



Listen to the art



The Ear of the Beholder
Huon Mallalieu
 (Thomas Del Mar, £25)

IN 2010, the Bate Collection of Historical Musical Instruments in Oxford commissioned craftsmen to make working replicas of the instruments being played by devils in the depiction of Hell in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted in 1490–1500. When played, they sounded horrible. The collection's scholars were taken aback, but, as Huon Mallalieu observes in this ear-opening account of the relationship between painting and sound, they should not have been surprised. Medieval viewers would have had no difficulty in hearing in their imagination the instruments portrayed by Bosch and they understood that the music in Hell would be another form of torture.

‘This is a book that deserves to change the way we experience paintings’

The ideas in this very well-illustrated book were first advanced by the author in an article in COUNTRY LIFE in 2012, in which he drew attention to a remarkable anonymous painting in the Royal Collection. Dating from the mid 16th century and probably Flemish, it shows a boy on the far side of a casement window. As Mr Mallalieu points out, the artist has made no effort to paint the glass, but it is made vividly evident to us by the boy raising his finger to tap on the window—we cannot see the glass, but we can hear it. In that painting, the evocation of sound is the whole point, but Mr Mallalieu extends his insight to listen carefully to paintings where it is much less obvious that we should see with our ears. Although he focuses on Dutch and Flemish art between the 15th and 17th centuries, he has interesting things to say along the way about Italian, Spanish and British art.

The range of sounds is immense—from the deafening waves in Maggi Hambling's *Portrait of the Sea* (2006), where Mr Mallalieu was able to ask the artist whether



Alive with sights and sounds: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow (Winter)*

she intended to evoke sound ('Of course,' she replied)—to the quiet noises that fill landscape paintings. I particularly liked the idea that in his great view of the countryside around his house Het Steen, painted in about 1636, Rubens evokes not only the creaking of a cart and the horses splashing through water, but also 'the plop of the pat dropped by the cow with the raised tail'.

A further subtlety of the relationship between sound and painting is the way an artist can suggest auditory anticipation or memory. The former can be a matter of humour, as in Jan Cossiers's picture of boys lighting a stick of gunpowder, or, in the case of the latter, a matter of profound meaning. Mr Mallalieu is the first to point out that the group of houses illuminated by a break in the clouds in Vermeer's great *View of Delft* (1660–61) is on the site of the explosion of the gunpowder factory that about five years before had killed more than 100 people. A local person seeing the painting might have recalled the loudest manmade noise heard in Europe before the First World War, thus giving the painting's silent tranquillity a commemorative and even consolatory meaning.

Much of the book is devoted to representations of music-making, a subject that has intrigued many critics—Walter Pater's famous statement that 'All art aspires towards the condition of music' was inspired by musicians in paintings by Giorgione and Titian. Pater would have been transfixed by the discovery during the recent restoration of the 15th-century Ghent Altarpiece that the shapes of the mouths of the angelic choir painted by Jan van Eyck confirmed the belief recorded by the historian Karel van Mander in 1604 that 'these angels are so skilfully painted that one can see the different key in which the voice of each is pitched'.

This is a book that deserves to change the way we experience paintings, although the author is aware that not everybody is enchanted by the sounds they evoke. He concludes with the first owner of one of the most famous paintings of the 19th century, Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* (1857–59), explaining why he had sold this image of peasants in the fields bowing their heads in response to a church bell tolling for evening prayer: 'In the end, the constant ringing just became tiresome.' Sometimes, one wants paintings to keep quiet.

Michael Hall