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Sound, Music, War and Violence: Listening from the Archive

Son, musique, guerre et violence : à l'écoute des archives

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Sound, Music, War and Violence: Listening from the Archive

Son, musique, guerre et violence : à l'écoute des archives

Annegret Fauser

- 1 Movies, video games, and television programs can take their audiences sonically and visually into the midst of battle and violence, offering vicarious experience through audiovisual mediation. Whether in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) or the latest *Terminator* installment (*Dark Fate*, 2019), in the darkness of the movie theater—or in the comfort of home—soundscapes of violence have grown to be a meticulously curated experience.¹ Similarly, attempts to invoke the experience of battle can be found also in costumed re-enactments—for instance of the American Civil War or of the 1811 Louisiana slave rebellion—where just the right powder and weapons produce the sonic signature of a musket fired in battle, even if the balls are blanks.² These simulacra of sonic violence contrast with the silence of past trauma—the fragmented character of its material remnants, including its sonic traces, left scattered in archives. To confront the aurality of historical violence poses challenges for musicology not only because of the absence of recorded sound but also given the way audiovisual media have contributed to overwriting archival traces with their invented soundscapes.³ Listening from and through the archives, however, opens up ways to engage with the sound, music, and even silence of war and violence.
- 2 This space of historic aurality, however, is one curated through scholarly intercession that poses theoretical, ethical, and methodological challenges. A historiography of past violence depends simultaneously on scholars' skills and their empathy, a willingness to face a past reality of death and trauma painstakingly pieced together from archives either absent—destroyed by perpetrators as a strategy of silencing their victims—or generated in retrospect, even if materials are already accumulated during a war, for instance by bureaucrats on either side of the conflict.⁴ But if the material traces in archives of violence provide significant challenges, the sonic side of war and its experience defy simple transposition and mediation. Rather, the silence of the archives opens a space for engagement that acknowledges from the outset the historical and

experiential difference between the positionality of the scholar as mediator and the sonic experiences of violence by the dead bodies of those with whom scholars might consort in their research.⁵

- 3 Where, then, does the sonic reside in records of violence, and how may archives become sites of listening? Moreover, what media can form part of such a resource, especially prior to, or absent of, sound recordings? And finally, how do noise and music intersect in this context? These questions form the core of sound-centered approaches to violence in the past, unique in their scope compared to traditional historiographies of war and conflict.⁶ To what extent sound and violence are often inextricably intertwined both in experience and in memory has been the topic of research by scholars in music history, ethnomusicology, and music therapy. In what follows I will focus on traces of the sonic in war-related archives and discuss music as activity and experience, as well as sound and silence in the framework of war theaters—the very word as it is deployed in the English language already an emblem of the located specificity of battles and their soundscapes for all that their impact usually extended far beyond such boundaries.
- 4 Much archival material that might enable listening to war—even through a mediated imaginary—consists of paper (whether or not now in digital form), and some of it is in the form of compositions and evidence of their performance.⁷ All these traces share their ontological condition as mediated and mediating discourse networks (*Aufschreibesysteme*) interceding between past and present.⁸ The performance-studies scholar Diana Taylor set up a dialectic relationship between the archive as mediating discourse network and embodied experience by pointing out that “insofar as it constitutes materials that seem to endure, the archive exceeds the live,” while—at the same time—“embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it.”⁹ This dialectic tension might be resolved, in Ana María Ochoa Gautier’s words, through “an acoustically tuned exploration of the written archive,” an approach that reveals the entangled history of aural and archival practices.¹⁰ Translating this theoretical position into the musicological practice of listening from the archive would lead to privileging the experiential aspect of the sonic past as it is reflected in the material remnants gathered in such collections. It demands of the scholar not only to take seriously the individual and their experience, but also to understand the constructedness of the archive and its powers of mediation. By shifting the focus on the traces of audibility in the archivally curated material debris of war, these remnants are functioning as “legible representations of aural experience” not only in writing but also in musical notation and recording.¹¹
- 5 As archives are constructed entities, they privilege certain experiences over others. Whose voice and which musics are recorded in the archives reflects the value systems not only of past societies but also of current ones given the way access to collections is curated, for instance through finding aids. As I worked on the music of World War I and World War II, two aspects were particularly noticeable. First, despite the immense volume of archival materials, such institutions as the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France were privileging the experiences of their own respective nations. And second, what was considered worthwhile to collect in these institutions were generally materials relating to the war-time experiences of white men, often neglecting those of women and of people of color. Unless recognized as such, this archival bias might find

an insidious reproduction in scholarly work. As I pointed out in the introduction to *Sounds of War*, it takes deliberate effort to trace a multitude of voices in these archives.¹²

- 6 Among the most fundamental responsibilities of scholarship on music and war is to respect and take seriously the experiential gap between a scholar's own musical practice and that of the voices inscribed within the archives. Rather than offering too quickly an assessment from the perspective of contemporary scholarship, it matters to listen to what someone reported on their experience of war. If a young man deployed during World War II in the Pacific wrote about the almost painful beauty of listening to a symphonic broadcast on the deck of his navy ship, it meant something different from hearing such music today in the safety of the concert hall or the home: "Above to hear Toscanini with the NBC Symph. It's very, very seldom that I get the chance to hear music + it sounded wonderful. Very satisfying + restful but at the same time causing pangs of frustration."¹³ It would be so easy and glib to speak of Eurocentrism and to address canonicity, whiteness, and hegemony; instead, listening from the archives means to value the writer's experience in its own right and to pay attention to the echoes of his embodied listening experience within the words written to his father—the emotions alluded to, his joy at that restful moment provided by the broadcast, and the unspecified experience of frustration. This short glimpse into hearing symphonic music in a war theater—the serendipity and rarity of the experience—speaks to how music might displace, at least for the time that it lasts, the everyday encounters of warfare and combat into a "restful" albeit exceptional sonic experience.
- 7 That music can offer a shift, through organized sound, into a calmer mental and emotional space has long been part of musical discourse networks.¹⁴ In the context of war and violence, this aspect of musicking plays a crucial role, whether in the experience of individual soldiers or that of groups subjected to precarious conditions of combat or other forms of violence. Yet this cognitive shift through music has also been instrumentalized in retrospective forms of engagement with violence, through commemoration and re-enactments. Even "battle" pieces composed close to the conflict itself—Claude Janequin's "La Guerre" ("La Bataille de Marignan"), Ludwig van Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory*, or Marc Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*—transpose the actual experience of sound and violence into a memory regime that can overwrite past or present experience through sonic reconfiguration.¹⁵ Appropriating previous musical works into acts of commemoration also diverts their purpose, whether in the case of "wartime pieces"—as with Edward Elgar's *The Spirit of England* (1917), used in the service of remembrance on Armistice Day through an annual broadcast on BBC radio—or those with no such prior connotation (Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*), relying on pathos to overlay any sonic traces that might remain from actual acts of violence.¹⁶ Yet Elgar's work fulfills an important role in configuring wartime trauma as heroic suffering, thus smothering through its very musical language any contradictory experiences by contributing to the fashioning of a normative and hegemonic narrative of national unity and Britishness. In this respect, *The Spirit of England* itself becomes part of the sonic archives—a strand of musical engagement with violence that has its place in listening from the archive—while also displacing the more terrifying, or mundane, sounds of war itself.
- 8 Still thornier questions are raised when music itself becomes complicit within acts of violence or the representation thereof. Music used directly for the purposes of propaganda on either side of any conflict might seem straightforward enough, but

appropriating it to instill fear in the enemy has a long history going back to Classical and Biblical times, treating organized sound itself as a weapon. The extension of that use of music into an instrument of torture, as documented by Suzanne Cusick and others, also poses profound ethical questions encompassing to the role of the scholars themselves (psychologists, sociologists, and even musicologists) in actively or passively supporting such practices for a purported greater good.¹⁷ It might also be worth asking how to listen to, and reflect on, the cultural work of musical soundtracks commonly added to representations of war and violence, whether in films—as with Beethoven and Gioachino Rossini in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Richard Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), or Elgar’s “Nimrod” in *Dunkirk* (2017)—or in video games.

- 9 These examples can serve only as signposts towards the presence of music, sound, and silence in the archives. There are other documents, for instance those that speak to shell shock, trauma, and the beginnings of music as therapy, developed by women—often nurses—who realized that their musicking might reach soldiers profoundly affected by the relentless noise of battle. There are official documents by governments regulating soldiers’ musical practice. There are letters about, and photographs of, music-making in war theaters. There are musicians who write music that hold the noise of battle at bay, and poets who use musical metaphors to describe battle noise they suffered as concerts from hell. The archives are rich with documents that inscribe the sonic experience in war, but they pose significant challenges and dilemmas to musicological interpretation, none more than that of listening across the experiential divide and privileging the voices of the dead over the agendas of the living.

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NOTES

1. In the DVD’s bonus material, members of the production team describe in striking detail how they worked on turning the sonic representation of battle into an “authentic” experience in the movie theater in order to “transport” audiences in the manner of time travel in the middle of the battle field. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), directed by Steven Spielberg, DVD released by Dreamworks Video, 2004.
2. The reenactment of the 1811 Louisiana slave rebellion on 10 November 2019, included chants and songs, echoing and recreating a “sonic vernacular” as part of the event. See LAUGHLAND Oliver, “‘It Makes it Real’: Hundreds March to Re-enact 1811 Louisiana Slave Rebellion”, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/11/louisiana-slave-rebellion-reenactment-artist-dread-scott>. The term “sonic vernacular” is borrowed from TAUSIG Benjamin, “Sound and Movement: Vernaculars of Sonic Dissent”, *Social Text*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2018, pp. 25-45. He defines (p. 26) “sonic vernaculars” as being “composed of locally trenchant sonic and aural practices and the symbolic meanings that they transduce and mediate.”
3. I addressed some of this cleavage in FAUSER Annegret, “Cultural Musicology: New Perspectives on World War II”, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011, pp. 282-286. See also on-line edition on <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Fauser-2-2011>.

4. Chérie Rivers Ndaliko addresses the absence and reconstitution of archives in “The Accidental Archivist: Memory, Resonance, and Decay in Kivu”, FAUSER Annegret and FIGUEROA Michael A. (eds.), Ann Arbor, *Performing Commemoration: Musical Reenactment and the Politics of Trauma*, University of Michigan Press, 2020 (in press).
5. I am drawing here on scholarship discussing phenomenological gap inherent in danced reenactment. See, for example, FOSTER Susan Leigh, “Manifesto for Dead and Moving Bodies”, formulated in her introduction to FOSTER Susan Leigh (ed.), *Choreographing History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 3-21, especially p. 6.
6. Although historians have begun to claim an acoustic turn of their discipline, the lack of interdisciplinary engagement with such fields as musicology make for limited and often naïve evocations of the sonic. See, for example, MEYER Petra (ed.), *Acoustic Turn*, Munich, Fink, 2008.
7. On the concept of “paper” and the function of documents, see GITELMAN Lisa, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Durham (N.C.), Duke University Press, 2014.
8. Friedrich Kittler’s notion of “Aufschreibesystem” still offers a valuable hermeneutic concept to address the material conditions of mediation. Unfortunately the English term “discourse network” misses some of its specificity. See KITTLER Friedrich A, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900*, Munich, Fink, 1985 (English translation: *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990).
9. TAYLOR Diana, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham (N.C.), Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 19-20.
10. OCHOA GAUTIER Ana María, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*, Durham (N.C.), Duke University Press, 2014, p. 3.
11. Lisa Gitelman’s 1999 formulation is cited in OCHOA GAUTIER, *Aurality*, p. 7. Ochoa Gautier continues: “This involved not only musical notation but also words about sound and aural perception, and recognizing the different historical ways in which technologies of the legible made and still make sound circulation possible. Since the period I address is before the invention of sound reproduction machines, I necessarily work with the inscription of sounds into writing.”
12. FAUSER Annegret, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 12-14.
13. William Hammerstein, letter to Oscar Hammerstein II, December 16, 1944, cited in FAUSER, *Sounds of War*, p. 119.
14. See, for example, the construction of music as a sonic space of calm in the relentless soundscape of early modern cities with their relentless bells and noisy streets discussed in CARTER Tim, “Listening to Music in Early Modern Italy: Some Problems for the Urban Musicologist”, KNIGHTON Tess and MAZUELA-ANGUITA Ascensión (eds.), *Hearing the City in Early Modern Europe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2018, pp. 25-49.
15. Andrea F. Bohlman introduced the concept of “overwriting” into sonic memory regimes in BOHLMAN Andrea F, “Overwriting Sound: Polish Commemoration in Concert”, FAUSER Annegret and FIGUEROA Michael A. (eds.), *Performing Commemoration: Musical Reenactment and the Politics of Trauma*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2020 (in press).
16. On the emergence of *The Spirit of England* as the emblematic piece for national commemoration by the BBC, see COWGILL Rachel, “Canonizing Remembrance: Music for Armistice Day at the BBC, 1922–7”, *First World War Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 75-107.
17. See, for example, CUSICK Suzanne G., “‘You Are in a Place That is Out of the World’: Music in the Detention Camps of the ‘Global War on Terror’”, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-26.

ABSTRACTS

When the sonic remnants of violence and war survive in archives as being inscribed in such media as paper, it can be a challenge to engage with their aurality, all the more because subsequent audiovisual representations might overlay such embodied past experiences with different musical signifiers. Drawing on examples from the two world wars of the twentieth century, this contribution discusses which positionalities an author might embrace when listening to war and violence through the presence of music, sound, and silence in the archives.

Lorsque les vestiges sonores de la violence et de la guerre survivent en étant archivés sur un support comme le papier, il peut être difficile d'accéder à leur dimension aurale. D'autant plus que des représentations audiovisuelles ultérieures peuvent venir recouvrir ces expériences autrefois incarnées en y superposant des signifiants musicaux différents. En s'appuyant sur des exemples issus des deux guerres mondiales du XX^e siècle, cet article examine les perspectives que peut adopter un auteur pour se mettre à l'écoute de la guerre et de la violence en prêtant attention à la présence, au sein des archives, de la musique, du son et du silence.

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Keywords: archives, aurality, listening, music, war, violence, musical historiography

Mots-clés: archives, auralté, écoute, musique, guerre, violence, historiographie musicale

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