The research of Perrault and Duverney demonstrated that hearing involved access to an imaginative, broader realm of existence. This model can be used to interrogate the Foucauldian “humanitarian” frame of state authority and to identify an alternative narrative of power that evolved during the eighteenth century in France, encompassing the auditory imagination. Such a narrative acknowledged the value placed on human “voices” within emerging contemporary political discourses of human rights.¹ Foucault himself acknowledged the “voice” of the liberal subject in his understanding of the relationship between authority and the citizen in the modern state.² The way in which the everyday person was able to gain a sense of the right to be “heard” and the means to develop these expectations, however, is much more complex.³ There are, however, specific examples of linguistic realms where the public had a clear expectation of being “heard” by those in authority before open debates surrounding democracy and rights. These sites of liberal expression were critical spaces of the auditory imagination where hearing cultivated a strong sense of inclusivity, incorporating an extended form of processing of “voices” on the part of the authorial hearer. By tracing the history of one such site from the eighteenth century through to the eve of the revolution, it can be demonstrated that audition, as practised in this transformative sense remained valued and conserved throughout the eighteenth century in France and was an important catalyst for political change.

By the 1700s, the Châtelet had built up a reputation as the most important institution, where the king, represented by the judiciary, might hear a particular complaint made by one French subject against another, regardless of their place of residence. This was recognized throughout the kingdom from the fifteenth century onwards.⁴ Officers

I. Sykes, Society, Culture and the Auditory Imagination in Modern France
© Ingrid Sykes 2015
of the Châtelet, however high-ranked, were ordered never to abuse the Droit Commun ("Common Rights") of the people to make a formal request for a hearing at the site. The Châtelet's judicial influence covered the area of the Provost of Paris and the Ile-de-France yet, at least until the revolution, it continued to be revered as one of the most important sites of inclusivity throughout the whole of France. Within the Châtelet, the Juge-Auditeur had "heard" the complaints of the lowliest subjects in the kingdom since the institution's inception. It was in this lower courtroom that judicial hearings most frequently took place. The position of the Juge-Auditeur was, in many ways, distinct from others within the judiciary, fulfilling a very particular role throughout the period of the Ancien Régime. The Chambre de l'auditeur, the lower judicial (small claims) court at the Châtelet, has generally been considered a secondary feature of Enlightenment history. Higher courtrooms dealing with serious crimes (Chambre du Criminel) or high-value commercial and family financial claims (Présidial, Parc Civil, Chambre du Conseil) have been more thoroughly researched. At the lower courtroom of the Juge-Auditeur, however, "ordinary" working people ("it is, for example, the master, the servant, the labourer or the poor tenant and owner of the house, the stranger and the inn-keeper") came to resolve their grievances, to discuss and to seek relief from their everyday problems. The financial sums involved were small, and were described in formal judicial terms as being "small and of modest interest". The Juge-Auditeur was listed as one of small group of lawyers titled gens du roi, that is, those officials at the Châtelet acting with direct interests in the crown and in public ministry. He therefore maintained a different type of status to the magistrates and prosecutors of the upper courts, simply because he had a more direct stake in the general public interest. His position involved a highly specialized practice of listening, collating, judgment and accumulating experience in a different range of issues. Luchaire explains: "The auditeurs had therefore three distinct functions: they were judges, investigators and administrators." Because of the number and nature of the complaints processed in his courtroom, the Juge-Auditeur was required to act efficiently, spontaneously and decisively. He demonstrated a strong moral sense in judgment, but also a particular ability to process the effects of the nature of the complaints and the effect on those involved. Since the majority of such complaints involved urban disputes, the Juge-Auditeur needed to be sensitive to the atmosphere of the street whilst also maintaining regulatory control.

During the long period leading up to the French Revolution, the administrative responsibilities of the Juge-Auditeur increased. This was