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Listening to Paris. Chopin between soirées intimes and the modern soundscape

'Listening to Paris. Chopin between *soirées intimes* and the modern soundscape' reflects on aspects of the history of audio sensitivity. Changes in Paris during the first decades of the nineteenth century gave rise to a modern soundscape that caused increasing problems for the inhabitants of the 'capital of the nineteenth century'. It was not just the quantity and kind of sounds that altered, but also the way in which they were received and people's audio sensitivity (the *flâneur*, for example), as well as the ways in which people sought to avoid those wearisome sounds. As a result of the changes, two strategies were adopted towards the modern soundscape during the first half of the nineteenth century: on one hand, spectacular concerts in ever-larger concert halls performed by increasingly large ensembles (e.g. Berlioz); on the other, *soirées intimes* in the salons, with a small group of listeners gathered around an instrument (e.g. Chopin). Both approaches were linked to a specific 'audio identity', created by a range of phenomena from behavioural patterns to aesthetic choices. Chopin's approach shared a common denominator with aesthetic values perceived as aristocratic. The salon – a space for elite performances by the composer-pianist and of genuine contact between the artist and the listener – became the opposite of the passive modern spectacle. Above all, it was a 'microscope for the ears', demanding disciplined behaviour. It allowed listeners to devote their imaginations to ideal worlds and Chopin to reveal all the nuances of sound accessible to only the most sensitive ears. An analysis of descriptions of Chopin's pianism within the context of an aesthetics of sound requiring a higher threshold of sensitivity is followed by a look at interpretations of the composer's music from the perspective of the construction of national identity in contrast to the vision of the pianist of the *soirées intimes* and an analysis of improvisation, which may be compared to a kind of 'stream of consciousness' – a key phenomenon during the nineteenth century. The structure and modes of the reception of heterogeneous improvisations attest perhaps the most crucial watershed in audio sensitivity, to which the soundscape of modernity became an increasingly aggressive counterpoint.