

M. J. Grant and Férdia J. Stone-Davis (eds.)

The Soundtrack of Conflict

The Role of Music in Radio Broadcasting
in Wartime and in Conflict Situations



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M. J. Grant and Férdia J. Stone-Davis

Introduction

In his poem *The Horses*, written at the height of the Cold War, the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir uses analogies to the biblical accounts both of creation and the apocalypse to describe the effects of a devastating global conflict—almost certainly nuclear—in which technology has led to the downfall of civilisation rather than its furtherance.¹ The horses of the poem's title mysteriously appear in the second part, and mark a kind of second coming for the survivors: a chance for humanity to pick up the pieces and begin again, as their ancestors had done, ploughing the fields and travelling by horse. The horses' gentle and uncomplicated willingness to serve also inspires memories and ways of communicating and co-operating lost in the period before the war. This is the sense of optimism with which the second part of the poem closes. In the first part, however, the picture painted is bleaker. Rather than the ancient technologies associated with the horses, a modern technology—radio—comes to stand for a world laid waste by these same technologies and the power structures that determine their use. 'On the second day', writes Muir, 'The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer'. Gradually realisation sets in; the radios remain switched on, he suggests, 'in a million rooms' around the world, but there is nothing more to broadcast. And even if they should come back to life, 'We would not listen, we would not let it bring / That old bad world that swallowed its children quick / At one great gulp'. Never mind that the radios may at one point speak again: the silence has given the survivors time to reflect and ultimately to reject their message. Radio, a medium of sound, thus comes to stand for a terrifying and more general silence. It is this apocalyptic silence that resonates in the first part of the poem,

1 First published in Muir's final collection of poetry, *One Foot in Eden*, London: Faber and Faber, 1956.

signalling through the absence of signals the devastation the war has wrought, and creating a caesura that offers the survivors a chance to do things differently in future. The silence is all the more striking as it contrasts with the extreme noise that is always characteristic of war, which, apart from the deafening sound of battle itself, is clamorous with messages and counter-messages and attempts to both instil and drown out sorrow and fear.

Muir was writing in an era when the threat of nuclear war was very real, and also before television had in many countries replaced radio as the favoured medium of mass communication. As the essays in this volume testify, however, radio continues to play an important role in wartime and in conflict situations. Arguably, and seen in global terms, it has been more important than television in many of the twentieth century's armed conflicts and maintains a central function even in the face of new media. Radio is an enormously effective communication medium, and messages are imparted through all that it transmits, including but not limited to words and music. What, then, would the soundtrack to the conflict Muir describes have been? Would the radios have broadcast music, and, if so, which music? Music promoting nationalism, or communism, or capitalism, or revolution, music promoting the necessity of war and of Mutually Assured Destruction? How would the choice of any music have been organised and what message would this have sent? Would extra-musical aural cues have reinforced or subverted the choice of music and, if so, how? In short, how would the realities of the war have been acknowledged and ignored, compromised and sublimated, through the soundtrack that radio broadcasts provided?

Any answer would be as hypothetical as the war Muir describes. The conflicts discussed in the chapters of this book, on the other hand, are very real. They have cost the lives of hundreds of millions of children, women and men, and have caused great pain and suffering to the many more who have survived. The studies presented here deal with both hot wars and cold wars; world wars and civil wars; conflicts in the more distant past and conflicts that have only recently ended, and where—as is the case in Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone and Rwanda—the process of rebuilding society and bringing those responsible for war crimes to justice continues.

Politicians and officials have long recognised the potential of radio, in both a positive and a negative sense. As early as the mid-1930s, concerns about the ways in which the medium could be used led the League of Nations to adopt a convention

aimed at preventing the use of radio to broadcast propaganda for war.² Historians, political scientists and even musicologists have been slower to address this topic; this can be attributed in part to the fact that the role of music in conflict situations in general has only relatively recently become a subject for in-depth scholarly research. The present volume thus seeks to at least reduce a gap in the research literature and also to draw attention to the importance of international and interdisciplinary perspectives on this topic.

One of the reasons why radio quickly attracted attention amongst foreign policy strategists is because it shows no respect for political borders. This makes it the ideal medium for spreading messages behind enemy lines, or for communications between those in exile and those back home. In several cases, such as the case of the ANC's clandestine *Radio Freedom* during the apartheid era in South Africa—discussed here by Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi—radio, music on radio, as well as other aural cues, can become crucial strategic elements in mobilisation. *Radio Freedom's* success in this regard is no doubt related to its status as a station broadcasting to South Africa from South Africans in exile; the situation becomes a lot more complicated when foreign governments attempt to influence political developments in another country via radio broadcasting, including music. In the initial period at least, few propagandists could count on expert assistance of the type offered by the composer Henry Cowell, whose long-standing interests in the music of non-western cultures and regions was put to political use by the US Information Agency in the Middle East in the 1950s; Cowell's contributions and the context are discussed here by Peter Schimpf. This account of early US efforts in this region is complemented by Beau Bothwell's study of *The Voice of America's* Arabic-language service: drawing amongst other things on programming information from early 2012, it is the most recent case study in the book.

Attempting to influence politics in another state through broadcasting is a risky business, however. Several of the chapters demonstrate only too clearly how agents from the outside—foreign governments, for example—may have only a superficial view of the significance of particular types of music in the local context: we could cite the example of the mixed signals sent by the radio programme *Zero Hour* and

2 *International Convention Concerning the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace* (1936). The full text of the convention is available in the *American Journal of International Law* 32(3), July 1938, pp. 113–120.

its presenter Tokyo Rose, discussed here by Kathryn Baber, in US broadcasts to Japan during World War II. One could also mention the way in which Greek music played on Nazi-controlled radio during the occupation often had the impact of signalling resistance to, rather than compliance with, the regime, one of several issues explored by Elli Charamis. Similarly, many chapters demonstrate that responses to particular musical repertoires and particular discourses in broadcasting are highly individual, being rooted in a person's personal and psychological history. This is most persuasively illustrated in the very different reactions to radio broadcasts in the Soviet Gulag, as discussed by Inna Klause: some prisoners drew strength from music broadcast centrally to individual camps, while others regarded its presence as nothing short of torture. The precariousness of receptivity to musical propaganda is thus evident even where governmental control is strong. Pradeep N' Weerasinghe, for example, notes that although songs related to the war may have been a mainstay of official broadcasters during the war in Sri Lanka, relatively few of those interviewed were active consumers of this repertoire in terms of playing it in other contexts. This may in part be due to a tendency—not only in Sri Lanka—of a preference in wartime for music that has to do with anything *but* war.

The examples mentioned, and several others discussed in this book, provide the best possible evidence for why, when discussing the impact of music in radio broadcasting, we should be wary of explanations that presuppose a unidirectional, cause-and-effect model of musical communication. Not least for practical reasons, it is often easier for research to focus on the transmitter and not the multiple receivers of musical messages, but only when the complexity of musical communication of this sort is recognised can we begin to understand the many and often contradictory roles played by music in such contexts. And there are other issues we need to consider as well. Radio is often approached as, in some ways, a 'disembodied' medium. This is easy to interpret in terms of a tendency, in modern western thinking, to focus on music as primarily a method of auditory communication. But radio does not exist in a communication vacuum and neither does music within that medium. Musical discourses can be formed or contradicted by, and can themselves form and contradict, the political message which such broadcasts serve to transmit directly or indirectly. Other media such as radio magazines (particularly discussed here in the context of Greece) are as important as forms of musical communication as the music actually transmitted. In general, music very often forms an important linkage

between different forms of political communication. The connection between music broadcast on radio and music as performed both in concert situations but also at rallies and demonstrations is an important one here. Several chapters, including Chen-Ching Cheng's discussion of Teresa Teng's impact in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China in the late twentieth century, and James Parker's discussion of the trial against Simon Bikindi for his part in the Rwandan genocide, point to the role played by and influence of individual musicians and broadcasters, particularly those of national or international repute. The use of formats specifically geared to actively involve listeners, such as call-in shows and request programmes, also contradicts the idea that radio is a unidirectional medium. Identification with personalities such as radio broadcasters and musicians can also promote a sense of security for listeners, something that is especially important in times of war.

Ideas about who we are, and where we come from, often play a crucial role in propaganda for war. Music is often not only caught in the cross-fire, but provides a forum for the establishment and transmission of such ideas. Mauro Fosca Bertola's study of the construction of an Italian historiography in music under Fascism, as communicated through radio, is only one of several cases in point; recourse to music broadcasting in forming and reforming national identity in the Balkan states in the 1940s and 50s, discussed here by Vlasis Vlasidis, is another. Yet as Ruth Finnegan demonstrates in her history of music and radio in Fiji, such attempts to construct and communicate identity along party lines struggles in the face of the complex cultural dynamics characteristic of human societies.

The use of music to manage emotions is arguably one of its most important functions in the context of armed conflict; and management does not simply mean manipulation. In his discussion of the Sierra Leonean civil war, Paul Richards explores the importance of radio for both communicating the demands and negotiating the self-understanding of guerrilla fighters. By situating this modern musical technology in a longer history of music and war in the region, Richards argues for a deeper investigation of the musicology of war, one that draws on historical and contemporary examples as well as recent work in the cognitive science of music.

Such a broad understanding of the musicology of war throws new light on the case studies in this book more generally. As diverse as the conflicts and contexts discussed are, there are several recurring themes not just within this book, but in the broader history of music in wartime. We might note how frequently love songs

and sentimental songs play a role in radio broadcasting in conflict situations, carrying on a long tradition of such songs playing a special role in wartime, as can be seen if we trace the longer history of songs which soldiers sing amongst themselves while on active duty, or look at the kinds of sentiments expressed in songs and ballads on contemporary conflicts in earlier centuries as well. Another example is the emergence of 'typical' soundtracks which may be carried across from one context to another. An obvious case in point is Oluwafemi Alexander Ladapo's discussion of the use of military music to signal a coup; more generally we could point to the way that particular forms of protest music, and music from other conflicts and the music of other liberation movements, reappears in other contexts as well. The different chapters also demonstrate how repertoires and programming are rarely static in their content and focus, but rather develop relative to the exact stage of a conflict. This is reflected in the balance of music to talk in broadcasts, for example, as well as in variations of what is perceived to be 'local' and 'foreign' music. An interesting case with regard to the latter point is offered by Karine le Bail's discussion of music programming on radio stations in occupied France during the Second World War, particularly with regard to the relative amounts of airtime given to German and French artists and music, both in theory and in practice.

The chapters in this book derive from papers presented at an international conference held in the autumn of 2011, and generously supported by funds from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony, and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Niedersachsen e.V. The project would not have been possible without the support given by these organisations, nor indeed without the hard work and dedication of present and past members of the research group 'Music, Conflict and the State', especially Simone Christine Münz. Our thanks go to all of them, and also to our authors for contributing such stimulating texts. That the topic is not exhausted, despite the wide range of case studies presented, should be obvious: our fervent hope, therefore, is that this volume will stimulate more research on all the issues raised here in the years to come.