidelijk Toneel, and will describe the sound dramaturgy of that work through the listening experience as well as additional sources. The two examples each give a different answer to the question about the historical and aesthetic value of theatre sound recordings.

## 1. Aural objects

### 1.1. Sound is performance

Theatre sound archives have not yet been subject to systematic research.<sup>2</sup> In this article, historical theatre sound will be examined in relation to its role in the dramaturgy of a performance. Dramaturgy, as used here, is understood as the aesthetic organization of performance. In my view, it provides a useful focus as it points beyond the mere execution towards the conception of performance. Gathering aspects of a production's auditory dramaturgy brings this research in proximity to a number of publications that deal with specific dramaturgies of sound (Brown 2009, 2010, 2014; Curtin 2014; Ovadija 2013), most centrally in the book *Dramaturgy of Sound* (2013) by Mladen Ovadija. Here, Ovadija profiles practices of theatre, which feature sound as autonomous from text, as the verbal root of drama in the word dramaturgy suggests (2013, 3). As examples of theatrical dramaturgies of sound, he discusses a set of avant-garde and postdramatic practices. Elaborating his terminology through these cases, it might be said that for Ovadija the term 'dramaturgy of sound' is inextricable from sound's emancipation from text as a central aesthetic organizing principle of performance. The shift away from the 'language of literary drama' to 'the idiom of theatre performance' (53) allows Ovadija to describe sound in relation to a specific conception of performance, as historically and aesthetically distinct. The formulation that 'sound ... is ... performance' is Ovadija's phrasing, used in the course of explaining the autonomy of sound as 'stage-building material' (3). He says:

The dramaturgy of sound, therefore, reads/writes another type of text (one of physical theatricality) by the temporal and spatial disposition of aural objects/acts of performance. It displays voice – not only as a carrier of speech but also as an emotional, pulsional, gestural expression in excess of speech, and sound – not only as supporting music or incidental noise but also as an autonomous stage-building material. (3)

Discussing different dramaturgies in 'aural objects/acts of performance' (4) in the context of this article, however, I do not regard them as necessarily tied to an avant-garde or even a conceptual, artistically intended 'emancipation' of sound. The aesthetic of the sound recording does not necessarily match the aesthetic of the historical theatre production. Besides, the sound

archive can be observed to orient itself slightly more towards institutional – more established – theatre rather than the experimental, at least in the period I will be looking at. Consequently, this article balances the aesthetic focus with the historical (documentary) line of questioning.

For the historical engagement with sound archival sources, I benefit from George Brock-Nannestad's (2013) source-critical considerations in Ruth E. Mohrmann's *Audioarchive*, entitled 'The Use of Somebody Else's Sound Recordings – Source-Critical Complexes when Working with Historical Sound Recordings'. The case of theatre sound recordings is not only a case of 'somebody else's sound recording' but, moreover, somebody else's sound recording of somebody else's theatre. The title alone suffices as a reminder of the source-critical query of motivations and inscriptions coming together in the format of a theatre sound recording as a historical document, a discussion I will return to in the course of the examples.

I do not rely on an introduction of theories at this point, but will however return subsequently to the concept of dramaturgies in dialogue with the case studies; in that context I will also conceptualize audience reaction, affinities with radio formats and audible imaginaries, for which additional literature will be used (Birdsall 2007; Chignell 2009; Curtin 2014). Looking at performances from this angle, historiographical questions emerge as part of the listening experience. The aspects that make the listening process difficult, as they contradict listening standards set by auditory formats of, for example, radio listening, are usually indicators of the technical conditions of a sound recording, so that questions emerge as part of the process: where were microphones placed? For whom was the recording made? In order to access the aspects of the performance that are documented, one has to understand the filters that – in this case – a sound recording poses. How best can I discursively account for the ramifications of the format of a sound recording? Could this be done by accounting for them as part of the complex different layers of dramaturgy? If 'dramaturgy of sound' designates for Ovadija the conscious dramaturgical organization of a performance centred on sound, then this article adds at least one more layer of organization, resulting from the technical isolation of the sound format. What I seek to delineate then in this article is the exact reach of the ear, that is, to understand the limitations of what I will call 'earsight', reframing the term that British anthropologist Tim Ingold had coined critically (Ingold 2000, 248). As it relates to the common term 'earshot', I suggest using the term 'earsight' for accommodating the possibility of the (visual) imaginary stimulated through the ear, as well as the possibility of 'insight' through the ear and in reach of the ear. A concluding discursive distinction could – I propose – account for the partiality of the type of dramaturgy that can be accessed through a theatre sound recording and signal auditory dramaturgy to be part of a bigger dramaturgy of a performance, which does not need to concern sound.

### ***1.2. The Dutch theatre sound collection: 'best expressions of contemporary performance'***

The Dutch theatre sound collection was founded in 1965 under the name 'Theater Klank en Beeld'. Now consisting of 37,000 items that were either collected or specially recorded, the sound archive documents a historical range of theatre sound over the course of almost the entire last century, from performance recordings to interviews, speeches, radio programmes, tapes of auditory stage design ('geluidsdecor'), songs and studio recordings,

among others. The collection grew as part of the Dutch Theatre Institute (Theater Instituut Nederland). With acquisition policies revolving around the event of a performance, the institution collected a diverse range of records, interlinking different material traces of performance (paper archive, sound, costumes etc.). Following the dissolution of the Theater Instituut Nederland in 2013 due to the austerity measures of the Dutch government, some of the institution's archives, such as the paper archives and books (now hosted by the University of Amsterdam), were able to remain in public use. The sound archive, in contrast, had been considered inactive by the archivists prior to the closure.

Lou Hoefnagels, one of the founding members and the first director of the archival endeavour, described the primary motivation to record 'best expressions of contemporary performance' and preserve them in order to counter the ephemerality of performance (Hoefnagels 1971, 8, my translation). Together with the fact that sound recording was still more affordable than video (Hoefnagels 1969, 527), this choice might have made sound a practical means of documentation instead of a disciplinary priority. The mixed approach of qualitative and pragmatic assessment cannot be understood as accounting for sound's aesthetic potential or of sound's relationship with theatre practice. This results in an archival body that also contains materials of no particularly exceptional auditory dimension or other obvious reason that make it worthwhile to consider the performances they document in terms of sound.

The qualitative assessment of the 'superlative' performances of the season was put in the hands of an artistic selection committee. Hoefnagels' aforementioned advice to record the 'best expressions of contemporary performance' (1971, 8) can be understood in light of the documentary purpose as putting an emphasis on what is contemporary. Hoefnagels' rhetoric coincides with formulations around a literary and cultural canon: in overseeing the recording practice to capture outstanding examples for the future, Hoefnagels proposes the idea of greatness across time.

In selecting performances for discussion in this article, I was interested to follow this special issue's topic of 'good sound', in which context it seemed fitting to trace examples of what the archivists considered to be the 'best expressions of contemporary performance'. Which performances would have repeatedly been chosen as 'best' by the archival selection process, including a selection committee advising the archivists to record these performances, a sound engineer deciding that the quality of the recording was at the very least sufficient, the archive's staff appraising and categorizing the recordings, and most currently the decision to consider them worth digitizing? How would the superlative of 'best performance' translate in terms of sound for today's listener?

## 2. The cases

### 2.1. Selection rationale

Tracing examples of 'best performances' according to the archival selection rationale had consequences in the first instance for what needed to be excluded. For the purposes of this article, this meant excluding all those sound recordings from examination that were not appraised, categorized, identified or interlinked in the archive. Accordingly, the two recordings I have chosen were thus well cross-referenced with other historical traces, such as archives of individuals or collected reviews. Accepting digitization as an additional

archival selection meant excluding all analogue recordings, although digital items form only about a sixth of all recordings. As pursuing Hoefnagels' rationale was my explicit goal, I chose performances that were part of the archival recording practice and restricted myself to the first five years since the institution's foundation, when I could count on the activity of a further mainly undocumented selection committee.

I chose recordings that helped me reflect on both theatre dramaturgy as well as the sound recording. In terms of genre, I could have selected more music or spoken word oriented performances, as there are numerous such recordings, among which variety or cabaret predominate, but decided against it, as much has been said already on developments of and delineations within music theatre (see Roesner 2003). Also, I did not include explicit accounts such as interviews, lectures and speeches, simply due to my primary focus on the role of sound in historical performance (and the sound recording). Furthermore, in order to map the sound archival holdings, many more recordings could have been included for consideration (such as conference recordings of multilingual discussions, recordings of dance or mime etc.), and the only reason that can be provided for not choosing them is contingency and personal preference.

The first recording is of the aforementioned *Telemachus Clay*. It presents a theatre form that in its sound-focus seems to invite audio documentation. The performance's possible affinity with radio formats prompts a line of inquiry about sound formats in aesthetic practice and the listening experience of its documentation. I chose the second recording, *De Spaanse Hoer* (1970), for its representative value. I sought to select two contrasting performances in order to profile a range of problems posed by the sound archive. Whereas the first performance relies on sound as its primary means, the second does not at all. This has quite different consequences for what becomes accessible when listening to the performance recording. The second example is representative of the numerous cases of performances captured in the archive that have no particular affinity with sound. The intent here is not to discuss the cases exhaustively, but to review the aesthetic organization of sound in past performance as captured by sound recordings.

## 2.2. *Telemachus Clay* (1966) – dramaturgy of sound?

*Telemachus Clay* premiered in 1966 and was conceptualized for the stage for the 11 actors of Stichting Toneelgroep Studio. The stage itself was left in the dark; only a spotlight illuminated the alternating speakers. In today's vocabulary, the performance would most likely be announced as live radio drama. One could relate it to recent performances such as Simon McBurney/Complicite's solo performance *The Encounter* (2015) in its mixture of live voice performance with recorded sounds and pre-recorded music, evoking a biographical account of a single main character's journey exclusively by acoustic means. In the case of *Telemachus Clay*, an ensemble of voices constitutes the performance. The exclusive use of acoustic means of storytelling brought the historical reviewers to comment on the blurring of boundaries between theatre and radio. The performance might rely on text and an imaginary stimulated by it to an extent that could indeed be compared with radio formats, such as radio drama.

The decision to reduce the visual dimension of the theatrical stage resonates with the question put forth by the early German radio theorist Rudolf Arnheim in his *Lob der Blindheit: Befreiung vom Körper* (Arnheim [1936] 2001). When he suggests that radio does not

necessitate a visual stage to evoke an integral experience, Arnheim appeals to a rhetoric of economic equation. He departs from the perspective of an artistic rule of 'austerity' when wondering what the minimal requirements are for evoking a 'complete' experience from a visually 'deficient' medium such as radio (87). Could *Telemachus Clay* be said to somehow obliterate the visual stage through the ample use of its acoustic means? How are these deployed? And, what does it mean for the ramifications of the sound recording and the various layers of dramaturgy? Let me firstly elaborate on the performance's dominant sound strategy and secondly disentangle its ramifications for a dramaturgy of sound.

### 2.2.1. *Theatre of the mind evoked by narration and sound – reviewing the performance's material*

In his article 'Turning' (2015), theatre scholar Adrian Curtin recounts Gertrude Stein's maxim about turning one's back to a view in order to enjoy it (Curtin and Roesner 2015, 120). A theatre sound recording necessarily deprives the listener of the visual dimension by disposition rather than for anecdotal pleasure's sake. But in this case the listener finds herself – pleurably or not – effectively *not* reminded of her deprivation, possibly because this deprivation was part of the historical theatrical stage set-up as well.

The performance starts with a narrator introducing 'Downsville Town' (Carlino and Kouwenaar 1966, 11) and continuing to set the scene of the main character's hometown by means of description, accompanied by an audible choir of snorers. These snorers illustrate the sleepiness of a town in which an involvement with farming, cows and sexual transgressions from the law of chastity seem to accompany each character introduced. The use of a narrator makes it possible to jump in and out of scenes and dialogue rather quickly, which together with the relatively high tempo of speech, short staccato sentences of information ('not night anymore, not day yet, silence'; 11, my translation), fast-adapting supporting vocal soundscapes and the selective introduction of a number of characters, establishes the impression of a fast-paced performance in the first couple of minutes. In its scripting of brief sentences, poetic metaphors and comparisons, the text evokes selective images of the characters as well as the environment; the soundscape mostly takes on a supporting and illustrating role. When the main character goes on a journey to Hollywood to find his luck but ends up 'finding himself' as a result of a prolonged state of crisis, each station on the main character's way to and in Hollywood, such as the train journey, the parties and encounters, all have an audible counterpart. Whereas the thorough description of places by means of words is image-provoking by itself, music and sound effects are also employed to create and enhance these imaginary spaces. Dutch music theatre-maker Paul Koek describes creating space by musical means as follows:

What is the musical space of the performance? If the script indicates that the scene takes place outdoors, you can translate it musically through *musique concrète*, through church bells, birds and rain. A bedroom sounds differently than a dining room. These are things you can give shape by means of music and sound. (Koek, in van de Haterd 2005, 131, my translation)

Different scenes including a visual imaginary are evoked through text, supported by sound effects from tape or produced by the fellow actors. Curtin (2014) systematizes diverse strategies for the use of specific acoustic imaginaries in avant-garde theatre, in ways that are significant for a repertoire of sound-related dramaturgy. Curtin discusses, for example, what he calls '[t]he aural dramaturgies of Maeterlinck, Chekhov, and Kandinsky'



(62). Under the header of ‘the acoustic imaginary’ (21), he subsumes strategies of evoking imagined acoustic worlds in the audience through text. He writes:

The acoustic imaginary of the play-as-text and the play-as-performance may or may not align depending on the staging. One of the things a theatre sound designer can do is realize the acoustic imaginary (or *an* acoustic imaginary) of a play text, transforming conceptual sound into actual sound – ideally without being terribly obvious about it. (23, italics in the original)

*Telemachus Clay* might, in comparison to Curtin’s examples, appear, indeed, ‘terribly obvious’ (23) in its quite direct relationship between sound and text. The narrator describes a goodbye scene at the station, and next one hears the sound of a steam train. Words evoke images and scenes; they do not evoke particularly rich or unexpected acoustic worlds; the soundscape works illustratively and is barely challenged to distinguish – for example – between ‘a bedroom and a dining room’ by auditory means, as Koek had put it (van de Haterd 2005, 131).

If in *Telemachus Clay* sound and words are used to create a scene, how then does this performance relate to radio in its potential radiogenic properties? As auditory counterpart to ‘photogenic’, the term ‘radiogenic’ has been as much defined as contested (Chignell 2009, 93). However, to distinguish it from ‘the notion that there is something “essentially” radio-like about a piece of drama, for example’ (3), it has been suggested that radiogenic might mean to be ‘following the conventional aesthetic of radio’ (93). Conventions of radio become readable in radio drama, which, since the very inception of radio, played with subversions of certain conventions, such as the on-site news reporter describing a scene. To pick one example, Neil Verma reviews instances of constitutive radio drama experimentation as early as 1937 and develops central aesthetic concepts such as producing perspective on the radio. In this context, Verma reviews the varying functions of an announcer-narrator and the various strategies of verbal narration and acoustic information set in creative tension with each other (2012, 33). In *Telemachus Clay* the acoustic information mainly stands in service of the verbal narration. A narrator, who unambiguously coordinates and guides through the images further evoked by sound, executes this narration. His omniscience reminds one of a literary device rather than of the involved radio (drama)’s announcer-narrator. However, the performance might be considered more radiogenic due to its fast switches between scenes, the quick alternation between voice and spatial evocation by means of sound, which would be impossible in a physical performance other than a verbal one. The script of the performance allows us to trace this quick-scripted alternation of narration and scenic dialogues.

To conclude this review of the performance’s main strategy, the recording features the performance of a partly narrated, partly dialogical text, ‘building the scene in the mind of the spectator instead of on stage’, as the original author Lewis Carlino is paraphrased in one of the performance’s reviews (*De Telegraaf*, 4 February 1966, my translation). The performativity and expressiveness of voice and stage sound stands out in addition to the text; the sound recording captures the acoustic means which – as the historical reviews confirm – are central for the dramaturgy of the overall performance. In one review, the historical set-up is called ‘anti-theatrical’, in forcing the actors into a static set-up (*De Telegraaf*, 4 February 1966). This translates into a listening experience in which it is barely discernible that the actors in the historical performance recordings are not performing for the listener, but for a live audience in the historical co-present situation; the listener is not left to linger in

uncertainty about whether or not the visual stage action might offer important clues to the perception of the performance.

*Telemachus Clay* forms a stark contrast to other sound recordings from the theatre sound archive, where the listener frequently – and at times disconcertingly so – is reminded of the archival focus on documentation over any aesthetic standard. The divide between the original event and the contemporary listener consists not only of a spatial and temporal gap of several decades, but also in the isolation of the auditory sense. In many recordings contained in the archive this forms an obstacle for the listener. In site-specific or other non-scripted experimental theatre recordings, the recording might contain minutes of silence or indecipherable stage action, discernible only as undetermined motion.

### 2.2.2. *Dramaturgy of sound – in and out of ‘earsight’*

In this performance recording, much comes into ‘earsight’ through the sound recording as a result of the particular arrangement of the historical stage; ‘seeing with the ear’ (Ingold 2000, 248) might in this case be exactly the right description as the performance predominantly strongly engages an acoustic imaginary. The recording conveys the power of imagination as evoked through words and sound. Radio scholar Tim Crook responded to a repeated claim that radio was a blind medium (Crisell 1994): ‘What is the philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind?’ (Crook 1999, 54). In a similar way, it is due to the specific disposition of the performance that one is tempted to overlook the difference in experience between the sound recording and the historical theatrical experience.

Ovadija’s terminology of a dramaturgy of sound may be used to describe the specific case of the performance of *Telemachus Clay* because of its use of sound and voice for its aesthetic organization. However, there is a difference here from Ovadija’s primary application of the term, as one cannot speak in this case of an emancipation of the sound from drama, as the use of voices and soundscapes stands in the service of linear character development and sense-making in a way drama can provide. *Telemachus Clay* consists of linear storytelling, and language is a primary means of conveying it.

In this case, what is accessible acoustically coincides mainly with the actual dramaturgy of the performance, relying on sound as primary means. Yet it should be acknowledged that the overarching dramaturgy of the performance might have involved more aspects that are out of earsight for today’s listener, including the fact that any interaction between stage, audience and the play’s material cannot be grasped.

### 2.3. *De Spaanse Hoer (1970) – audience resonance and technical conditions*

The performance recording of *De Spaanse Hoer* performed by the group Zuidelijk Toneel offers rich material for studying voices in an otherwise stage-centred and visual/text-centred theatre performance, and as such forms a strong contrast to the performance discussed previously. This performance brings together famous theatre personalities of their time: the Belgian author Hugo Claus, the director Ton Lutz, the stage designer Nicolaas Wijnberg who was well known at the point of performance, not to mention the famous Dutch composer Louis Andriessen in charge of the sound design, as well as the actress Ank van der Moer in the leading role. The popularity of the artistic team might well

have led to the performance being recorded, although it is interesting to note that during the rehearsal period leading up to the premiere on 1 January 1970, a historically significant series of institutional critiques had begun (Erenstein 1996), in the light of which this performance's accumulation of big names might be seen to represent what the protest was against. The anachronism might also be detected regardless of – or in fact because of – its approach to the topic of prostitution, indebted to the 1499 original Spanish moral novel *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* by Fernando de Rojas, which this performance adapts.

While the performance might be in some regards out of joint with the developments of its time, from my perspective the performance combines factors that are very much in tune at least with the archival selection five years into the archiving project, realizing what director Hoefnagels had originally envisioned. Not only are the voices and contributors of this performance famous, but the spectators' response in audience surveys showed the performance's utmost popularity. More than 40,000 people had seen the performance by 10 April 1970, and 79% had 'a good evening', making it potentially one of the 'best expressions of contemporary performance' (Hoefnagels 1971, 8). Technically, as mentioned previously, it belongs to the category of recordings that, beyond the quite common centrality of text, as performances are not particularly suitable to be recorded in terms of sound. In this article, this performance becomes interesting due to – among other factors – a technical interference, a potential sound recording error, which I suggest is seen as an auditory dramaturgical addition to the experience of the sound recording. But let me start with an overview of the material and the highlights of the listening before I discuss two particular instances.

At the performance's centre is the tragicomic story of the aged procuress called Celestina (van der Moer) who arranges an encounter between the young noble woman Melibea and Calisto, in return for a reward, over which she eventually ends up being killed by her supposed collaborators, Calisto's greedy menials. The performance is anything but subtle. The language of the original text is identified – characteristically for author Hugo Claus – as 'baroque' language, resulting in an 'avalanche of metaphors and grandiloquence' (*Volkskrant*, 5 January 1970, my translation). For the performance, a most illustrative and over-the-top farcical entertainment style is maintained. It starts with music composed by Louis Andriessen that resembles Mario Bava horror film soundtracks by Les Baxter from the early 1960s, conveying suspense to the listener. Soon the husky rough voice of lead actress Ank van der Moer is heard. Her voice in turn is contrasted by fellow actors' high-pitched voices yelling and screaming their texts enthusiastically. Conceptually and possibly partially in line with the genre of a (tragi)comedy, the course of the performance shows, predictably, mainly an alternation between fast-paced witty jest and thrilling tension. Accordingly, the conduct of voice and the musical soundscape have mainly supporting functions. There are two incidents that stand out in terms of sound, which I discuss further below, one in terms of a dramaturgy of sound on the level of the performance, the other in terms of a condition posed technically and possibly intervening on a technical level with aesthetic ramifications for the imaginary construction of spaces for the contemporary listener.

### **2.3.1. Conjuring ghosts and audiences – resonance in the performance**

The performance *De Spaanse Hoer* consists of fast-paced dialogue. The timing of the performance is mostly subordinated to the plot development. One scene, however, is audibly juxtaposed in relation to the rest of the performance, which is occasionally remarked upon in

reviews. It is a scene of Celestina singing for the sake of the conjuration of ghosts to help her unite the two young lovers. This scene of conjuration stands out in auditory ways, lingering for a few minutes in this audible gesture of appeal, as an intense moment of performativity. The actress Ank van der Moer lifts her voice in a monotonous but ardent prayer. While, due to her Falstaff-like character, she tends to display calculation and intrigue, in this particular scene she prays in yet unseen dedication. Several reviews remark on this particular scene as outstanding (such as *Het Binnenhof*, 8 January 1970; *Trouw*, 5 January 1970).

However, what the recording somewhat surprisingly offers in earsight along with this scene is the audience's resonance with the stage action, mostly through a suspenseful silence that becomes audible. Although I did not set out to listen for audience reaction, what the scene reveals is an explicit immediate confirmation of a captivating performance, caused by and discernible through sound. To add a theoretical framework, this audience reaction could most appropriately be called 'affirmative resonance', following the vocabulary of radio scholar Carolyn Birdsall (2007). And although in Birdsall's wording 'affirmative resonance' is defined as the occasion 'when a group of people communally create sounds that resonate in a space, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of their group and its identity patterns', and she develops it to analyse Nazi propagandist strategies (2007, 61), she acknowledges the openness to further definition:

... the concept of affirmative resonance ultimately offers a number of critical aids for an historical investigation of sound. The most significant foundation for writing such a history is the recognition of the *spatial, imaginative and intersubjective dimensions of sounds in cultural contexts*. That is to say, sound is marked by its ability to reverberate in spaces, to travel and fill spaces, and reach beyond the field of vision. In response, the researcher is confronted with the sensory and embodied nature of historical experience. (79, my emphasis)

This latter explanation opens the term's application to a theatre audience's reaction. So while it can be held that the theatre recording captures the aesthetic organization of this scene in the overall dramaturgy of the performance, coordinated towards integrity on a conceptual level (and as such not relying on sound as any primary means), the recording also captures the immediate vibrancy of the cultural context it takes place in. In this collective reaction to the sound-intensive scene, the embodied understanding of a scene through the spectator acts as a reminder of the original spatial and collective situation that a sound recording can capture in ways that point beyond the aesthetic organization of the performance itself. It seems that while the laughter of the audience in other scenes could also be seen as the aforementioned 'affirmative resonance', in this scene it stands out as evoked in reaction to a sound-intensive scene.

### 2.3.2. *Spatial imaginary and technical recording conditions*

The performance of *De Spaanse Hoer* was recorded on 31 January 1970. When earlier, on 8 January 8, the performance had been travelling through the country – as is common in the Netherlands – and was performed in The Hague, a reviewer remarked on the mal-adaptability of the stage design to stages other than the original one. At one point, a piece of the set, the throne of Celestina, which allowed the actress to be on stage for the entire performance, was placed so far to the right of the stage that the performance at times became unintelligible. And while I have no access to evidence that would confirm whether it was due to the stage design or due to a misplaced recording microphone,

the sound recording leaves the listener at times with a distorted spatial awareness as well: in the course of movement on stage, actors can be heard to approach the recording microphone as much as turn their backs to it. This creates an imaginary spatial listening position that might or might not coincide with a historical spectator's perspective. As the audience is clearly discernible, the latter might very well be the case. This technical condition can work both ways. On the one hand, as a reminder of an original spatial arrangement it can distance the contemporary listener. On the other hand, the positioning might work towards the creation of an imaginary spatial perspective. However, there are also moments when the main actress, who apparently suffers from a cough, is closest to the microphone while other actors become temporarily inaudible. In these moments volume determines the focus of the listener, which brings the interaction of the sound recording with the contemporary listener to attention.

Sound conservation specialist George Brock-Nannestad disentangles the different layers of knowledge and ideologies influencing a sound recording and divides them into a 'recording packet', consisting of sound event, background knowledge and secondary information (2013, 30), all of which I have been discussing throughout this article. As preceding the ultimate recording package, he mentions several filters that are the technical conditions. Consequently, he holds:

Working source-critically with sound recordings first of all requires knowledge of the way in which recording equipment influences the result, the recording. At the very least there must be knowledge of the principles governing the result. And the most important factor is that an existing recording is the result of a selection process: if the recording was unsuccessful, it was discarded, and another one was made in its place. ... Secondly, the researcher has to be aware of the distortions that are created by the reproduction equipment and the reproduction conditions. (31)

I would hold that various of Brock-Nannestad's considerations might emerge as a result of the listening process when disentangling conceptual aspects from technical conditions as above. Consequently, theatre sound recordings might pose more complex listening experiences than other more isolated situations of research recordings, such as the performance of individual songs for ethnomusicological research, for example. Theatre confronts its listener with a complex of aesthetic autonomous decisions in their dramaturgical organization that might not at all points be separable from (sound) technical conditions of recordings. And whereas both exemplary recordings discussed here did not have the distortional noises that older recordings may have, technical filters were seen to create distancing or apparent aesthetic effects of their own. This is where the initially intuitive 'earsight' can potentially be systematized further, drawing on historiographical considerations shared categorically with related disciplines.

### 3. Conclusion

In this article I set out to listen specifically for the conception of sound and the aesthetic organization of the two performances, and acknowledged that there might be further auditory dramaturgical layers, prompted by the technical organization of the recording. The exemplary theatre performances were overall easily accessible in their aesthetic organization. In the case of *Telemachus Clay*, sound and narration formed the single foremost dramaturgical strategy to set and play out the scenes. The recording revealed – and

potentially confirmed what the historical reviews might have been stunned by – the performance's fast switches. The speed of creating and switching between scenes is something that might show this performance's affinity to radio formats but is also something to which the sound recording grants particularly apt and historically unique access.

For the case of *De Spaanse Hoer*, a technical condition of the sound recording became audible. Due to the positioning of the recording equipment in the original setting, the sound recording's format can be said to add an audible layer to that which the performance originally intended. The discrimination through the ear of these two different layers can be aided by the knowledge of source-critical categories for sound recording (Brock-Nannestad 2013). Both performances display overall a firm dramaturgical guideline through their use of text, which translates well into the listening experience – which in turn may or may not be why these recordings survived several archival selections.

My choice of the term 'earsight' – in reference to the reach of the ear when listening to historical theatre sound recordings – might, at first, seem controversial to those who claim that, for too long, scholarship has been 'inclined to treat hearing as a species of vision' (Ingold 2000, 248). Surely concepts in sound studies need not derive their authority from visual metaphors? I might, likewise, have upset theatre scholars. Why not pick historical accounts of experimental sound in theatre (Curtin 2014; Ovadija 2013)? Why follow the verbal signifiers, the textual predominance in performance by the choice of case studies? In both of the examples discussed here, however, the term earsight may be understood to provide an essential technique by which to consider how the performances employed language and sound to create images according to dramaturgical standards with which a theatre scholar is quite familiar. However, an insight offered through my use of the concept earsight is that the vibrancy of sound is available to the archival scholar through the study of audience reaction.

Listening to sound recordings of performances may perhaps be thought to resemble listening to a time-travelling *théâtrophone*, a late nineteenth-century audio transmission medium briefly used for opera and theatre performances. While one can acknowledge beforehand the spatial (and in this case temporal) gap, listening to sound archival records affords its own training (Hoffmann 2015), and to distinguish between aesthetic intentions and technical conditions was in this case inevitably helped by both secondary sources and the familiarity with a performance style.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from non-English sources are my own.
2. The French project 'Echo – Ecrire l'histoire de l'oral. L'émergence d'une oralité et d'une auralité modernes. Mouvements du phonique dans l'image scénique (1950–2000)' is to my knowledge the only current comprehensive research project (2013–2017) that engages with theatre sound archives and among other goals develops 'listening analyses of theatre audio archives' ([http://www.thalim.cnrs.fr/IMG/pdf/echo\\_resume\\_abstract.pdf](http://www.thalim.cnrs.fr/IMG/pdf/echo_resume_abstract.pdf)). The exploration of sound in its relationship with theatrical performance was the programme for the 11th international conference of the Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft in 2012. The publication of its proceedings, *Sound and Performance* (Ernst 2015), gathered reflections on theatrical collections in regards to (historical) sound (Probst 2015). The Dutch collection is introduced (with no particular mention of the sound collection) and compared selectively in the volume *Theatrical Heritage* in a chapter by Dutch museum specialist Riemer Knoop (2015).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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