

The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction. *By Jonathan Sterne.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. xvi + 450 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Paper, \$22.95. ISBN 0-822-33013-X.

Reviewed by David Hochfelder

Jonathan Sterne has written an ambitious book. Readers may learn little about the business and technological histories of sound reproduction, but Sterne has a larger agenda: to show that sound technologies are social artifacts. As the subtitle suggests, his goal is to shift historiographic emphasis away from the technology and business of sound reproduction toward a more textured history of its cultural origins and implications. He largely succeeds. Indeed, I found this to be a stimulating and provocative work. Some readers may not agree with all his arguments or find his cultural approach congenial, but they will come away from this book with an altered perspective about the technologies and practices of sound reproduction. Sterne does not demand total acceptance of his arguments or approach; rather, he offers “a deliberately speculative history,” and he sees his work “as a kind of philosophical laboratory” that allows him and the reader “to ask new questions about sound, technology, and culture” (p. 27).

As this excerpt suggests, Sterne covers a great deal of ground. The technologies he considers include the telegraph, stethoscope, telephone, radio, and phonograph. While historians of business enterprise, technology, and medicine have already discussed these devices, *The Audible Past* examines them from novel perspectives. For example, Sterne shows that the development of the telephone owed a great deal to physiological research on hearing, which in turn was enmeshed in a complex history of medical dissection. Doctors using stethoscopes, telegraphers copying by sound, and radio hobbyists using headphones all had to learn how to listen, to construct a set of skills that allowed them to interpret the sounds they heard. Early users of the phonograph thought that one of its primary purposes was to preserve the voices of dead individuals, and even of dying cultures like Native American tribes. Sound recording at the turn of the century was thus “a product of a culture that had learned to can and to embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life” (p. 292).

Sterne excels as a writer. He is particularly good at interpreting his numerous illustrations. Even his discussions of theory and historiography are clear and engaging. He has three major theoretical objectives. First, he insists that the true importance of the history of sound reproduction is that it is no less than “the history of the transformation of the human body as object of knowledge and practice” (p. 51). While this thesis owes a great deal to Michel Foucault and similar theorists, Sterne uses it to argue against the predilection of cultural theorists to privilege sight as the most important sense. “As there was an Enlightenment, so too was there an ‘Ensoniment.’” During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “sound itself became an object and domain of thought and practice” (p. 2). For example, doctors who used stethoscopes and telegraphers who copied by sound both developed a set of skills and practices for listening, and these skills became important an part of their professional identities. Finally, Sterne takes issue with philosophers, from Plato to Walter Ong and Juergen Habermas, who give orality and the speaking subject prime importance in theories of communication. Instead, by embedding sound technologies in a larger social context, Sterne argues that communication “is a collective endeavor, not reducible to a model of two people talking” (p. 343).

Historians who are interested only in the technology and business of sound reproduction will find little of direct utility here. However, this book will amply reward readers who want a broader perspective on the culture of sound. Sterne’s book will no doubt reach the wide readership it deserves.

David Hochfelder is assistant editor of the Thomas A. Edison Papers at Rutgers University. He teaches and conducts research in the areas of technology and communications, and he also studies the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Currently he is under contract with Johns Hopkins University Press to write a history of the American telegraph industry from the 1830s through World War II.