



Summary report on the conference “Music in Detention”, March 2013

The international conference “Music in Detention” took place in the Paulinerkirche, University of Göttingen on 15-16 March 2013. We welcomed researchers from across Europe and North America to discuss various aspects of the use of music in detention centres, prisons, and prison camps. A topic of particular interest was the use of music in connection with torture. Apart from the speakers and chairs, around twelve non-speaking guests attended. As well as students and staff of the University of Göttingen, these included a number of researchers and therapists from Germany, the UK, Switzerland and Lebanon.

In keeping with the research group’s remit to extend the historical basis of work on this and related topics, we were pleased that the conference opened with two papers on the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, chaired by M. J. Grant (Universität Göttingen). Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild (Freie Universität Berlin) discussed iconographic evidence on the use of (replica) musical instruments in the humiliation and degradation of criminals in the Middle Ages, drawing also on work in the field of legal history which attempts to analyse such treatment in the context of historical ideas of punishment and retribution. A quite different historical perspective was offered by Beat Föllmi (University of Strasburg) who discussed how, in the charged atmosphere of the Reformation period, psalm-singing as an expression and powerful symbol of Protestantism became both a grounds for and means of resistance to persecution.

The first of several papers on the twentieth century was given by Inna Klause (Universität Göttingen), who reported on some of the ways that music was used to structure daily life and as a means of “reeducation” in the Soviet Gulag. Andrea Bohlman (Pennsylvania State University) focussed on the music of political prisoners under martial law in Poland in the 1980s, including the way these songs became mythologised; she also discussed the historical roots of some of the repertoire in songs dating from the Nazi occupation of Poland. This session was chaired by Cornelia Nuxoll (Universität Göttingen).

The next session, chaired by Férdia Stone-Davis (Universität Göttingen) offered three papers on music and noise in detention in the related cases of Greece, Portugal and Spain. Anna Papaeti (Universität Göttingen) drew connections between Greek prison camps in the civil war of the late 1940s and under the military Junta in the late 1960s, highlighting in particular how music and noise from loudspeakers impacted on prisoners and in many cases was used as an instrument of torture. Anabela Duarte (University of Lisbon) looked at evidence regarding sound recording and reproduction technology obtained by the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, which demonstrates links to methods being developed by the CIA around the

same time. Juan José Pastor Comín and Cristina Rodríguez Yague looked at the extensive use of fascist songs and also religious songs as a means of “reeducation” but also degradation in prisons in Spain under Franco, with a special focus on women’s prisons.

The last session of the first day of the conference, chaired by Mareike Jacobs (Ethnological Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) began with a paper by Caitlin Procter (SOAS, University of London) on witch camps in Ghana. Based on initial fieldwork conducted there, it looked at the role of singing in structuring community life and delineating power structures in one camp where women and often their children live after accusations of witchcraft. Áine Mangaoang then discussed a controversial but extremely famous dance programme developed in a prison in the Philippines: her presentation looked both at social media reaction to a video of the inmates recreating the dance routine from Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”, and the actual situation faced by prisoners in prisons across the country.

The second day of the conference began with a short presentation by Mareike Jacobs on a project to digitalise and evaluate the extensive archive of recordings made by the Prussian Phonographic Commission in German prisoner-of-war camps during the First World War. Juliane Brauer (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin) then chaired a longer session on music in the Holocaust. Barbara Milewski and Bret Werb began this session with a discussion of a seminal but little-known work by Aleksander Kulisiewicz, who collected and analysed testimony from prisoners held in camps across Germany and Nazi-occupied Poland. Katarzyna Naliwajek-Mazurek’s paper included moving video testimony from survivors of the camps on how they were forced to play music either to accompany the torture of others or while being subjected to extreme degradation themselves. Kirsten Dyck discussed the way that documentary films on National Socialism and the Holocaust deal with the subject of music, with particular focus on Claude Lanzmann’s documentary “Shoah”. The session concluded with a paper by Melissa Kagen (Stanford University) read in her absence by Emily Dreyfus, drawing connections between the use of music in Auschwitz and by US forces at Guantánamo Bay: the paper drew on her work to create an interactive map of music as and where used in the Auschwitz camp system.

The next session, chaired by Anna Papaeti, featured our two invited speakers. We were delighted to welcome back Suzanne G. Cusick (New York University), who had already attended the first workshop on music and torture organised by the research group in April 2011. Suzanne’s paper at “Music in Detention” focused again on music torture in recent US policy and practice, but especially the development of the debate on torture in the USA. She discussed the political and not just emotional difficulties faced by herself and others when attempting both to conduct research in this area and to raise awareness of the topic in scholarly circles as well. Following Suzanne’s paper, Harmin Sijercic, a music therapist working for Freedom From Torture in London, discussed how music can be used in the rehabilitation of survivors of torture. He focused particularly on his work with one teenager

who had been beaten and mistreated in detention, and traced the stages of the teenager's recovery as mirrored in the music created during therapy sessions.

The conference drew to a conclusion with a paper by Johann S. Buis (Wheaton College, Illinois), chaired by Christian Storch (Universität Göttingen), which discussed the functions of song for political prisoners in South Africa under apartheid, with particular focus on the notorious prison Robben Island and its most famous ex-prisoner, Nelson Mandela. The paper suggested that the central role of song for prisoners is rooted in African cultural practices and also had an impact on the way Mandela approached the duties of government in the critical post-Apartheid era.

A closing discussion, chaired by Anna Papaeti, drew some tentative conclusions from the papers presented, and raised some critical issues that had emerged over the course of the conference. These included the emotional strain experienced by researchers working these issues over the longer term, as well as ethical issues relating to how best to approach work on music and torture, particularly when working with survivors. Given the experiences of survivors of torture, an interview setting is not always appropriate; it was suggested, however, that this does not mean that survivors are not willing or able to talk about what happened to them. It was also noted that more general work needs to be done on the subject of aural conditions of detention, not least since many prisoners express their difficulty in dealing with prolonged silence and not just prolonged noise. Thus the functional use and context of music, of sound and of silence needs to be approached in a holistic fashion, without however reducing sound to its sonic dimension alone.