

Cultural Musicology: New Perspectives on World War II

Annegret Fauser

The study of organized sound is the business of musicology – yet this routine observation carries a wealth of complexities, especially in the context of interdisciplinary discourse. Although musicology's pluridisciplinary foundations offer open access to such disciplines as history, literary studies, mathematics, or sociology, the field's intradisciplinary discourses and methodologies have shaped musicology in ways that turn most interdisciplinary exchange into a challenge. The scholarly exploration of sound in the twentieth century presents a case in point. Meaningful research on, for example, the music of the contemporary avant-garde composer Kaija Saariaho demands highly sophisticated technical skills in the spheres of the analysis, aesthetics, and technologies of music. While one could imagine interdisciplinary research on Saariaho involving, for example, the humanities or social sciences – perhaps with respect to, say, cultural politics in the late twentieth century – the specialist areas of music research usually remain disciplinarily hermetic. My current work on music in the USA during World War II offers striking examples of the need for, yet problems of, squaring interdisciplinary engagement with intradisciplinarity. The following remarks will address some of those disciplinary intersections.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (1981), Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie* (2008) are just three iconic films of the last thirty years that have shaped what our senses associate with the soundscapes of World War II. In telling the stories of those six years between 1939 and 1945, films and documentaries have added, for over half a century, countless layers of invented, reconstructed, and recovered sound to this slice of history, creating a sonic imaginary whose vivid immediacy provides an acoustic framework not only for movie-goers but also for scholars who engage with that age's music. In that respect, World War II is unique. Earlier historical periods rely on different representational imaginaries where sound can sometimes become fleetingly symbolic (witness the popularity of Jordi Savall's soundtrack for *Tous les matins du monde* of 1991) but more usually remain subordinate to the visual and verbal. Since World War II, on the other hand, recorded sound has become such commonplace that it has lost its historical specificity. Songs may still stand for a period – the Beatles' 'I Want To Hold Your Hand' or Joan Baez's version of 'We Shall Overcome' are heard as em-

bodying the Sixties – but these postwar soundscapes remain open and often fragmentary. World War II as a period, however, has been fashioned into a total soundscape of acoustic and musical signifiers fusing the sounds of war, oppression, and propaganda with those of the radio, concert hall, and opera house. Engaging with the acoustic history of World War II thus poses unique challenges which bring into sharper relief the broader concerns of sound, music, and culture when approached from a musicological perspective.

Two key issues confront musical scholarship in the case of World War II. On the one hand lies the challenge of defamiliarizing the soundscape of this period by reintroducing – or at least acknowledging – the topic's historical, cultural, and sonic distance. Because of the sonic immediacy of modern media experiences, the chasm between the imaginary soundscape of postwar movies and the lived sonic experience of that global war often remains unrecognized. A case in point is the soundtrack for *Saving Private Ryan*.¹ In the DVD's bonus material, members of the production team describe in striking detail how they worked on turning the sonic representation of battle into an 'authentic' experience in the movie theatre, the soundtrack acting as a 'transporter' into historic reality that might seem to make time-travel come true: Ranke would have been delighted. Whereas we have learned to distance ourselves cognitively from the visual experience in the cinema – we remain aware that *Private Ryan* also goes by Matt Damon – the reception of soundtracks tends to be, for the most part, subliminal and unreflected. Therefore, the musicological commonplace of the impossibility of period listening – the fact that our ears are not historical ones, and that our listening experience has little or nothing to do with that of the 1940s – becomes an acutely important distinction for the acoustic history of World War II.

On the other hand, music scholarship on World War II also needs to face the political, cultural, and even acoustic exceptionality of this global conflict. To be sure, many of its cultural discourses and musical practices were well established during the nationalist retrenchment of the 1930s. The outbreak of war in an age where broadcast media had already started to take a significant hold, however, intensified these trends – as, for example, the quest for an autochthonous art music – and added new developments whose specificities were a direct result of the conflict, in particular the deliberate employment of music, and of sound technology, within the military and for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, to explore the wartime politics of sound – whether noise or music – becomes a task situated at the intersection between national (and even local) distinctiveness, international relations, and transnational trends. Ideally, a musicological approach would emphasize the multiperspectival complexities

¹ *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), directed by Steven Spielberg, DVD released by Dreamworks Video, 2004.

of these interwoven sound histories – including comparative approaches within and across national boundaries – while insisting on the past’s sonic and experiential alterity. For present purposes, however, I can address the issues only on a smaller scale. In terms of methodology, my work belongs to what has been called ‘cultural musicology’, defined as a context-conscious engagement with sound objects and musical practice.² Yet music – not context – remains at the center of inquiry. Rather than understanding music as a result of historical events and circumstances, cultural musicology considers sound in its many manifestations as a historical agent. Herein lies the difference from history as a discipline.

World War II was the first war in which modern media played a key role: radio, gramophone, and film allowed for the strategic distribution of sonic materials in entirely new ways. These sonic remnants pose different challenges to scholarship from text-based archives, especially when one seeks to emphasize the chasm between our own ears and those of the past. And then, the music itself hovers in the interstitial space between a past manifestation in performance, its notated form as score, and its continued reception in concert hall, recording, and advertising. Witness such well-loved works as Aaron Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), which have lost their wartime resonances even though they can only be read properly in that context. One should add to this – not so much as a material condition but, rather, as a historical one – the complicated history of concert music in the U.S., with its unique (compared to other Allied and Axis powers) anxieties over European influence and national identity.

I choose two examples drawn from this vast reservoir of wartime musical life in the U.S. in order to emphasize the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic approaches to the topic. In the first, I engage with the role of music and listening in the armed forces to show that careful attention to historical sources allows for rethinking some preconceived aspects of American cultural history. This approach overlaps methodologically to the point of fusion with potential narratives from other disciplines. My second example, however, tells a perhaps far more important story about musical politics, national identity, and performance practice when I discuss the renewed search for musical roots in American composition during these years. Yet this issue also unveils the limits of interdisciplinarity, for without technical analysis and in-depth engagement with the sonic objects themselves, the discussion remains banal.

Our perception of music in the U.S. armed forces is shaped by decades of movies showing that G.I.s loved Glenn Miller, the Andrews Sisters, and Dinah Shore, with music serving as relaxation and entertainment in the manner of

² Ronald Radano introduced this term in his introduction to ‘Music and Identity’, special issue edited by Annegret Fauser and Tamara Levitz, *Musical Quarterly* 89 (2006), pp. 452–456.

good beer and a decent meal. This image is not entirely wrong – just incomplete and oversimplified. Even at first glance, musical practice in the military appears unruly, complex, and contradictory. The U.S. military was sixteen million strong and consisted mostly of draftees: their musical tastes ran the gamut from so-called hillbilly music to evenings spent at the Met. Their music could be that of Bach, Beethoven, or even Wagner – as in the case of a burly ‘bo’an’s mate aboard an aircraft carrier who was devoted to the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*.³ Music, so letters from soldiers reveal, could offer a moment of mental peace even in the life-threatening midst of enemy territory. Thus another sailor reported home from his ship in the Pacific that he went on deck to listen to a broadcast on the ship’s loudspeaker system: ‘[...] above to hear Toscanini with the NBC Symph. It’s very, very seldom that I get the chance to hear music + it sounded wonderful. Very satisfying + restful but at the same time causing pangs of frustration.’⁴

Without CD players and iPods, access even to recorded music was a rare treat for combat troops. Music was available only when there were functioning radios and record players in camp or on ship. With electricity a sporadic commodity in the war theaters, hand-cranked and battery-operated machines in good working order became essential musical tools. One air-force officer pointed out in 1943, for example, that ‘victrolas and records were vitally needed for small units in Africa.’⁵ Popular music certainly had its part to play, but so, too, did classical, the latter given an aesthetic premium while also raising tricky political and ideological questions: was it disloyal for a bosun’s mate onboard an American ship to be devoted to *Tristan*?

The answer clearly came in the negative: great art, so the argument went, knew no national bounds. Nor was it a minority interest, if we are to believe the actions of those responsible for the morale of G.I. Joes. The Army Special Services proposed a new twice-weekly radio program called ‘Soldiers’ Symphony’: ‘Research indicates a high degree of interest in good classical music among overseas troops. Fighting men, faced with the actualities of war, find spiritual encouragement in symphonic music. It gives them “something to hang onto.”’⁶ Here classical music was cast as a source of spiritual sustenance *eo ipso* that could calm the emotional stress especially of soldiers in combat zones,

³ Deems Taylor, Radio Script, Intermission Talks, New York Philharmonic, 31 January 1943, Deems Taylor Papers, Yale University, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Series V, Scripts.

⁴ William Hammerstein, letter to Oscar Hammerstein II, 16 December 1944, Oscar Hammerstein Collection, Library of Congress, Box A.

⁵ Mrs. Barton K. (Mildred) Yount, letter to Harold Spivacke, 12 October 1943, Archives of the Joint Army and Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation, Subcommittee on Music, Library of Congress, Box 21.

⁶ Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule, Radio Division, Information Branch, Special Services, [early 1943,] Papers of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theater Division, *T-Mss 1967-00, Box 5.

and also remind them of just what they might be fighting for. But the military complex saw music as an even more effective weapon when the men could be educated to sing together. Indeed, as the popular entertainer Joe Jordan wrote during his time as a music advisor at Fort Huachuca in Arizona, ‘a singing army is a winning army’. Raymond Kendall, the music coordinator for the United Service Organization (USO; which catered for military welfare and morale), put it more bluntly: ‘Within the armed services [...] singing is primarily a weapon, a medium through which men march straighter, give better commands, fight harder, work longer and move co-ordinately.’⁷ Music as weapon, music as spiritual sustenance: these were two sides of a coin so far as Army Headquarters were concerned. In either case, music – especially classical concert music – was instrumentalized for the war effort.

There was a difference, however, between a classical repertoire drawn from U.S. concert life, which consisted to a large extent of European works, and so-called American music. The latter was still a concept fraught with insecurity and anxiety about what kind of concert music could or should be truly native. While European composers such as Darius Milhaud and Maurice Ravel embraced jazz as the sound of modernity, racial politics in the U.S. made it a more problematic idiom not just across the Atlantic but also at home.⁸ American folk music, with its strong regionalism, was also dangerous ground. With the advent of World War II, American composers started to look for native roots in a different repertoire that had been discarded in the early nineteenth century when German-trained composers started to dominate American concert life.⁹ Elie Siegmeister and Henry Cowell turned to the music of the late eighteenth-century Revolutionary Wars because composers of that period such as William Billings and Francis Hopkinson – the latter a signatory to the Declaration of Independence – offered an embodied authenticity, ‘thereby forging a link between American music and the struggle for freedom that has never since been broken’. Siegmeister thus mythologized Revolutionary songs as unadulterated expressions of ‘an independent American culture’.¹⁰ This music, he proudly claimed, had both ideological and aesthetic value: ‘Besides telling us much about the thoughts and feelings of those who founded our American democracy, these songs have a musical quality all their own.’¹¹

⁷ Captain Joe Jordan, A Singing Army is a Winning Army, in: *Local 802*, September 1943, p. 12; Raymond Kendall is quoted in Isabel Morse Jones, Place of Music in Global War Conditions Defined, in: *Los Angeles Times*, 3 October 1943.

⁸ See Annegret Fauser, Aaron Copland, Nadia Boulanger, and the Making of an ‘American’ Composer, in: *Musical Quarterly* 89 (2006), pp. 524–555.

⁹ Douglas William Shadle, Music of a More Perfect Union: Symphonic Constructions of American National Identity, 1840–1870, Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010.

¹⁰ Elie Siegmeister, Music in Early America, in: Elie Siegmeister (ed.), *The Music Lover’s Handbook*, New York 1943, pp. 661–662 (p. 661).

Some composers – for example William Schuman – used the time-honored method of integrating one or several Revolutionary hymns as the thematic foundation for orchestral works, and relied on contrapuntal variation as their compositional strategy within a predominantly tonal framework. Aaron Copland and Henry Cowell, both more radical modernists, tried their hands at a different form of compositional engagement with the Yankee Tunesmiths of the American Revolution in such works as *Appalachian Spring* (Copland, 1944) and *Hymns and Fuguing Tunes* (Cowell, 1944–45).

Cowell explained in 1945 that his work was ‘written in a manner which is frankly influenced by the early American style of Billings and Walker. However, the early style is not exactly imitated, nor are any of the tunes and melodies taken from these early masters. Rather I asked myself the question, what would have happened in America if this fine, serious early style had developed?’¹² – and therefore, by implication, if a German musical invasion had not taken place. In these works, Cowell used stylistic elements such as modes and open chords that he derived from early American hymn tunes, but he inscribed them into a sparse modernist framework that was more diatonic than tonal. Thus for Cowell, the romance of homegrown American music played itself out not so much in the invention of a past than in the imaginary of an alternate present. For his part, Copland characterized this musical language as ‘a home-spun musical idiom, similar to what I was trying for in a more hectic fashion in the earlier jazz works. [...] I have touched off for myself and others a kind of musical naturalness that we have badly needed.’¹³

Both composers appropriated early American hymn styles for a musical modernism that posited a reconciliation of the archaic with the modern as an autochthonous musical character trait. Indeed, these works dissolved the historical and stylistic distance that often self-consciously marked concert compositions citing folk melodies or other nationalist material. The result invoked a combination of sonic immediacy and historicity that jibed well with the aesthetic demands of wartime America. It has also served the U.S. well since then, such as when President Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration ceremony included part of Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* (arranged by John Williams) to celebrate a renewed American identity. Here, however, I reach the limits of interdisciplinary discourse, not just because the devil sits in the compositional detail – requiring a deeper discussion of technicalities than others might wish or be able to read – but also given that I have moved from historical contexts to

¹¹ Elie Siegmeister, *Songs of Early America, 1620–1830*, New York 1944, p. 3.

¹² Cowell (1945), cited in Wayne D. Shirley, *The Hymns and Fuguing Tunes*, in: David Nicholls (ed.), *The Whole World of Music. A Henry Cowell Symposium*, Amsterdam 1997, pp. 95–143 (p. 96).

¹³ Cited in Wayne D. Shirley, Aaron Copland and Arthur Berger in Correspondence, in: Carol J. Oja/Judith Tick (eds), *Aaron Copland and His World*, Princeton 2005, pp. 179–229 (p. 191).

musical intertexts. Knowing *Appalachian Spring* is one thing, but knowing all the works to which it refers is something else entirely.

My two examples speak to a tiny slice of the history and politics of music (including, but not limited to, sound as such) during World War II: musical production and listening, recorded sound and communal singing, musical politics and the instrumentalizing of music for the war effort. By focusing on so-called classical music – and moreover, by avoiding the more obvious classical compositions with direct wartime themes such as Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*, Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, and Morton Gould's *American Salute* – I have tried to nuance some of the monolithic soundscapes usually associated with World War II.

In contrast to Glenn Miller, the Andrews Sisters, or Dinah Shore, classical music was unlikely to be heard as entertainment. Like them, however, it carried a wealth of other signifiers, some typical of music in general but others specific to genre, style, and function. Other concerns could also intervene: the Office of War Information's (OWI) use of music as propaganda; the Office of Strategic Services' (OSS) incessant but unrealized interest in musical cyphers; the training of military ears by way of musical recording equipment to identify enemy aircraft; the noise of nearby gunfire impinging on the performances of musicians in combat zones. We might even ask just what was being heard by whom when a lonely G.I. trumpeter played *Lili Marleen* to stop a German sniper from firing in the last days of the war.¹⁴ But it certainly had its effect.

For several examples of music mentioned in the text, please visit:

<<http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Fauser-2-2011>>.

Prof. Dr. Annegret Fauser, University of North Carolina, Department of Music, Hill Hall, CB #3320, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3320, USA, E-Mail: fauser@email.unc.edu

¹⁴ German Nazi Sniper Tamed with Trumpet, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmIg8nyGyh4>>.