

Musical Shadows:
Mapping Music as Torture at Auschwitz and Guantánamo

This project began as an attempt to think about music in space, in order to examine its totalitarian function. How does music work to control space, and how can it affect bodies inhabiting that space? What does an environment saturated with an enemy culture's music sound like, and is the music functioning as anything beyond cultural aggression? I explored this set of questions using two separate cases, Auschwitz concentration camp and Guantánamo Bay detention center.

Of course, there are differences, in theory and practice, between music used at Auschwitz and Guantanamo. First, the US is dedicated to keeping prisoners alive, both for PR purposes and ostensibly to learn intelligence from them. This stands in distinction to the Nazi policy of general extermination. Torture in Nazi camps was, in a certain way, circumstantial. As there was no actionable intelligence to be imagined from concentration camp prisoners, torture was often experienced as a side effect of being imprisoned in a murder camp, not even obliquely as a means to an end. This distinction means that, while the overall agendas of Auschwitz and Guantanamo obviously differ, music in both was used for similar purposes: environmental control and display of cultural hegemony. At Guantanamo there is the added aspect of using sound's physical properties to torture prisoners, which I will discuss in more depth later on.

In the case of Auschwitz, I used survivor testimonies to place songs on a map of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau, creating an interactive map that users can explore. Through mapping music demanded by captors in red and voluntary music created by prisoners in blue, I hoped to make a musical geography of controlled spaces in the camps. Although the entirety of Auschwitz was controlled by Nazi soldiers to some extent, voluntary music making could potentially illuminate spaces which were subject to slightly less rigidity and slightly more freedom.

To introduce the maps, I'd like to give a brief overview of the kinds of music in Auschwitz and how we can know what was played or sung where. Most of my sources are first hand accounts by survivors like Emilio Jani's *My Voice Saved Me* (1961) or Fania Fenelon's *Playing for Time* (1976, *Sursis pour l'Orchestre*), written by pre-war musicians who were recognized in the camps and made to play, both for the enjoyment of the SS and in orchestras that accompanied prisoners into and out of the camp gates. Scholars like Guido Fackler and Shirli Gilbert have compiled detailed accounts of musical life in the camps, ranging from private prisoner compositions describing the miseries of daily life, to required Sunday afternoon concerts performed outside the villa of the camp commandant. This music served several sometimes contradictory functions; as slave laborers, the prisoners were forced to perform for the enjoyment of their captors, a process which survivors often described as alienating them from music they had previously loved. At the same time, performance allowed for a modicum of creative expression, an outlet not readily available for manual laborers. For example, after a rehearsal in Block 24 of Auschwitz I, a Hungarian pianist played Chopin's Funeral March (Piano Sonata #2 in B-flat minor), saying it was the only appropriate music considering the circumstances <Chopin clip>.

This same block, however, transformed into a perverse jazz club when SS officers came to unwind after a long day. They would ask musicians to play prohibited American jazz and ragtime songs like Dinah, Sweet Sue, I can't give you anything but love, and Alexander's Ragtime Band. <Alexander's Ragtime Band clip>

And directly outside block 24 was the area through which work gangs marched into and out of the gates, accompanied by various marches like Fucik's Florentiner Marsch, Liebling wenn ich traurig bin, and the Horst Wessel Lied. <Liebling clip>

Obviously this became a very different type of musical space at different times of the day. This sort of struggle over musical space as a metaphor for control can be seen in the Hospital barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Szymon Laks described how his ensemble was sent to the barracks on Christmas of 1943. to console the sick with carols, specifically Stille Nacht. "After a few bars quiet weeping began to be heard from all sides, which became louder as we played and finally burst out in general uncontrolled sobbing. I didn't know what to do. To play on? Louder? From all sides, spasmodic cries began to roll in on me. 'Enough of this! Stop! Clear out! Let us die in peace!'" <Stille Nacht>

The prisoners wish to die in peace, which is to say, they want the barest hint of autonomy over the space in which they die. This music, to which they are forced to listen, disturbs them not only because it disrupts that space, but because it gets inside their bodies. It shares their air and physically touches their ears. We know that sound is a physical medium with a bodily affect and that sound bleeds easily. A piece played inside a brick barrack would be audible on the path outside, and the march played next to the path would be audible to anyone within. Moreover, there is a limited distinction between sounds heard by guards and sounds heard by prisoners- a difference in psychological affect, certainly, but not in the music itself.

In this strange sense, prisoners and guards are united in their experience. In the case of Auschwitz, their shared space is not a unique revelation; one is not surprised to note that the guards were also surrounded by barbed wire, but that this wire served a radically different function for them than it did in the minds of the prisoners. But in the case of musical torture in Guantánamo, this sharing was, at least in one instance, more radical. Jonathan Pieslak in his book *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, gives the following quote from U.S. soldier C.J. Grisham, who used music during interrogations in Iraq: "As long as they were listening to babies crying, I had to listen to babies crying...You are not allowed to do anything to the enemy, by law, that you wouldn't do yourself. So if I'm getting eight hours of sleep, the people I'm interrogating have to get eight hours of sleep, if I'm only getting two hours of sleep, then my prisoners are only required to get two hours of sleep. We can't treat them any worse than we treat ourselves."¹

Grisham's account of US policy in Iraqi prisons does not tally with the testimony of former Guantánamo prisoners, who recall being chained in stress positions, sleep deprived, kept in extreme cold or heat, and blasted with floodlights and loud music. However, his description of the law requiring equality of torture among prisoners and guards, provides an interesting inversion of, for lack of a better term, a traditional understanding of torture. In Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, torture's premise is the utter gulf between a person being tortured, who

¹ Pieslak 88

experiences the pain as world-destroying, and a person not being tortured, who doubts the existence of that pain because of its utter unsharability. She describes the divide in spatial terms: the world of the victim shrinks down to the single room in which torture is occurring, then their own body, inside of which the pain is so intense as to be world-destroying. If the boundaries between torturer and victim blur- not in their power relations, but by the similarity of their experienced environment- what does that mean?

The psychologist Gustav Keller wrote in 1981 that “purely physical torture is losing importance. Psychological and psychiatric findings and methods are taking its place, planned and sometimes administered by white-collar torturers.”² This actually doesn’t seem to be true; plenty of purely physical torture has been reported by former prisoners. The implication, however, is one of progress: that torture has been civilized, professionalized, in some way stripped of its teeth. After the news broke that American soldiers were torturing detainees in secret prisons like Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the idea spread that our “No touch” torture is, at least, a lot nicer than conventional kinds of torture other countries use, which often draw blood and leave marks on the body. Endless news cycles discussed whether waterboarding, hooding, and playing loud music could even be considered torture, and internet commenters quickly minimized the particular horror of musical torture with quips about what would be on their own torture playlists. Musicians, when asked for comment, sometimes responded dismissively: *Metallica*’s James Hetfield replied to the news with the comment, “We’ve been punishing our parents, our wives, our loved ones with this music for ever. Why should the Iraqis be any different?”³ Bob Singleton, who composed the often-used Barney the Purple Dinosaur, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Would it annoy them? Perhaps...But could it “break” the mental state of an adult? If so, that would say more about their mental state than about the music.”⁴ The implication that these torture methods are somehow softer or easier to withstand than traditional methods is a dangerous and interesting fallacy, growing out of our natural desire to justify our country’s actions and the inherent doubt that, according to Scarry, accompanies an account of another person’s torture.

But no-touch torture is exactly what Scarry might as well be describing when she writes that “this unseen sense of self-betrayal in pain...is objectified in forced exercises that make the prisoner’s body an active agent, an actual cause of pain.” In no-touch torture, the torture weapon is the prisoner’s own body, which aches in stress positions, shivers, sweats, and demands sleep. The body itself becomes the enemy, and torture works from inside out, psychologically destroying the prisoner. Further, this kind of torture is much easier to dismiss in the public sphere, as we’ve seen. During war-crime trials, the torture weapon is often used as a synecdoche for the torture itself, allowing an observer a symbolic way to conceive of the act that weapon accomplished. A hammer, thumbscrew or bathtub presented as evidence manifest the experience of that torture in an object. But with no-touch torture, where the weapon is the prisoner’s body, no such object exists to display as a remnant of the event. Particularly in the absence of a clearly identifiable torture weapon, the room itself becomes toxic for the victim.

² Qtd in Grüny 207

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/19/usa.guantanamo>

⁴ Los Angeles Times, July 10, 2008, “Barney the Purple Torturer?”

Again to quote Scarry, “the torture room is not just the setting in which the torture occurs...it is itself literally converted into another weapon, into an agent of pain. All aspects of the basic structure-- walls, ceiling, windows, doors- undergo this conversion.”⁵ By turning the environment itself into a weapon, torture unmakes the world, undoes its normal referents, mirroring the unmaking of the victim’s world during torture, and part of this process requires the “mutilation of the domestic,” the perversion of quotidian objects- chair, light, bed, or music- into torture weapons.⁶

As a physical torture, music is rarely used by itself; instead, it’s a component of the toxic environment. By blasting music, blaring lights, and keeping a cell ice cold, a prisoner is prevented from sleeping, and this deprivation is the ostensible goal. Music’s physical properties, however, mean that it can be used as a weapon by itself. The US and Israel have both used LRADs and Infrasonic weapons to suppress resistance, causing reports of blown out eardrums, dizziness, ringing, and temporary deafness. “Safe” levels of sound are articulated in scientific language. As the CIA guide on interrogation tactics explains, “as a practical guide, there is no permanent damage for continuous, 24 hours a day exposure to sound at 82 dB or lower, 84 dB (highway) for up to 18 hours a day, 90 dB (cranked up motorbike) for up to 8 hours, 95 dB (truck engine at full throttle) for 4 hours, 100 dB (jackhammer) for 2 hours.”

But in Guantanamo, music’s physical and psychological properties interrelate. Not only does the music cause headaches and sound like loud, painful banging, its aesthetic qualities demand an innate human reaction. When we listen to music over and over again, it inscribes itself in our brains (think of ‘getting a tune stuck in your head’ or a German ‘Ohrwurm’). Musicologist Christian Grüny writes about a former prisoner of Guantanamo who was tortured with David Grey’s “Babylon.” Years after when Grüny played a part of the song for him, he immediately burst into sobs. The former prisoner, was not responding to the sound waves as physical objects, but to the song itself. Suzanne Cusick describes it, “as being plunged into something like the post-modern, post-Foucauldian dystopia where one is unable quite to name, much less resist, the overwhelmingly diffuse Power that is outside one, but also is inside, and that operates by forcing one to comply against one’s will, against one’s interests, because there is no way, not even a retreat into interiority--to escape the pain.”

So if the music is functioning on both physical and psychological levels, what is the rationale behind the music chosen to be played? During the siege of Fallujah in November 2004, the 361st PsyOps company bombed the city with Metallica. As PsyOps spokesman Ben Abel explained at the time “It’s not the music so much as the sound. It’s like throwing a smoke bomb. The aim is to disorient and confuse the enemy to gain a tactical advantage...our guys have been getting really creative in finding sounds they think would make the enemy upset...These guys have their own mini-disc players, with their own music, plus hundreds of downloaded sounds. It’s kind of personal preference how they choose the songs. We’ve got very young guys making these decisions.”⁷

⁵ Scarry 40

⁶ Scarry 45

⁷ Note: During the siege of Fallujah, mullahs responded to American rap with “loudspeakers hooked to generators, trying to drown out Eminem with prayers, chants of Allahu Akbar, and Arabic music” (Pieslak 85)

Because the torturous point is the sound, not the music, the songs chosen seem to serve the dual purpose of torturing prisoners as well as comforting soldiers far from their homelands. The forced music at Auschwitz served a similar function (for example, *Hoch auf dem gelben Wagen*, Beethoven, Schubert). Through music, guards can make themselves comfortable, emphasize their cultural hegemony, and impress upon prisoners their impotence in a musical space controlled by their captors.

Some of the selections are understandable as aggressive signifiers of culture. Satanic heavy metal groups, like Dope's (*Die Motherfucker Die*) and Drowning Pool's "Let the Bodies Hit the Floor" or hard rock, like Rage Against the Machine, are the easiest choice to understand. Some patriotic (or seemingly patriotic) songs, like Springsteen's *Born in the USA*, can also be understood as a kind of forced cultural incursion. A third category, oversexualized music like Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears, makes contextual sense, considering the sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

The last category is more difficult to parse. It includes emotional, nostalgic music: Fleetwood mac, Matchbox 20, Chris Christopherson, David Grey's "Babylon" as well as children's songs- notably the themes from Sesame Street and Barney the Purple Dinosaur. To me, this bespeaks a strange nostalgia for a specifically American childhood, the same impulse that led to the Broadway show *Avenue Q* taken to a horrible extreme- the idea that American children must grow up and inherit a world that is nothing like what they anticipated while watching Sesame Street. *Bye Bye Miss American Pie*, another song in this category, similarly invokes nostalgia for a lost past, in addition to carrying a religious implication- one verse reads, "the three men I admired most, the father, son, and holy ghost, they caught the last train to the coast, the day the music died"- in a kind of requiem for a nation that's strayed from its God.

On that note, I want to end with a quote from Colonel Walter Manley, who ran the Jericho Project under the Bush Administration: "we came to realize that there is no sound more powerful than the one that conquers your true heart with deep vibrations...Ultimately what we are talking about is a weapon that uses harmonic infrasound amplified by the power of Evangelical Christian faith to summon and deploy a voice that sounds like it comes from right inside your head, but also sounds like it is coming from everywhere else...Ladies and Gentlemen, God is there to hear our prayer."⁸ With its combination of religious fervor, technical jargon and psychological acuity, Manley's statement illustrates the overlapping power structures which must be taken into account to truly map the musical geography of a detention center.

⁸ Goodman 15-16