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Inter- and Intrareligious Conflicts through/about Sound

Introductory Essay

Ruth HaCohen¹

Sound and music² have long been viewed and propagated as media of religious piety, unity, and reconciliation. The present issue of the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* stems from a growing understanding in recent decades that organized sound is also significantly involved in conflicts over religious matters.³ This perception finds important manifestations in the history of religions, past and present. Thus, sound and music are sometimes used as a symbolic weapon in struggles between religious factions (what is meant by “through sound”) or serve as a cause for fighting (what “about sound” signifies).⁴ Sound is also mustered to express controversies over theological ideas or configured to represent them (in which conflict can be both *through* sound and *about* the use of it).

The social and political circumstances which feature such sonic conflicts are varied. They might express deep religious animosity, of the kind Christian Europeans bore toward Jews, whom they considered, for centuries, ruthlessly noisy.⁵ Alternately, they could erupt as part of a larger religious conflict, for example, when revolutionary religious conceptions beget novel sonic forms which enhance the identity and solidarity of their adherents. Martin Luther’s chorale reformation is a case in point, to which we shall return.⁶ In such circumstances and many others, three major factors seem to be in play. First, certain propensities of sonic expression embedded in the medial features of organized sound; second, religious norms and sonic forms associated with the religious communities

involved; and third, the nature of the conflict which the historical circumstances under discussion bring to the surface.

This issue of *YJMR* includes three articles featuring three case studies that represent different religious worlds and historical moments. In each, the interplay of the above three factors – medium, forms and norms, and religious contest – can be clearly discerned. Before introducing these studies, let’s take a closer look at how sounds may be involved in such conflicts, how norms and forms may further shape them, and what sorts of conflicts invite sonic manifestation.

Though some of my claims and illustrations apply to secular conflicts, political or other, in their core one finds a religious fervor: a deep belief, a strong conviction, which sometimes generates new rituals. Thus they partake in a dynamic characteristic of religious clashes. Religious clashes, in turn, often carry strong political sway. Instructively, the cases discussed in the following three articles, as well as in the present Introduction, are all politically implicated, that is, stemming from power relations within a given polity, or aiming to affect them.⁷

Sound

Overcoming darkness and a limited view, sound transcends sight. Sound marks the territory of those who emit it, and concomitantly reaches beyond it.⁸ Through sound a community becomes audible, internally and externally. It invigorates its carriers and may threaten their adversaries.

Humans seem to have sensed the advantages of shared voicing early on: sonic clashes between groups, real or imagined, are as old as human cultures, and so are fights and battles backed by noise. Sheer volume plays an important part in such battles, and the clatter of many instruments contributes to it.

This basic configuration never left the historical stage, all the way to modern times. Felix Mendelssohn applied it in his *First Walpurgis Night* of 1831 (text by Goethe), where enlightened Druids, dressed as demons, fright at night their Christian conquerors through a well-orchestrated, raucous parade. Those prejudiced Christians, who wished to vanquish the Druids' religious rites, are freaked and flee.⁹

In Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron* (1932), two factions of the children of Israel, one supporting Moses and Aron's plan and the God who sent them, the other preferring the Egyptian deities, confront one another. When all is said and done, they are chanting, unpitched, at one another, antiphonically: "Glaubt nicht den betrügern / Er wird uns befreien / Die Götter lieben uns nicht / Wer wollen ihn lieben" (Oh heed not the liars / He shall make us free / The gods do not give us love / We want to give worship).¹⁰ Unadorned voices, they fight over the most crucial question of their beliefs and lives, as individuals and as a group.

Sometimes voices amplified by idio-phones or membranophones, such as bells, cymbals, or gongs, suffice. Even sophisticated technology cannot compete with multiple voices chanting in unison in a highly populated rally, though it can assist it. My own recent experience in dozens of rallies in Israel in 2023, protesting a planned judicial overhaul by a heavy-handed government, strongly

reverberates in me: Synched human voices of determined protestors, enwrapped by well-coordinated drumming by skilled and untiring drummers, granted these demonstrations life and spirit.¹¹ Repeated slogans and jingles haunt you long after they cease, scorching their messages beyond cortical thresholds. A crucial component for the protest movement, the rallies would fail without this auditory aid.¹²

Once becoming more defined—that is, musical—sound becomes crucial in the making of communities and in shaping and maintaining their cohesion and identity. Vocally synchronized, a community is unified in time and space, sacralizing both. Through his chorale revolution, Luther formed his new religion in terms of local communities, vocally unified. Homorhythmically coordinated, they carried together their syllabic hymns and claimed their textual message as their own. The four-voice texture further harmonized and adorned the message, beyond simple song. Philip Bohlman called my attention further to gender implications realized by the choral texture, allowing for a reimagination of sacred communities. This had practical consequences, because sixteenth-century hymn singing in German formed around small groups, in which women were increasingly present. Accumulating aural monuments of this or other kinds, communities retrieve them at proper moments, enhancing their distinctiveness while forging their collective memory.¹³

A collective treasure, whether oral or inscribed, risks contamination. This might occur through improper transmission, furtive expropriation, or unholy infiltration of prohibited sonic vessels. The airy, transitory, and easily perceived nature of

tunes renders them susceptible to such cooptations. These are causes for internal or external conflict, for excommunication but also for desired adaptation. Jews in medieval Ashkenaz long tried to guard their sacred tunes against coveting Christian ears; and yet sound often bypasses gatekeepers and alights in hostile sonic territories.¹⁴ But what one generation forbade, another would embrace, though with some cautious procedures.¹⁵ A cause of conflict in one period, political history tells us, can be nullified in another.

As music, sound also partakes in exegetical settings of sacred texts, emboldening theological stances or contesting them. Inasmuch as the power of music to pinpoint textual meanings is developed and acknowledged, so the protection of holy texts against blasphemous interpretation increases. In composing his motet cycle *Canticum Cantorum* (Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs) of 1584, dedicated to his patron, Pope Gregory XI, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina was well aware of his perilous undertaking. Palestrina's musical rendition of this highly erotic text, which both Christians and Jews tamed through allegorical reading, verged on sensual profanity which could have cost him his high office, and maybe more. Preempting criticism with a shrewd (if not hypocritical, as Alfred Einstein had it) introduction to the score, he seems to have overcome the danger.¹⁶ Yet soon thereafter, when the papacy loosened its firm hold on artists, Counter-Reformist composers would not abstain from sensuality even in setting verses from the Song of Solomon.¹⁷

Norms and Forms

The above cases involve sacralized sonic forms and well-established norms.

By norms I mean certain regulations concerning ritual, administration, teaching, sexual restrictions, and more. Sometimes, sonic forms are at the center of the conflictual situation, which is about sound and its proper use or abuse. Conflicts of this kind often pertain to decorum: what befits a community, or part of it, at a certain time or on a certain occasion. This calls for a learned inspection of the forms involved, and an informed consideration regarding their suitability to prevalent norms.

As in the case of Palestrina's *Canticum Cantorum*, a mutual adaptation through transformation of forms and norms is not rare to find. The transformation is not necessarily in the direction of a more tolerant acceptance. Change of circumstances may lead to a rejection of what was previously acceptable. In present-day Israel, for example, it has become more difficult for women to sing in certain public gatherings, due to new restrictions initiated by the ultraorthodox political parties and endorsed by the government. (The restrictions concern a Jewish law which equates a woman's voice with *erva*, literally, the nakedness of sexual organs.)¹⁸

At other times certain sonic forms are the carriers or the means serving a more encompassing religious struggle, over religious norms. In these cases the forms are viewed more for their effectiveness than for their intrinsic value. This is especially the case when the conflicts are over fundamental principles of a religious group, sometimes even concerning its right to exist. The struggle of the Huguenots in sixteenth-century France, discussed in John Romey's article in this issue of *YJMR*, is a case in point. This state of affairs pertains to the sonic choice leaders of the fighting group undertake, which, as we

shall see, can be classified as “music degree zero”¹⁹ – a minimal elaboration of the sonic forms enlisted for the battle.

A breaking with norms by a dissenting group, or their renewal, may involve change of forms. These forms, in turn, become a cause for conflict with the conservatives from whom the group dissented. When Jews in central Europe wished to modernize their communal life, in tune with their gentile environment, they recast their soundscape in the attempt to overcome the noise accusation. Among other things, they adapted homophonic renditions of prayers, in a chorale style; kept the soundscape less heterophonic; and opted for more tuneful melodies in the major mode. Those synagogues which introduced an organ to their services, however, went one step beyond the well-entrenched Jewish halachic norms. The ensuing dispute, which developed into a clash, caused a rift in the Jewish community between “orthodox” and “liberal” Jews that was only rarely overcome.²⁰

Conflicts

All these conditions harbor potential for conflict within and between religious factions, or serve existing conflicts. Some of them have already been spelled out, as they emerge from certain incompatibility between norms and forms. Others concern attacks prompted by the physical presence of an adversary group, whose sonic embodiment annoys, if not repels, a dominant group. Such was the case of the *adhan* (calling to prayer by the *mu’adh-dhin*) from minarets in Israel more than a decade ago.²¹ Another motivation of conflict may stem from a concern over musical sensuality, as we have seen above, or from its association with the music of the other – for

instance, pagan music for early Christians. Yet others may relate to a controversy over religious ideas, yielding new interpretations of sacralized liturgical texts.

Generally speaking, conflicts about or through acoustic presence occur more in interreligious cases, while those over forms and norms are typical of intrareligious ones. So are those involving interpretation of sacred texts.

Each of the following three articles illustrates at least one kind of conflict through or about certain sonic configurations. The conflict portrayed in Romey’s “Polluted Soundscapes and *Contrepoison* in Sixteenth-Century France: The Sonic Warfare Leading to the First War of Religion” treats the most basic use of sound in a religio-political struggle: a struggle, through sound, over space and control. It is the war waged by Catholics against Huguenots, the French version of Protestants. The case itself, however, is far from simple. Sound in this case, as Romey makes amply evident, is an expression of the “will to power” in which religion and politics are profoundly entangled. It is also the means to achieve power by marking territories and presence. Concomitantly, texted sound is mobilized to spread the gospel of the new religion – or to buffer against it, marking for each group the divide between the pure and the polluted. Lastly, it is the stuff the martyrs’ songs are made of, who, in turn, further sacralize and canonize it.

One thing is clear in the Huguenots’ case: the conflict is *not* over proper musical forms. On the contrary, both groups are deploying the same genres, often even the same melodies. They fight by means of contrafacta. They draw on the familiar

and the easily perceivable and memorized: take a known melody and set it to new words, changing them sometimes only slightly, but enough to render the text significantly different. The setting itself is simple, uniform, and unifying: Luther's above-mentioned chorales are the model. In France, metric psalms were rendered in a syllabic and chordal manner. As in Germany, those *psaumes* and songs took great advantage of the efficacy of printed matter—books, booklets, and ephemera. As *contrepoisons*—literally, antidotes—they participate, as Romey emphasizes, in the iconoclastic struggle aimed at idolatrous, and often adulterous, words associated with Catholics. And yet, being sonic palimpsests, they could not prevent older layers from peeping out underneath a sung text.

In the ensuing war and massacre, however, eradication concerned people, not sung words alone, and was terminal. The major questions that hover above Romey's article are of primal importance for this issue of *YJMR*, and the issues it involves: Is the sonic struggle a promo (or, in the religious terms used by Romey, a prefiguration) of such aggressive acts, their combustion material, or maybe their sublimation?²² Romey's intricate case study points in different directions and leaves us with much food for thought, and thirst for comparative case studies in other periods and cultures.

Zhang Jie's "Buddhist Music as a Contested Site: The Transmission of Teochew Buddhist Music between China and Singapore" takes us civilizations and religions away and centuries later. The contest in this case is intrareligious, and concerns forms and norms. The location is the Chaozhou region in southeastern China. The form, or genre,

is the Chanhe style associated with the "flaming mouth ceremony," which aims "to relieve all sentient beings from suffering." A Buddhist funerary ritual, having both religious and social functions, it was conducted for generations only by official monastics. Against the backdrop of political chaos (wars, the Cultural Revolution, and so forth), lay Buddhists transferred this kept knowledge to Singapore and back, more than once, in the course of 150 years. Breaking norms in order to preserve rich and intricate sacred forms, those acts of propagation included several transgressions: first, unauthorized religious agents, who dared to expose sacred forms to the uninitiated; second, in later days, their use of scores rather than oral teaching for instructing scriptural trainees and musicians; and finally, performing and recording music that was meant to be kept live in holy temples. The continuous motivation of these "transgressors," however, seems to have gone beyond preservation: they wished to spread the sacred text, and provide communities with the spiritual and salvific effect those ritual practices have been famous for.

Politics in this case history is an important factor, but one which remains in the background. Internal fights for control of norms cannot be considered as politics per se. And yet they are deeply conflicted. The labeling of lay Buddhist practitioners as "heterodox" and "transgressive," which Zhang Jie challenges, reflects the power relations within East Asian Buddhist circles. From a wider perspective, this case history is typical of late modernity, where grand political upheavals shake established hegemonies, and mass media technology involves cultural standardization.

Theology, scores, and public debates are major players in Joel Clarkson's "Annunciation and the Cross: The Marian Theology of Incarnation in James MacMillan's Music and Public Discourse." Equipped with hermeneutical tools, Clarkson uncovers their entanglement in MacMillan's two grand scriptural pieces: *The Seven Last Words on the Cross* (1993) and *St. Luke Passion* (2013). Conflict, in his case, resides in two interrelated realms: the composer's public-religious positions and his theological-artistic attitude. A born Catholic, MacMillan publicly expressed his frustration from the age-old Protestant-Catholic tensions in contemporary Scotland. Within the Catholic establishment in his country, he fought against the poor and lukewarm music characterizing, in his view, prevalent liturgy.

His criticism transcends Scotland. Unlike minimalist composers such as Arvo Pärt, whose music is constructed around a "deliberate avoidance of conflict," as he maintains, MacMillan seized the unique qualities of organized sound to enhance the basic dialectics inherent in the Gospels. Through contrasting musical textures, carefully built dissonant clashes, and vociferous speech acts juxtaposed with moments of "still small [instrumental] voice(s),"²³ MacMillan forges a provocative exegesis of those scriptural texts, meant to be grasped experientially more than intellectually, as Clarkson puts it.

We further learn that MacMillan follows Joseph Ratzinger's (later Pope Benedict

XVI) "Marian theology of Incarnation and the Cross" and its befitting musical aesthetics, which nourishes his works. At the center, we find a radical reading of the idea of Annunciation which, so to speak, is "pregnant" with that of Crucifixion. Conflating the two major, however contrasting, moments in Jesus's life mars the blissfulness of Mary's reception of the message, familiar to us from hosts of Annunciation paintings. Tragedy builds into the moment of conception/incarnation, encapsulates humans' destiny while deifying both. In theological terms, it means transfiguring scriptural words into the Word—Annunciation. In MacMillan's oeuvre, such transfiguration is indicated when music turns from visceral concreteness (while carrying text) to sublime essence of pure sound. As in Bach's Passions, though in even more abstract terms, salvation is attempted through compassion. Even this, in MacMillan's universes, is ever challenged from within the theological substratum.

With all the differences (and a few commonalities) these three case studies comprise, they share one important feature: the agents of conflict, in all cases, were (or still are) courageous people who fought for their ideas and practices. They paid for this in various ways, but undoubtedly left a mark on the world, while effecting a vibrant musical scene. It is my hope that this collection of articles will ignite interest in this topic and yield more research and ideas about conflicts through and about sound.

NOTES

1 I am grateful to Philip Bohlman and Avishai Margalit for their helpful comments.

2 For the use of *sound* and *music* as complementary terms, see Margarethe Adams and August Sheehy's instructive discussion in the introduction to "Sound and Secularity," *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 6/2 (2020): 2.

3 The recent collection of articles by Fiona Magowan et al., *Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), mainly goes in the same direction, i.e., advancing a "comparative approach to exploring the role of sonic and creative practices in addressing the effects of conflict." On the musical path realizing resolution to religious conflicts through transcendence, see Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Resounding Transcendence: Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

4 For a recent study of contemporary "worship wars," see Jonathan Dueck, *Congregational Music: Conflict and Community* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). The book tells the story of "the musical lives of three Canadian Mennonite congregations, who sang together despite their musical differences," which testifies for different modes of worship and experiences. Important and influential is John Morgan O'Connell and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, eds., *Music and Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

5 Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel against the Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

6 The literature on Luther's musical reformation is quite vast; see, for example, Ulrich S. Leupold, "Luther's Conception of Music in Worship," *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 13 (1940): 69–89; and J. Andreas Loewe, "Why Do Lutherans Sing?: Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation," *Church History* 82/1 (March 2013): 69–89.

7 The argument about the interdependence of religion and politics in modernity is mainly associated with Carl Schmitt's concept of political theology. See Carl Schmitt and George Schwab, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The argument in this Introduction, however, goes mainly in the opposite direction to that of Schmitt, who discerns the theological basis of modern secular politics. The claim here is that religious conflicts can rarely be detached from politics, especially since early modern times.

8 The effervescence field of sound studies in recent decades has brought many important insights in this regard. Here are examples related to early modern, modern, and postmodern worlds, in which the relations between sound, space, and control are treated in various ways: Burche R. Smit, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Yaron Jean, *Hearing Experiences in Germany, 1914–1945: Noises of Modernity*, trans. Peter Wytznner (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); and Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

9 See John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007); and HaCohen, *The Music Libel*, 53, 139.

10 Arnold Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron: Oper in Drei Akten*, Studien-Partitur (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1958), 79–81; and Ruth HaCohen, "A Theological Midrash in Search of Operatic Action: *Moses und Aron* by Arnold Schoenberg," in *Music's Obedient Daughter: The Opera Libretto from Source to Score*, ed. Sabine Lichtenstein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 405–31, at 427.

11 Itamar Katzir, "These People Have Become the Heartbeat of Israel's Protest Movement," *Haaretz*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-03-15/ty-article-magazine/.premium/drummers-have-become-the-heartbeat-of-israels-protest-movement/00000186-e501-decd-a1e6-fda53c080000> (accessed July 15, 2023). Apparently secular, the protest movement bears many of the features J. J. Rousseau ascribed to civil religion, a concept further developed in the twentieth century by sociologists such as the American Robert Bellah.

12 Drumming can of course work also for reconciliation, as Jim Sky has shown in *The Musical Gift: Sonic Generosity in Post-War Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), in which drumming affords the crucial connection of attempted conflict resolution in the Sri Lankan civil war, that is, between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus.

13 See the discussion of the German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig on chorale singing, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 402–03; Marissa Glynias Moore, "Sounding the Congregational Voice," *Yale Journal of Music and*

Religion 4/1 (2018); and Ruth HaCohen, “The Birth and Demise of Vocal Communities,” *AJS Perspectives: The Sound Issue* (Spring 2016); and HaCohen, “Vocal Communities in the Twilight: Real and Imagined Sonic Spaces of Central European Jewry at the Opening and Closing of the Gate,” in *The Interpretive Imagination: Religion and Art in Jewish Culture and Its Contexts*, ed. Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower), Galit Hasan-Rokem, Richard I. Cohen, and Ilana Pardes (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016), 116–53 (in Hebrew).

14 HaCohen, *The Music Libel*, 51–52.

15 I refer here to the Hassidic movement of the eighteenth century, which welcomed adaptations of gentile melodies into the repertory of sacred niggunim. See, for example, Amnon Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 71.

16 Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, trans. Alexander H. Krappe et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 312, as quoted by Ariel Paul, “Is the Doric a Real Doric?: Palestrina’s *Song of Solomon* as a Case Study of 16th Century Modal Theory” (master’s thesis, Hebrew University, 2005), 56 (in Hebrew).

17 See Robert L. Kendrick, “Devotion, Piety and Commemoration: Sacred Songs and Oratorio,” *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Western Music*, vol. 1, ed. Tim Carter and John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 327–31.

18 BT (Bavli Talmud), Brachot 24; Kiddushin,70a. These topics are broadly discussed in Mili Leitner Cohen’s “‘Sacred in Your Midst’: Sounding Israeli Identity through the Performance of Jewish Liturgy in Jerusalem’s Public Spaces” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2022).

19 In the spirit of Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (*Le degré zéro de l’écriture*), trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

20 See Tina Frühauf, *The Organ and Its Music in German Jewish Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

21 Ruth HaCohen, “The Sounds of a Familiar Plot,” *In the Moment: Critical Inquiry Blog* (Oct. 7, 2012); Alison Dundes Renteln, “The Tension between Religious Freedom and Noise Law: The Call to Prayer in a Multicultural Society,” in *Religion and Human Rights Discourse*, ed. Hanoach Dagan, Shahar Lifshitz, and Yedidia Z. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2014), 375–411.

22 Romey’s major claim contradicts in part well-known arguments about music’s relaxing effect even on lethal aggression. Jacques Attali, for one, famously maintained that music “symbolically signifies the channeling of violence and the imaginary, the ritualization of a murder substituted for the general violence, the affirmation that a society is possible if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated” (Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985], 25–26).

23 From 1 Kings 19:12, describing God’s revelation to Elijah.