

A CRITIC AT LARGE JULY 4, 2016 ISSUE

## WHEN MUSIC IS VIOLENCE

*From trumpets at the walls of Jericho to pop songs as torture in the Iraq War, sound can make a powerful weapon.*

**By Alex Ross**

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*Music has the power to cloud reason, stir rage, cause pain, even kill.*

In December, 1989, the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega was expelled from power by American forces. To escape capture, he took refuge in the Papal Nunciatura in Panama City. When an American general arrived to confer with the papal nuncio, the U.S. Army blared music from loudspeakers to prevent journalists from eavesdropping. Members of a psychological-operations unit then decided that non-stop music might aggravate Noriega into surrendering. They made requests for songs on the local armed-forces radio station, and directed the din at Noriega's window. The dictator was thought to prefer opera, and so hard rock dominated the playlist. The songs conveyed threatening, sometimes mocking messages: Alice Cooper's "No More Mr. Nice Guy," AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long."

Although the media delighted in the spectacle, President George H. W. Bush and General Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took a dim view of it. Bush called the campaign “irritating and petty,” and Powell had it stopped. Noriega, who had received psyops training at Fort Bragg in the nineteen-sixties, is said to have slept soundly through the clamor. Nonetheless, military and law-enforcement officials became convinced that they had stumbled on a valuable tactic. “Since the Noriega incident, you’ve been seeing an increased use of loudspeakers,” a psyops spokesman declared. During the siege of the Branch Davidian compound, in Waco, Texas, in 1993, the F.B.I. blasted music and noise day and night. When Palestinian militants occupied the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, in 2002, Israeli forces reportedly tried to eject them with heavy metal. And during the occupation of Iraq the C.I.A. added music to the torture regime known as “enhanced interrogation.” At Guantánamo, detainees were stripped to their underwear, shackled to chairs, and blinded by strobe lights as heavy metal, rap, and children’s tunes assaulted their ears. Music has accompanied acts of war since trumpets sounded at the walls of Jericho, but in recent decades it has been weaponized as never before—outfitted for the unreal landscape of modern battle.

The intersection of music and violence has inspired a spate of academic studies. On my desk is a bleak stack of books examining torture and harassment, the playlists of Iraq War soldiers and interrogators, musical tactics in American crime-prevention efforts, sonic cruelties inflicted in the Holocaust and other genocides, the musical preferences of Al Qaeda militants and neo-Nazi skinheads. There is also a new translation, by Matthew Amos and Fredrick Rönnbäck, of Pascal Quignard’s 1996 book, “The Hatred of Music” (Yale), which explores age-old associations between music and barbarity.

When music is applied to warlike ends, we tend to believe that it has been turned against its innocent nature. To quote the standard platitudes, it has charms to soothe a savage breast; it is the food of love; it brings us together and sets us free. We resist evidence suggesting that music can cloud reason, stir rage, cause pain, even kill. Footnoted treatises on the dark side of music are unlikely to sell as well as the cheery pop-science books that tout music’s ability to make us smarter, happier, and more productive. Yet they probably bring us closer to the true function of music in the evolution of human civilization.

A striking passage in J. Martin Daughtry's "Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq" (Oxford) evokes the sound of the battlefield in the most recent Iraq war:

The growl of the Humvee engine. The *thump-thump-thump* of the approaching helicopter. The drone of the generator. Human voices shouting, crying, asking questions in a foreign tongue. "*Allahu akbar!*": the call to prayer. "*Down on the ground!*": the shouted command. The *dadadadadada* of automatic weapon fire. The *shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* of the rocket in flight. The *fffft* of the bullet displacing air. The sharp *k-k-k-k-r-boom* of the mortar. The rolling *BOOM* of the I.E.D.

Daughtry underscores something crucial about the nature of sound and, by extension, of music: we listen not only with our ears but also with our body. We flinch against loud sounds before the conscious brain begins to try to understand them. It is therefore a mistake to place "music" and "violence" in separate categories; as Daughtry writes, sound itself can be a form of violence. Detonating shells set off supersonic blast waves that slow down and become sound waves; such waves have been linked to traumatic brain injury, once known as shell shock. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are often triggered by sonic signals; New York residents experienced this after September 11th, when a popped tire would make everyone jump.

Sound is all the more potent because it is inescapable: it saturates a space and can pass through walls. Quignard—a novelist and essayist of an oblique, aphoristic bent—writes:

All sound is the invisible in the form of a piercer of envelopes. Whether it be bodies, rooms, apartments, castles, fortified cities. Immaterial, it breaks all barriers. . . . Hearing is not like seeing. What is seen can be abolished by the eyelids, can be stopped by partitions or curtains, can be rendered immediately inaccessible by walls. What is heard knows neither eyelids, nor partitions, neither curtains, nor walls. . . . Sound rushes in. It violates.

The fact that ears have no lids—earplugs notwithstanding—explains why reactions to undesirable sounds can be extreme. We are confronting faceless intruders; we are being touched by invisible hands.

Technological advances, especially in loudspeaker design, have increased sound's invasive powers. Juliette Volcler, in "Extremely Loud: Sound As a Weapon" (New

Press), details attempts to manufacture sonic devices that might debilitate enemy forces or disperse crowds. Long-range acoustic devices, nicknamed “sound cannons,” send out shrill, pulsating tones of up to a hundred and forty-nine decibels—enough to cause permanent hearing damage. Police units unleashed these devices at an Occupy Wall Street rally in 2011 and in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, among other settings. A commercial device called the Mosquito discourages young people from loitering; it emits sounds in the 17.5-to-18.5-kilohertz range, which, in general, only those under the age of twenty-five can hear. Further Army research into low- and high-frequency weapons, which developers hoped would “liquefy the bowels,” apparently failed to yield results, although conspiracy theories proliferate on the Internet.

Humans react with particular revulsion to musical signals that are not of their choice or to their liking. Many neuroscientific theories about how music acts on the brain—such as Steven Pinker’s notion that music is “auditory cheesecake,” a biologically useless pleasure—ignore how personal tastes affect our processing of musical information. A genre that enrages one person may have a placebo effect on another. A 2006 study by the psychologist Laura Mitchell, testing how music-therapy sessions can alleviate pain, found that a suffering person was better served by his or her “preferred music” than by a piece that was assumed to have innately calming qualities. In other words, music therapy for a heavy-metal fan should involve heavy metal, not Enya.

Lily Hirsch’s “Music in American Crime Prevention and Punishment” (Michigan) explores how divergences in taste can be exploited for purposes of social control. In 1985, the managers of a number of 7-Eleven stores in British Columbia began playing classical and easy-listening music in their parking lots to drive away loitering teenagers. The idea was that young people would find such a soundtrack insufferably uncool. The 7-Eleven company then applied this practice across North America, and it soon spread to other commercial spaces. To the chagrin of many classical-music fans, especially the lonely younger ones, it seems to work. This is an inversion of the concept of Muzak, which was invented to give a pleasant sonic veneer to public settings. Here instrumental music becomes a repellent.

To Hirsch, it’s no coincidence that 7-Eleven perfected its technique of musical cleansing while American forces were experimenting with musical harassment. Both

reflect a strategy of “deterrence through music,” capitalizing on rage against the unwanted. The spread of portable digital technology, from CDs to the iPod and on to smartphones, means that it is easier than ever to impose music on a space and turn the psychological screws. The logical next step might be a Spotify algorithm that can discover what combination of songs is most likely to drive a given subject insane.

**W**hen Primo Levi arrived in Auschwitz, in 1944, he struggled to make sense not only of what he saw but of what he heard. As prisoners returned to the camp from a day of hard labor, they marched to bouncy popular music: in particular, the polka “Rosamunde,” which was an international hit at the time. (In America, it was called the “Beer Barrel Polka”; the Andrews Sisters, among others, sang it.) Levi’s first reaction was to laugh. He thought that he was witnessing a “colossal farce in Teutonic taste.” He later grasped that the grotesque juxtaposition of light music and horror was designed to destroy the spirit as surely as the crematoriums destroyed the body. The merry strains of “Rosamunde,” which also emanated from loudspeakers during mass shootings of Jews at Majdanek, mocked the suffering that the camps inflicted.

The Nazis were pioneers of musical sadism, although loudspeakers were apparently deployed more to drown out the screams of victims than to torture them. Jonathan Pieslak, in his 2009 book, “Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War,” finds a telling cinematic precedent in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 film “Foreign Correspondent,” where Nazi spies torment a diplomat with bright lights and swing music. To some extent, sonically enhanced interrogation may have been a Hollywood fantasy that migrated into reality—just as other aspects of the American torture regime took inspiration from TV shows like “24.” Similarly, in the 2004 battle of Fallujah, speakers mounted on Humvees bombarded the Iraqis with Metallica and AC/DC, mimicking the Wagner scene in “Apocalypse Now,” in which a helicopter squadron blasts “The Ride of the Valkyries” as it lays waste to a Vietnamese village.

Jane Mayer, a staff writer at this magazine, and other journalists have shown that the idea of punishing someone with music also emerged from Cold War-era research into the concept of “no-touch torture”—leaving no marks on victims’ bodies. Researchers of the period demonstrated that sensory deprivation and manipulation, including extended bouts of noise, could bring about the disintegration of a subject’s personality.

Beginning in the nineteen-fifties, programs that trained American soldiers and intelligence operatives to withstand torture had a musical component; at one point, the playlist reportedly included the industrial band Throbbing Gristle and the avant-garde vocalist Diamanda Galás. The concept spread to military and police units in other countries, where it was applied not to trainees but to prisoners. In Israel, Palestinian detainees were tied to kindergarten chairs, cuffed, hooded, and immersed in modernist classical music. In Pinochet's Chile, interrogators employed, among other selections, the soundtrack to "A Clockwork Orange," whose notorious aversion-therapy sequence, scored to Beethoven, may have encouraged similar real-life experiments.

*"I'm a gigantic starfish endowed with the gift of speech, not a miracle worker."*

In America, musical torture received authorization in a September, 2003, memo by General Ricardo Sanchez. "Yelling, Loud Music, and Light Control" could be used "to create fear, disorient detainee and prolong capture shock," provided that volume was "controlled to prevent injury." Such practices had already been publicly exposed in a short article in *Newsweek* that May. The item noted that interrogations often featured the cloying theme of "Barney & Friends," in which a purple dinosaur sings, "I love you / You love me / We're a happy family." The article's author, Adam Piore, later recalled that his editors couched the item in joking terms, adding a sardonic kicker: "In search of comment from Barney's people, Hit Entertainment, *Newsweek* endured five minutes of Barney while on hold. Yes, it broke us, too." Repeating a pattern from the Noriega and Waco incidents, the media made a game of proposing ideal torture songs.

The hilarity subsided when the public learned more of what was going on at Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Mosul, and Guantánamo. Here are some entries from the interrogation log of Mohammed al-Qahtani, the alleged "twentieth hijacker," who was refused admittance to the United States in August, 2001:

1315: Corpsman checked vitals—O.K. Christina Aguilera music played. Interrogators ridiculed detainee by developing creative stories to fill in gaps in detainee's cover story.

0400: Detainee was told to stand and loud music was played to keep detainee awake. Was told he can go to sleep when he tells the truth.

1115: Interrogation team entered the booth. Loud music was played that included songs in Arabic. Detainee complained that it was a violation of Islam to listen to Arabic music.

0345: Detainee offered food and water—refused. Detainee asked for music to be turned off. Detainee was asked if he can find the verse in the Koran that prohibits music.

1800: A variety of musical selections was played to agitate the detainee.

Aguilera seems to have been chosen because female singers were thought to offend Islamist detainees. Interrogation playlists also leaned on heavy-metal and rap numbers, which, as in the Noriega case, delivered messages of intimidation and destruction. Songs in regular rotation included Eminem's "Kim" ("Sit down, bitch / If you move again I'll beat the shit out of you") and Drowning Pool's "Bodies" ("Let the bodies hit the floor").

Does such coerced listening qualify as torture? The N.Y.U.-based musicologist Suzanne Cusick, one of the first scholars to think deeply about music in the Iraq War, addressed the question in a 2008 paper for *The Journal of the Society for American Music*. During the Bush Administration, the U.S. government held that techniques inducing psychological rather than physical pain did not amount to torture, as international conventions have defined it. Cusick, however, makes clear that the loud-music tactic displays a chilling degree of casual sadism: the choice of songs seems designed to amuse the captors as much as to nauseate the captives. Few detainees probably understood the English lyrics aimed at them.

No official policy dictated the prison playlists; interrogators improvised them on-site, making use of whatever music they had on hand. Pieslak, who interviewed a number of Iraq veterans, observes that soldiers played many of the same songs for their own benefit, particularly when they were psyching themselves up for a dangerous mission. They, too, favored the most anarchic corners of heavy metal and gangsta rap. Thus, certain songs served both to whip soldiers into a lethal frenzy and to annihilate the spirit of "enemy combatants." You couldn't ask for a clearer demonstration of the non-universality of music, of its capacity to sow discord.

The soldiers told Pieslak that they used music to strip themselves of empathy. One said that he and his comrades sought out a "predator kind of music." Another, after admitting with some embarrassment that Eminem's "Go to Sleep" ("Die, motherfucker, die") was a "theme song" for his unit, said, "You've got to become inhuman to do

inhuman things.” The most unsettling choice was Slayer’s “Angel of Death,” which imagines the inner world of Josef Mengele: “Auschwitz, the meaning of pain / The way that I want you to die.” Such songs are far removed from uplifting wartime propaganda like “Over There,” the patriotic 1917 tune by George M. Cohan. The image of soldiers prepping for a mission by listening to Metallica’s “One”—“Landmine has taken my sight . . . Left me with life in hell”—suggests the degree to which they, too, felt trapped in a malevolent machine.

**A**s Hirsch and other scholars point out, the idea of music as inherently good took hold only in the past few centuries. Philosophers of prior eras tended to view the art as an ambiguous, unreliable entity that had to be properly managed and channelled. In Plato’s Republic, Socrates scoffs at the idea that “music and poetry were only play and did no harm at all.” He distinguishes between musical modes that “suitably imitate the tone and rhythm of a courageous person who is active in battle” and those which strike him as soft, effeminate, lecherous, or melancholy. The Chinese “Book of Rites” differentiated between the joyous sound of a well-ruled state and the resentful sound of a confused one. John Calvin believed that music “has an insidious and well-nigh incredible power to move us whither it will.” He went on, “We must be all the more diligent to control music in such a way that it will serve us for good and in no way harm us.”

German thinkers in the idealist and Romantic tradition—Hegel, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Schopenhauer, among others—sparked a drastic reevaluation of music’s significance. It became the doorway to the infinitude of the soul, and expressed humanity’s collective longing for freedom and brotherhood. With the canonization of Beethoven, music became the vehicle of genius. Sublime as Beethoven is, the claim of universality blended all too easily with a German bid for supremacy. The musicologist Richard Taruskin, whose rigorously unsentimental view of Western music history anchors much recent work in the field, likes to quote a phrase ironically articulated by the historian Stanley Hoffman, who died last year: “There are universal values, and they happen to be mine.”

Despite the cultural catastrophe of Nazi Germany, the Romantic idealization of music persists. Pop music in the American tradition is now held to be the all-encompassing,

world-redeeming force. Many consumers prefer to see only the positive side of pop: they cherish it as a culturally and spiritually liberating influence, somehow free of the rapacity of capitalism even as it overwhelms the marketplace. Whenever it is suggested that music might arouse or incite violence—Eminem’s graphic fantasies of abuse and murder, or, more recently, the whiff of rape culture in Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines”—fans suddenly devalue music’s potency, portraying it as a vehicle for harmless play that cannot propel bodies into action. When Eminem proclaims that he is “just clownin’, dogg,” he is taken at his word.

Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan expose this inconsistency in “Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence” (2008). They are not reactionaries in the Tipper Gore mode, trying to whip up a moral panic. Pioneers of pop-music studies, they address their subject with deep respect. Nonetheless, if music can shape “our sense of the possible,” as they say, it must also be able to act destructively. Either music affects the world around it or it does not. Johnson and Cloonan avoid claims of direct causality, but they refuse to rule out links between violence in music—in terms both of lyrical content and of raw decibel impact—and violence in society. Furthermore, musical brutality need not involve a brutal act, for a “song of vilification is in itself an act of social violence.”

The pattern of sonic aggression that runs from the Noriega siege to the Iraq War poses these issues in the starkest terms. There was a nasty undertow of cultural triumphalism in the hard-hitting, hypermasculine music used to humiliate foreign prisoners. “The detainee’s subjectivity was to be lost in a flood of *American* sounds,” Johnson and Cloonan write. On a symbolic level, the rituals at Guantánamo present an extreme image of how American culture forces itself on an often unwilling world.

Although music has a tremendous ability to create communal feeling, no community can form without excluding outsiders. The sense of oneness that a song fosters in a human herd can seem either a beautiful or a repulsive thing—usually depending on whether you love or hate the song in question. Loudness heightens the tension: blaring music is a hegemonic move, a declaration of disdain for anyone who thinks differently. Whether we are marching or dancing or sitting silently in chairs, we are being molded into a single mass by sound. As Quignard notes in “The Hatred of Music,” the Latin

word *obaudire*, to obey, contains *audire*, to hear. Music “hypnotizes and causes man to abandon the expressible,” he writes. “In hearing, man is held captive.”

Quignard’s slender, unnerving volume is quite different in tone from the sober academic books on the theme of music and violence. It hovers in a peculiarly French space between philosophy and fiction, and goes on mysterious lyrical flights, animating scenes from history and myth. One astonishing sequence evokes St. Peter’s denial of Jesus before the third crowing of the cock. Quignard imagines that, ever after, Peter was traumatized by any high-pitched noise, and that he soundproofed his home to escape the cacophony of the street: “The palace was shrouded in silence, the windows blinded with drapes.”

For years, Quignard was active on the French music scene, organizing concerts and working with the Catalan viol player Jordi Savall. Quignard co-wrote the screenplay for the music-drenched 1991 film “Tous les Matins du Monde.” Soon afterward, he retreated from such projects and wrote “The Hatred of Music” as a *cri de cœur*. Although he does not explain this change of heart, he gestures toward the meaningless ubiquity of music in contemporary life—Mozart in the 7-Eleven. Quignard gives this familiar lament a savage edge. In a chapter on the infernal Muzak of Auschwitz, he quotes Tolstoy: “Where one wants to have slaves, one must have as much music as possible.”

The book’s most disquieting passages suggest that music has always had a violent heart—that it may be rooted in the urge to dominate and kill. He speculates that some of the earliest music was made by hunters luring their prey, and devotes a chapter to the myth of the Sirens, who, in his reading, beguiled men with song just as men once beguiled animals with music. Quignard muses that some early weapons doubled as instruments: a string stretched across a bow could be resonantly plucked or it could send an arrow through the air. Music relied conspicuously on the slaughter of animals: horsehair bows drawn over catgut, horns torn from the heads of big game.

What to do with these dire ruminations? Renouncing music is not an option—not even Quignard can bring himself to do that. Rather, we can renounce the fiction of music’s innocence. To discard that illusion is not to diminish music’s importance;

rather, it lets us register the uncanny power of the medium. To admit that music can become an instrument of evil is to take it seriously as a form of human expression. ♦

*Alex Ross has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1993, and he became the magazine's music critic in 1996.*

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