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Andrea F. Bohlman, *Musical Solidarities: Political Action and Music in Late Twentieth-Century Poland*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2020

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Andrea F. Bohlman, *Musical Solidarities: Political Action and Music in Late Twentieth-Century Poland*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 344 p.

- ¹ In recent years, simplistic accounts of song as sonic protest have increasingly been subject to critical reappraisal. As repertoires and methodologies diversify, scholarship on the sounds of political dissent has begun to embrace contestation, ambiguity and extra-academic approaches.¹ With *Musical Solidarities: Political Action and Music in Late Twentieth-Century Poland*, Andrea Bohlman adds to the growing diversification of studies in sonic struggle. Examining the sounds of the opposition to state socialism in 1980s Poland, the book resists a simple teleological account of the role and power of grassroots movements to affect political change. Bohlman proceeds from a commitment to “hear, heed, and echo [...] demands to re-examine, deconstruct, and complicate Polish history by letting its materials resound” (p. 3). Her study, which focuses on the activities surrounding the Solidarity workers’ movement, adds an acoustic dimension to a political narrative that has until now predominantly been constructed around metaphors of silence.² *Musical Solidarities* shows that life under oppressive regimes, though frequently characterised as mute, may in fact be richly sonic, yielding its own particular repertoire of sounds conditioned by, but also occasionally independent of, socio-political circumstances.
- ² The monograph’s subtitle emphasises the project’s focus on action. In Bohlman’s treatment, this preoccupation extends beyond the obvious realm of political protest, to

include forms of being and participation shaped by broader cultural and social ecologies. The author develops a multivalent examination of the relationship between sound and political action, touching on themes including sound as action; sound as accompaniment to action; sound as product of action; and sound and action as (co-)incidental concurrence. Bohlman herself relates her use of the term “political action” to social movement theory, “from Marxian class action to Durkheim’s fundamentally social collective action”. But, she continues, her use of the term “also avoids discourses of intentionality that would fix certain individuals as more politically minded than others [...] or direct attention to the political efficacy of musical performances, compositions, or other events” (p. 6) In other words, *Musical Solidarities* does not measure the extent to which music facilitated Solidarity’s struggle against state socialism in the People’s Republic of Poland (1944-1989). Rather, it seeks to develop a portrait of the Solidarity movement through its sounds. Asking what the foundational moment of Solidarity sounded like and what this signified politically, Bohlman creates what she calls “a music history of a social movement” (p. 6).

- 3 To reconstruct the various repertoires and soundscapes of Solidarity, Bohlman draws on sources ranging from official archives to personal testimonies, material residues (documents, recordings, ephemera), and ethnographic observation. This heterogeneous approach to historical examination resists a more traditional documentary impulse by considering broader practices of memory making and truth formation. The past, Bohlman suggests, consists not only of what is archivally verifiable, but also of that which is (mis)remembered, imagined, and re-enacted in the present. As a scholarly ethos, this approach affords the text a great deal of empathy, not only towards its subjects, but also towards the fragility of the historiographical project.
- 4 Attending closely to sound – a vessel of knowledge as delicate as the quest to articulate and rearticulate the past – the author advances a practice of “listening as a historical methodology” (p. 132). She incorporates a wide range of repertoires, including Western art music, religious music, popular music, tape (and other recording) culture, and various forms of folk-ish music. Bohlman’s disregard for “borders inscribed between musical genres” (p. 32) mirrors that of her historical subjects, who, as a commanding account in Chapter 1 of the creators and consumers of the *Sound Gazette* no. 16 (a “sound newspaper” created and distributed as part of Poland’s non-official media network, the *drugi obieg*) demonstrates, navigated seamlessly between diverse sound cultures.
- 5 The *Sound Gazette* is one of several anchors around which the gently undulating text revolves. Throughout *Musical Solidarities*, Bohlman returns to the same scenes at regular intervals, each time revisiting them through a different sound or artefact. The cyclical nature of the text lends coherence even where the prose is not always tightly structured. It also allows the author to develop a distinct genre of auto ethnography shaped by thick sonic descriptions of key events, such as a commemorative service for Father Jerzy Popiełuszko (Chapter 4), or, in Chapter 5, the 1980 commemoration and unveiling of the Monument to the Fallen Workers of 1970 at the entrance to the Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk. Bohlman describes her hearing of these events and others in meticulous detail. She situates the sounds she perceives – either through personal attendance or by means of historical reconstruction based on surviving records – within complex networks of geography and temporality. Troubling the boundary

between memory, imagination, and historical actuality, the author invites the reader to listen creatively into moments that may or may not have sounded exactly as described.

- 6 *Musical Solidarities* offers the reader occasional opportunities to listen alongside the author. The publication is linked to a password-protected website where sound and video clips of some of the sounds under discussion in the book are hosted. This is a helpful feature, and one that gestures positively to the huge potential afforded by digital integration in music scholarship. Unfortunately, a lack of description and/or reference in relation to these clips hampers the user experience. Relevant “listening moments” are indicated by a graphic in the text. However, these signposts are not numbered, making it difficult for the reader to find the right sound example for the relevant point in the book. Moreover, none of the clips is fully named or referenced, often leading to some confusion about the identity of the sounds and their creators. These problems are easily remedied, however, and should not be allowed to detract from the significant enjoyment to be obtained from a multi-sensory reading experience.
- 7 Bohlman adds critical weight to her discussions of sound objects by invoking a wide range of theoretical frameworks, including Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, Walter Ong’s secondary orality, and Judith Butler’s excitable speech. Nonetheless, the book maintains a light theoretical touch. While it gestures to concepts and theories, it rarely interrogates or expands on them. That being said, this is not a book for the theoretically inexperienced: by leaving it to the reader to establish how, exactly, complex critical frameworks pertain to or shed light on the material under discussion, Bohlman demands equal investment in the text from her audience. In Bohlman’s own description, “[the book] approach[es] key concepts in social movement studies” (p. 18). This is an accurate characterisation: *Musical Solidarities* approaches theory, but requires the reader to take the last steps to get there.
- 8 In this light, some theoretical and structural conceits could use more elaborate critical engagement. I think here especially of the use of the concepts of “voice” and “vocality” as organising themes for Chapter 4. While Bohlman gestures cursorily to the vast extant theoretical discourse on this topic, a more thorough engagement with this work could raise interesting questions pertaining to the particular voice under consideration here. Particularly, the issue of vocal uniqueness – and the extent to which a voice may be equated to the identity of a person – could add interesting and productive complications to her consideration of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko’s voice. In Bohlman’s reading, Popiełuszko’s voice is regarded as an unambiguous stand-in for his person (and his memory). But are voice and subject truly identical? And to what extent does his training, which in Bohlman’s own acknowledgement shaped his voice, condition the politics imparted by and read into its sounds? The same may be asked of the various other voices on whose training Bohlman remarks – including “the distinctive cabaret-trained voice” of actress Krystyna Janda (p. 218), or the “self-taught and raw” technique of cabaret singer Tamara Kalinowska (p. 27). One wonders how occupation, education, and perhaps even class shape the types of (mythical) identities constructed and commemorated around these voices.
- 9 Given that this is a book about a social movement, rather than specific persons, the amount of detail in which personal narratives may be considered is, of course, limited. Indeed, the balancing act between individual and collective remains a challenge for social movement scholars. In James M. Jasper’s view, this is a drawback of the

theoretical framework, since “it becomes a theory of activity (of groups), not of action (by individuals)”.³ Aligning herself with Marxian and Durkheimian approaches to social movement theory, Bohlman comes up against these very same challenges. Even as the author attends to what Jasper calls “the rich emotions of strategic action”, individuals remain subject to the collective.⁴ Particular figures emerge as sites of struggle (Popiełuszko, Lech Wałęsa, Krzysztof Penderecki) or memory (her numerous interviewees), but they are always nonetheless subsumed into the larger narrative of Solidarity. They appear somehow as cardboard subjects, existing only in relation to the movement. The author herself implicitly acknowledges this limitation when she recognises that “even if multiplicities are inherent in social movements, they depend on the illusion of unity in order to act collectively” (p. 143) It is particularly on this “illusion of unity” that Bohlman focuses, choosing to listen for the ways in which sound facilitated collectivity, rather than attending to individual aims or actions that may have been at odds with the group.

- 10 Though it maintains a focus on the collective, *Musical Solidarities* does succeed in balancing grand histories of musical politicisation with intimate narratives where sound and music add meaning to quotidian experience. Referring to dissidence as practice of/and survival, rather than merely political gesture or theory, Bohlman describes her subjects’ musical action as “the crafting of an everyday life infused with sonic thinking and being” (p. 69). A moving example of this attention to apparently unremarkable musicality is presented towards the end of Chapter 2, in a section that chronicles communal activities, including sound and religious observances, among political detainees. Here, Bohlman shows how music gains meaning not only as an oppositional force, but also as a means to connect subjects to each other and to inscribe them in place and history. In so doing, the text attends carefully to culture and the meanings it creates within and beyond social movements and actions.
- 11 In music historiography, retrospective constructions of repertoires of resistance often risk replacing the more heterogeneous and uncertain soundscapes of objection with an image of a powerful collective united in song.⁵ This idealisation of protest songs threatens to erase the more contested aspects of political history. Bohlman’s attendance to several – occasionally contradictory or extraneous – repertoires presents an important challenge to such mythologising impulses, and offers one example of a more nuanced form of historical-political listening.

NOTES

1. Examples include DALAMBA Lindelwa, “Disempowering Music: The *Amandla!* Documentary and Other Conservative Music Projects”, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3-4, 2012, p. 295-315 and MOGOS Petrică and BERKERS Pauwke, “Navigating the Margins between Consent and Dissent: Mechanisms of Creative Control and Rock Music in Late Socialist Romania”, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2018, p. 56-77.

2. Bohlman does acknowledge recent efforts to inscribe greater sonic awareness into Cold War histories, as evinced by the efforts of the AMS Cold War Study Group, and publications by JAKELSKI Lisa, "Pushing Boundaries: Mobility at the Warsaw Autumn International Festival of Contemporary Music", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, p. 189-211; VEST Lisa, "Educating Audiences, Educating Composers: The Polish Composers' Union and *Upowszechnienie*", *Musicology Today*, vol. 7, 2010, p. 226-242; and PATTON Raymond, "The Communist Culture Industry: The Music Business in 1980s Poland", *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, p. 427-449.
 3. JASPER James M., "Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 4, no. 11, 2010, p. 965-976, at 972.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 968.
 5. A salient example is HIRSH Lee, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony* [film], Santa Monica (CA), Artisan Home Entertainment, 2003.
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