I was once asked why I had chosen to focus on avant-garde theatre sound. Why write a sense-specific cultural history? “What about the smell of the avant-garde?” I was asked non-facetiously, “Isn’t that equally valid?” I said it was and joked that this would be my next project, provided we were talking about the use and historicity of scent in performance and not the smell of avant-garde artists. As it happens, scholars have already written about the creative use of olfaction in performance, including theatrical works by symbolist artists, though this type of sensory experimentation is relatively rare in the modernist avant-garde.¹ I am unsure if one could write an extensive study on the subject. Sound, on the other hand, provides a surplus of examples—more than can be usefully analyzed in a single study, in fact. This is partly due to its conceptual breadth: sound incorporates related phenomena such as noise, voice, speech, and music, which are all elaborate domains. Silence is also potentially sonorous, as John Cage’s famous “silent” piece “4’33” (1952) reveals. The category of imaginary hearing should not be discounted either; it plays a part in drama even if it is not actually sounded. It is practically impossible, then, to avoid sound in performance if one is hearing enabled. Theatre is arguably a quintessentially noisy art form. The modernist theatrical avant-garde exploited this, even the noise-phobic symbolists, who harped upon silence and forced audiences to strain their ears to hear it.

Furthermore, sound did not simply accompany modernity; on the contrary, it helped determine it. Being “modern” in the fin de siècle meant hearing a variety of sounds, many involving industry and urbanization, and having novel auditory experiences facilitated by newly developed sonic technologies. Sound suffused modern life and shaped perceptions of it in ways that were not all immediately apparent. “Sonic modernity” is a recent critical coinage, not a buzzword of the age, but this does not mean that people did not consider how their lives were being affected by sonic developments; the history of noise-abatement campaigns proves

A. Curtin, Avant-Garde Theatre Sound
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Assessing more abstract issues, however, such as the impact of sound on selfhood and subjectivity, is not easily determined. It is common to ignore the sonic environment unless it is either especially pleasing or displeasing. We are also prone to disregard how our identities are shaped by what we hear and the manner in which we hear it unless we have deliberate cause to think about it (e.g., a hearing impairment). This is what makes modern art, and art in general, so valuable: it captures impressions that may be only partially understood or dimly intuited by the perceiving/creating subjects.

This is especially true of modernist avant-garde theatre, which can readily evoke an unknowing or unknowable quality (e.g., Kandinsky’s *The Yellow Sound*). Artists, especially avant-gardists, often create work they do not fully comprehend and that may not be fully comprehensible, though it may feel appropriate for that particular historical moment. Their art transmutes experience, but the “experience” of modernity, including sonic modernity, is, on the whole, too colossal and inchoate to be neatly circumscribed. This is why avant-garde theatre artists staged sonic modernity in a variety of fashions, both directly and indirectly, by design and happenstance. The historical significance of this aspect of their work is more evident in retrospect. Avant-garde theatre may, on the face of it, strive to mystify, shock, and/or aggravate audiences, but it also engages with contemporaneous social debates, philosophical ideas, and current modes-of-being. It takes propositions that may only be notionally understood and presents them as artistic provocations, as an ideational complex that poses problems of understanding for those in attendance. These problems are worth trying to solve even if there is no single solution. They provide insights into how we make sense of the world, even if our comprehension is necessarily incomplete.

In this book, I have sought to correct the notion that the modernist theatrical avant-garde used sound in the form of loud and obnoxious noises, weird disturbances, nonsense vocalizations, and the like, simply to rattle and provoke audiences. I have argued instead that these practices were consonant with, and borne out of, sonic modernity, and should be interpreted in kind. Modern dramatists’ exploration of imaginary sounds evokes acoustic interiority and subject-centered listening; dramatizations of sound-reproduction technologies drew attention to how these devices altered users’ sense- and self-perceptions; experiments with invented and nonsense languages re-staged modernity’s mooted Babel problem; and performances of noise co-opted urban modernity’s affective acoustics. In some cases, this led to “failed” experiments, but these “failures” are still instructive. In a conversation about the avant-garde, James Harding remarks: “Failure usually suggests something went wrong, but thinking...