

Cauldrons of Noise: Stadium Cheers and Boos at the 2012 London Olympics

davidhendy

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Abstract

Welcome to the extra innings of our summer series on “Sound and Sport”! In today’s bonus post, David Hendy discusses his recent Noise broadcast for BBC Radio 4 on the sounds of Olympic crowds.

Keywords

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Welcome to the extra innings of our summer series on “Sound and Sport”!

In today’s bonus post, **David Hendy** discusses his recent *Noise* broadcast for BBC Radio 4 on the sounds of Olympic crowds. For an instant replay of our summer series click **Kariann Goldschmitt’s** “[The Sounds of Selling Out?: Tom Zé, Coca-Cola, and the Soundtrack to FIFA Brazil 2014](#)” (August), **Josh Ottum’s** “[Sounding Boards and Sonic Styles: The Music of the Skatepark](#)” (July), **Tara Betts’s** “[Pretty, Fast, and Loud: The Audible Ali](#)” (June), and **Melissa Helquist’s** “[Goalball: Sport, Silence, and Spectatorship](#)” (May). Following Hendy’s post on Olympics past, give **Andrea Medrado’s** podcast a spin for a listen into its future: “[The Sounds of Rio’s Favelas: Echoes of Social Inequality in an Olympic City](#).” And now, David Hendy. Of course, the crowd goes WILD. —**J. Stoever-Ackerman, Editor-in-Chief**

I didn’t get to go to the London 2012 Olympics or Paralympics. Alas, my number didn’t come up in the lottery for seats. So, like millions of others, my family and I watched – and *heard* – the sporting action on television or, occasionally, on our smart phones. A pretty good experience it was, too: the BBC for instance gave British viewers 24 live streams of high-definition coverage for the [Olympics](#); Channel 4’s approach to the Paralympics was smaller-scale but packed a similar punch in terms of imagery. A key part of the “enhanced experience,” however, was the acoustic quality of the broadcasts. When the Olympics had last been staged in London, during the post-war austerity of 1948, television footage sounded like this:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/1948-olympics.wav>

“1948 Olympics Clip” courtesy of Peregrine Andrews and Alan Hall, Falling Tree Productions Limited

Just about the only things viewers would’ve heard were the voices of the commentators and the distant, muted sounds of the crowd.

That evocative archive recording was used in a [recent radio documentary](#) by the British sound designer [Peregrine Andrews](#). The programme explored just how much had changed in location recording techniques by 2012. This time around, Peregrine pointed out, some 4,000 microphones were in position at the various venues: not just suspended in the air above or placed on the trackside, but bonded directly onto the beams in the gymnastic hall, say, or attached to the targets used in archery. Competitors everywhere were heard in extreme close-up – every shift of a hand or foot, every creak of wood, every grunt or groan made audible to the viewer at home.

This wasn’t just hyperbole. Newspapers quickly latched on to the phenomenon, [dispatching reporters](#) to measure decibel levels and offer their readers guides to the “best” venues for hearing

the sound of the crowd. They pointed out that an airplane taking off produces about “140 decibels of noise”– and that the cheers echoing around the soaring curves and low ceilings of the Olympic Velodrome reached very nearly the same level.



Panorama of the London Olympic Velodrome, Image courtesy of Flickr User Jack999



Olympic Velodrome Image courtesy of Flickr User adambowie

“The roar was thrilling, to the point of pain,” claimed one reporter from the [Toronto Globe and Mail](#). “If I had endured another minute, I am sure we’d all have gone deaf.” Zaha Hadid’s gloriously sweeping Aquatics Centre provided perhaps the most intense acoustics of all. Whenever the 17,500 fans inside cheered, the “guttural roar” was simply “ear-drum shattering,” declared the [London Evening Standard](#). The main Olympic stadium was open air, of course, making the sound less intense. But even here the *Globe and Mail* journalist wrote of a “tsunami of noise” building in waves; another of the stadium’s “sonic boom”; yet another of how Usain Bolt’s 100 metres final produced a roar from the crowd which, measured at [107 decibels](#), beat that of your average pneumatic drill.



Olympic Stadium 2012, Image by Flickr User tom_bennett

Perhaps it wasn't surprising that London 2012 was dubbed the loudest ever Olympics. For the main stadium's designer Rod Sheard had always conceived it with acoustics firmly in mind. He's quoted in a piece in [It's Nice That](#): "The athletes are so focused, it's very easy for them not to hear the crowd. . .we've got to make it really loud for them to get any benefit from it." And so the 80,000 people inside were packed as closely together as possible with the roof shaped to rebound their roar back into the heart of the space, generating maximum volume.

As my producer [Matt Thompson](#) and I discovered when making our recent BBC radio series [Noise: a Human History](#) (available on [iTunes](#)), this contemporary attempt to revel in the roar of the spectators throws up some striking – and very ancient – parallels. The most obvious is that of the Colosseum in Rome, which, some 2000 years ago, provided what [Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard](#) have described as "a brilliantly constructed and enclosed world, which packed emperor, elite and subjects together, like sardines in a tin."



David Hendy at Colosseum, Image by MattThompson/Rockethouse Productions

The acoustic qualities of ancient amphitheaters like this – their ability to amplify the slightest sounds – is still pretty unnerving if you get the chance to witness it for yourself, as Matt and I did when recording, at the Colosseum and at the ancient Greek theatre of Epidauros:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/06-epidaurus-clip.m4a>

In these cauldrons of concentrated sound, the roar of the spectators took on a collective force of its own – a volatile quality rich with cultural and political repercussions. During plays in Greek theatres, audiences were rarely hushed and reverential. They were talkative and unruly, sometimes showing their disapproval by drumming their heels against the benches, sometimes disrupting the action by shouting and jeering. The chorus below would address spectators directly, as if facing a jury. Audience participation was as much a part of a performance as were the actors in the orchestra or on the stage. And when it came to the Roman Games later held at the Colosseum or in even larger venues such as the nearby Circus Maximus, the barrage of sound could reach intimidating levels of ferocity.



David Hendy Recording at Epidauros, Image by Matt Thompson/Rockethouse Productions, taken on location

Roman arenas were not just sporting venues, of course. They were designed for political theatre. Vespasian had ordered the Colosseum to be built to help wipe away the memory of his predecessor Nero and his notorious private pleasure palace the Golden House. Now Roman citizens had a pleasure palace all of their own. The ruling elite had also created a place for the ostentatious display of imperial power and generosity, a bribe for the people's continuing loyalty. Which is why, if the crowds were sometimes a little slow in showing their appreciation, paid stooges dotted about the arena would start applauding – or booing – at all the right moments, while soldiers would strike down any member of the audience who lagged in their cheering. But, as in the Greek theatres, Rome's audiences were never entirely under the cosh; they could occasionally give voice to underlying discontentment. And when so many people were so tightly packed together, sheer proximity and the contagious quality of sound meant any turn in the mood would have been quick to make itself felt.

One startling example of this came in 55BC when Julius Caesar's powerful rival Pompey put on a show in the Circus Maximus that featured the slaughter of elephants – something the crowd lapped up until the very moment they heard the poor creatures' death throes. In [episode 9 of *Noise: a Human History*](#), I speculated on what it might've been like – and recalled the unsettling outcome:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/09-orwell-and-pliny-on-pompey.m4a>

In London in 2012, we had our very own Pompey, in the form of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, [George Osborne](#). He'd turned up to the Paralympics to award some medals. And as his name was announced the stadium resounded with loud booing for the first time all summer:



<https://youtu.be/qqM0Ube0oLs>

Why did 80,000 people all suddenly decide to boo as one? Because, one commentator quipped, there were only 80,000 people in the stadium.

Politicians as a class are inevitably unwelcome in a place of entertainment, their presence too obviously betraying an attempt to siphon off a little of the goodwill. Osborne's particular problem, though, was that he wasn't just any old politician. He was from the ruling Conservative party, which, true to its ungenerous instincts, had just cut welfare benefits for Britain's disabled people. In the circumstances, turning up to the Paralympics seemed an entirely predictable affront to most of those in the stadium – one that Osborne was thick-skinned and numb-skulled enough not to have predicted for himself.

All this might seem, well, *unsporting*. But booing is part of the civic dialogue. It brings politicians face-to-face with their electorate. It forces them to feel the scorn and anger of those they've let down. The moment passes, of course. Clips briefly went viral on YouTube, and were soon forgotten. Osborne himself is still in office, overseeing the ruination of the British economy through his programme of austerity. But for a delicious few seconds we were reminded of the inherently *public* nature of sound. We heard – we *felt* – the role of listening to one another, not as a passive thing but as a powerfully collective, inter-subjective, electrifying, communicative act.

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Featured Image: Crowd: London 2012 Olympic Stadium, Image by Flickr User Flickmor

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David Hendy is Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Sussex, England. He wrote and presented the recent 30-part BBC radio series *Noise: a Human History*, which remains available to download on iTunes. The accompanying book, *Noise: a Human History of Sound and Listening*, will be published in the US in October 2013 by Harper Collins. He's the author of *Radio in the Global Age* (2000), *Life on Air: a History of Radio Four* (2007), and *Public Service Broadcasting* (2013), and contributes regularly to radio programmes.



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