



"Music, Conflict and the State": Remarks on the focus of the group

*Wo Menschen singen, da lass dich ruhig nieder
Böse Menschen haben keine Lieder.*

[Where people sing, there should you live
Bad people have no songs to give]

German proverb

This proverb is often the first response I get from people here in Germany when I talk to them about the intended focus of the research group "Music, Conflict and the State" - namely, the study of how music is used to promote hatred and violence. When people mention this proverb, my response often takes the form of the following quotation: "*The Third Reich was, as it were, a sort of singing dictatorship. We were always singing ... Sometimes I ask myself who had the greater influence on us, Adolf Hitler or [the songwriter] Hans Baumann, and I'm almost tempted to say Baumann.*"¹ These are words of the late Carola Stern, journalist and co-founder of the German section of Amnesty International, as she recalled her time as a member of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (the girls' version of the Hitler Youth). Her words are echoed in many other testimonies from the time.²

Other countries may or may not have a similar proverb to the one above, but the sentiment behind it seems to be international. This is the sentiment that music is basically "good"; that music at the very least does more good than it ever does bad; that it might therefore be better to focus on the many examples where music has a positive impact in conflict situations, contributing directly or indirectly to understanding between peoples, to resistance against dictatorships and repressive regimes, to post-conflict reconciliation. Indeed, there are several researchers already working in this area, and this is one reason why the group in Göttingen will focus instead on the other side of this issue: the use of music as propaganda for war and in justification of atrocities committed in war; the use of music to spread hatred and intolerance; the use of music in the preparation of genocide.

The two fields are, however, inextricably connected to each other, two sides of the same coin. Music used to incite hatred and hostility may not on the face of it be very different, or at all different, from music used for more positive ends, or for no obvious ends at all. The difference, then, is not so much in the detail as in the exact context of the way the music is used and received, and in its ability to provide a sense of security and identity, to set the scene for human action as effectively in real life as in a film score. This, ostensibly, makes it much more difficult to identify and react appropriately to the concerted use of music to accelerate or heighten an existing conflict. The conclusion often drawn, however - that music has little impact on such situations - is not borne out by the evidence, and is often a sign of unwillingness to tread into difficult moral and legal terrain where the protection of fundamental freedoms leads to an apparent conflict between those freedoms: one person's right to freedom of expression, another person's right to be protected from incitement to hatred and violence against them.

This dilemma is not limited to music. In 1993, faced with the difficulty of applying, effectively, the international prohibition of "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence" (International Pact on Civil and Political Rights, Article 20/2), two members of the UN Human Rights Committee noted that

there may be circumstances in which the right of a person to be free from incitement cannot be fully protected by a narrow, explicit law on incitement [...] This is the case where, in a particular social or historical context, statements that do not meet the strict legal criteria of incitement can be shown to constitute part of a pattern of incitement against a given racial,

religious or national group, or where those interested in spreading hostility and hatred adopt sophisticated forms of speech that are not punishable under the law against racial incitement, even though their effect may be as pernicious as explicit incitement, if not more so.³

It is exactly these "social and historical contexts", such "patterns of incitement" that this research group seeks to analyse.

The specifically musicological approach to this topic has a lot to offer. Music, like language, is one of the characteristic features of humankind. There is no known human society that does not practise something we would recognise as music or musicality. And in most of these societies, music has a very prominent position in social and cultural life: a core element of rituals and ceremony, but also a companion in everyday life; a pedagogical tool and a memory aid; an expression of private emotion and of the public bonds between people; in many cultures music is a direct link to gods and ancestors, for most of us also the directest link to our earliest memories and emotions. Music, unlike language, rarely produces clear semantic statements or commands of the kind which are generally presumed necessary for an accusation of incitement. The impact of music on the human emotions is, however, undisputed, if only inadequately explained. If we can trace recurring features of when, how, and with what impact music is used to intensify conflict situations, we will not only understand music and musicality better, but the humans behind the music as well, and what sometimes motivates them to behave in a way we describe as inhumane. And if we still need justification for this work, we need only look at the world around us. We do not need to rely on the testimonies of those who lived through the Third Reich, either. We could also ask the children who more recently have been drawn into brutality, as child soldiers, in countries such as Angola and Sierra Leone; we could ask them about the songs they were forced to sing before or during the horrific acts of violence they witnessed or committed, had to commit.

As the sociologist Janja Beč said, "Genocide is not impossible, genocide is possible, it shows how this world functions".⁴ And genocide, and other atrocities, are possible because they are carried out by people who are not "evil". It seems to me that our unwillingness to accept the role of music in crimes against humanity and genocide is related to our unwillingness to accept that people, not evil people, just people, are responsible for these acts. Or, in other words: whether or not bad people have songs is not the issue here. The issue is that other people sing along, secure in the knowledge - they think - that bad people have no songs to give. And the real danger arises not just when they sing, but when the rest of us refuse to admit what is happening, and stay silent.

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¹ Quoted in Gottfried Niedhart, "Sangeslust und Singdiktatur im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland", in Gottfried Niedhart & George Broderick (eds.), *Die Lieder der NS-Zeit* (Köln: PapyRossa, 1999) 5-13; this quotation, 5. My translation.

² See for example the title of a study on music in the *Bund deutscher Mädel*: Anne Niessen, "Die Lieder waren die eigentlichen Verführer" ["It was really the songs that seduced us"]. *Mädchen und Musik im Nationalsozialismus* (Mainz: Schott, 1999).

³ Individual opinion from Elizabeth Evatt and David Kretzmar, co-signed by Eckart Klein (members of the UN Human Rights Committee) in the case of *Faurisson vs. France*, Communication No. 550/1993, U. N. Doc. CCPR/C/58/D/550/1993(1996). The case concerned holocaust denial, a crime under French law.

⁴ Janja Beč, "Od Hate Speech do Hate Silence: Banalnost Ravnodušnosti [From hate speech to hate silence. The banality of indifference]" in Sonja Biserko (ed.), *Srebrenica: Od poricanja do priznanja [Srebrenica: From Denial to Confession]* (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2005) 13-18; this quotation, 18. Translation by Emil Kerenji. Beč was responding to the remark made by Robert H. Jackson, chief prosecutor of the Nuremberg Trials, to the effect that they had to prove impossible crimes by possible facts.