

The World's Din: Listening to Records, Radio and Films in New Zealand 1880-1940

By Peter Hoar

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Reviewed by Roy Shuker

Peter Hoar provides a fascinating and informative account of the role of sound and listening in the development of sound recordings, radio, and films in New Zealand. While these have been covered in recent general histories of New Zealand, as well as more specific treatments of each media form, these previous accounts have largely focused on their associated technologies, the organisations involved in their production, distribution, and regulation, and the impact on changing leisure patterns. What is usually largely neglected or simply overlooked, is how they were *listened* to, the focus here. The historical discussion of this is tied to current digital technologies, as these “are extensions of the audio machines that have gone before” (8).

The period covered is viewed “as part of the disruptive experience of modernity” (8), situated within an international context: the world’s din of the title. Modernity is a central theme for Hoar: “a complex concept referring to a matrix of trends and events ... some commonly accepted characteristics include mass leisure and consumption, rationality, industrialisation, urbanisation, the nation state, democracy, mass media, faith in science, technology and progress, widespread education, the rise of global commercial entities, and a general sense of ceaseless and dynamic change” (203).

As indicated in the book’s title, here are three main sections, covering records, radio, and films. Part 1 follows studies of “gramophone culture” internationally, in considering the local impact of the Edison phonograph (and its successors) from its initial demonstration at Blenheim’s Lyceum Hall on 18 April 1879 and the exhibitions that toured the country during the early twentieth century. Sounds for exhibition and entertainment became sounds for sale, the subject of chapter 2, as records (cylinders and then 78s), phonographs and gramophones encroached on the dominance of sheet music and musical instruments, notably pianos. An interesting aspect of this was how classical musical styles, especially opera, were accorded greater cultural value (as indicated by their recordings being higher priced) than their more popular counterparts. Further chapters deal with the domestication of sounds, as the phonograph became part of the home environment and domesticity; the role of sounds in teaching at various levels, including at University and in groups such as the Workers’ Education Association; and “moving sounds”, with shifts in response to recordings and their dissemination became portable, durable, and repeatable.

Part 2 takes radio from its very early days with wireless telegraphy and ‘ham radio’; through its key role in the First World War; and into the 1920s and 1930s as the medium was shaped by Governmental broadcasting and the social contexts of listening to it. The largely unrecognised work of the New Zealand Wireless Troop is a fascinating one, comprehensively covered in chapter 7: Military Radio. In the post-war period, the issue of what was to be played, and the perceived role of the “right” music as cultural uplift, is nicely addressed. Hoar is also insightful in his discussion of the treatment of Māori, who “were on radio between the wars to bolster the idea of New Zealanders as one people rather than as a diverse assemblage of groups and cultures whose

interests and needs often diverged. This listening could be construed as a form of comfort for the Pakeha majority and a deafness to the fissures and divisions that ran through society” (150).

Part 3, on films, includes chapters on the establishment of cinema, and its shift from silent (albeit with a “soundtrack”) to the talkies, with the boom in cinema building and movie-going prior to a bust during the Depression. There were debates around the influence of United States films, which dominated the local market, with their associated crime themes and “slang”. Despite attempts to implement a quota system of British films, American glamour remained very attractive. The movie musical *Gold Diggers of Broadway* was a huge hit in 1929-1930 with New Zealand audiences: “They took pleasure in the film’s stylish costumes, sets and dances, but also engaged with the soundtrack in a variety of creative ways that were both commercial and personal” (191).

The study is nicely situated within the emerging field of Sound Studies. As Hoar observes, scholars across a variety of disciplines have turned their attention to the significant roles of audio in the historical development of culture and the media. “It is no longer possible to describe cinema or television as “visual media” and simply ignore the vital roles that sounds played in their construction and reception.” (156). An example of this is his consideration of how early “silent cinema” often had a mix of human voices, live and recorded sounds, accompanying screenings.

In his conclusion, Hoar argues that new digital technologies “are not necessarily changing the fundamental characteristics of recorded sound that were developed during the period covered by this book”. While we are watching a greater range and increased quantity of media images and sounds, “the qualitative characteristics of listening to technological mediated audio are not a great deal different” (201). What is new is the ease of access to and portability of sounds.

The book was originally a PhD thesis. Some transitions from dissertation to book are not always successful, with theoretical language and sheer detail sometimes rather overwhelming a revised text for a wider readership. This is not the case here. Hoar provides a well-written, accessible study that has much to offer those interested in New Zealand social history and media studies. There are extensive footnotes (207-243), along with a comprehensive bibliography (244-277). Together, these serve as excellent resources for an interested reader to follow up. In addition, there is a through index, enabling the reader to follow up reoccurring themes. Contemporary black and white illustrations, drawn primarily from newspapers during the period covered, add an interesting dimension to the discussion. This handsomely produced book deserves to find a wide readership.