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Sonic Witnesses: Music, Testimony, and Truth

Abstract: Ever since Richard Taruskin pointed to Steve Reich's use of survivor testimony in hailing the composer's *Different Trains* (1989) as 'the only adequate musical response ... to the Holocaust', composers have embraced spoken testimony and other forms of sonic witnessing. This persistent connection between music, testimony, and witness is framed as preserving memories or reflecting wider trends towards a documentary aesthetic; yet this does not address the blurring of the lines between the presumed truths of sound and its aesthetic presentation in music.

Starting from Hannah Arendt's claim that 'factual truths are never compellingly true', I trace the interpretation of documentary sound as conveying reality and truth in music. This is followed by examples of testimonial witnesses in works by Philip Miller and Mary Kouyoumdjian. Finally, I reflect on the roles that testimonial music might play in creating or imparting compelling truths and its connection to conflict.

Keywords: Documentary Aesthetics, Testimony, Truth, Witness, Hannah Arendt, Mary Kouyoumdjian, Philip Miller, Steve Reich

What is the relationship between music and truth? This broad question has preoccupied thinkers from the time of Aristotle and Confucius, though many of the answers proffered over millennia have since lost their appeal. Indeed, to write about 'music' and 'truth' in the present-day context immediately raises questions of *what* music and *whose* truth. As will become clear, Western conceptions about truth and testimony are grounded in philosophical thought and legal practices, and they have often found expression through Western art music. This does not mean that the connections between music (broadly conceived), testimony, and truth are limited to Western societies. These structures of thought and practice are imbricated in Western culture, but they have frequently been exported to other societies, including under the aegis of social change

and conflict transformation. This philosophical imperialism has been a powerful shaping force around the world, even as it has been resisted, undermined, and brought into dialogue with other knowledges and practices. Although I will focus on musical practices which resonate within Western traditions, understanding the ways in which specific sounds, voices, and practices are invested with truth-bearing significance and then deployed in music can reveal lacunae as well as conceptual overlap that may illuminate wider studies of music and conflict.

In this essay I focus on one specific connection between music and truth: namely, late twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers' appropriation and manipulation of pre-recorded testimonial texts as sonic witnesses to violent and contested histories. Using examples from South Africa and Lebanese refugee populations in the United States, I demonstrate how composers who are not first-hand witnesses to conflict draw on documentary sound in order to align their compositional choices with testimonial truth. In these works, composers shape the interactions between the performing body (both live and recorded), environmental sound, musical gestures, and testimonial language to construct musical works and their performance as engaging in the act of testifying to truth.

After brief excursions on the nature of testimony and the comparatively recent surge of interest in its study as mediated through the prism of the Holocaust and trauma studies, I introduce some of the main questions surrounding music's general testimony- and truth-bearing capacities. I then turn to arguing that the combination of music as sounded, embodied, temporal practices (with its attendant world-disclosive and world-creative character) and the compelling force of testimony serves a key role in establishing factual truths in society. It is this potent marriage that makes testimonial music an important feature of what are sometimes called 'post-conflict' societies in

which fixing historical facts in place is at once a fraught and necessary component of building peace.¹

* * *

In 1997, Richard Taruskin hailed American composer Steve Reich as having solved one of the problems of art after Auschwitz by ‘compos[ing] the only adequate musical response – one of the few adequate artistic responses in any medium – to the Holocaust’ ([1997] 2008: 101). The work in question was Reich’s *Different Trains*, his 1988 composition for string quartet and pre-recorded tape that employs snippets of text about life in the 1930s and 1940s gleaned from various sources including interviews with three Jewish Holocaust survivors. According to Taruskin, at the heart of the composer’s success was his choice to eschew emotional manipulation and present the survivors’ testimonies as straightforward narration. The resulting juxtaposition of texts means that ‘there is just the perception that while this happened here, that happened there, and a stony invitation to reflect’ ([1997] 2008: 101).

Looking back at this from a distance of twenty-five years, the implication that any such narrative can be considered apart from authorial choices seems like a specious claim to objectivity and universality – one might even argue, to history. Amy Lynn Wlodarski (2010) has demonstrated persuasively that such assertions are undermined by evidence of authorial framing, mishearings, and other aesthetically significant choices in how Reich engages with his testimonial subjects in *Different Trains*. Yet Reich’s own

¹ As will become evident, ‘post-conflict’ is often a misnomer. Many of the examples I cite are from societies with recent histories of violent conflict, and in that sense they might be thought of as ‘post-conflict’ even though the conflicts and their causes continue to be a source of friction. However, given that all societies experience conflict, the implicit assumption that only some societies are subject to conflict is misleading.

programme notes state: ‘[*Different Trains*] presents both a documentary and a musical reality and begins a new musical direction. It is a direction that I expect will lead to a new kind of documentary music video theatre in the not too distant future’ (Reich 1988). The declaration that a musical work can present reality – or *realities*, both documentary and musical – is striking, but so too is the suggestion that this kind of engagement with the world is a key aim at the end of the twentieth century.

I begin here, at the heart of contemporary Western art music, because in some respects, Reich’s claims were prescient: *Different Trains* has become a landmark in a wide array of musical works that incorporate testimonial voices or adopt a self-consciously documentary approach to historical phenomena. A shared aesthetic hinging on the interpolation of music and testimonial texts links both the aesthetic and the testimonial categories and positions composers, performers, and audiences as mediated or secondary witnesses. Yet this ostensible relationship between musical and documentary realities is a contested one, in no small part due to its reliance on an unstable confluence of elements (sound, testimony, and history) with different claims to truth. I explore how composers use testimony to mediate the expression of truth, and thereby contribute to the creation of documentary and musical realities. Through deliberate appeals to the truth via documentary sound, composers craft narratives that benefit from testimonial assumptions of truth while simultaneously contributing to the process of fixing those truths within the public sphere. In exploring this phenomenon, I begin by surveying different facets of the relationship between testimony and music. I then trace how interpreting testimonial sounds as conveying reality leads to their investment with extra layers of truth. This is followed by an assessment of the types of sonic material construed as witnesses in two examples of contemporary music and a brief survey of the general contours between music, testimony, and truth in other

contexts of societal conflict. Finally, I reflect on how scholars might think more deeply about the roles that testimonial music, with its attendant excess of aesthetic signification, might play in creating or imparting compelling truths.

Testifying to the Truth

In 1992, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub inaugurated the field of trauma studies with a declaration that the twentieth century was ‘an era of testimony’ (1992: 5). They might have added, as did Annette Wievorka (2006), that it was also an ‘era of the witness’. As this suggests, testimony and witnessing, together with their intertwined legal and religious connotations, have been a signal note in interpreting recent history. Against this backdrop, German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt’s (1971) claim that ‘factual truths are never compellingly true’ but that ‘facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs’ is a striking reassessment of the relationship between witness, testimony, and truth. On the one hand, this seems to point to something quite self-evident; namely, that humans, in general, relate better to stories than to statistics. On the other hand, the relationship Arendt draws between facts, truth, and testimony seems to admit the latter to a kind of extra-truthiness in its grounding of facts. This acknowledgement of the heightened value ascribed to recitations of personal experience locates testimony by witnesses beyond questions of mere facticity. Yet, the caveat that such witnesses be trustworthy is necessary, as the witness and their testimony have often stood in an unstable relation to truth.

Arendt’s connection between facts, truth, and testimony stems in part from the habitual Western distinction between *rational* truths of mathematics, science, and philosophy, and *factual* truths of events. It is the ‘modest verities’ of the latter which are

fragile and vulnerable to erasure (for more, see Arendt 2006). Furthermore, her insistence on the compelling force of testimony is a reminder that testimony shapes not only facts of history but also actions in relation to those facts. It is not for nothing that to ‘bear false witness’ is a synonym for lying; in fact, Arendt’s assertion is embedded in an essay devoted to the relative capacities of truth and lies to inspire action. One reading of Arendt suggests that the reason why facts must be compelling is so that people may know and believe in what has happened in order that they might take meaningful action.

In her account of this interlocking constellation of facts and truth, Arendt spends little time discussing what testimony is or who may testify to the facts. Fortunately, since the mid-twentieth century, the nature and function of testimony, together with the figure of the witness, has become a subject of increasing scholarly and societal attention. This burgeoning interest was initially centred on the witness of Holocaust survivors in a phenomenon which scholars such as Wievorka, Nancy Goodman, and Marilyn Meyers trace to the widespread coverage of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann (Goodman and Meyers 2012: 11; Wievorka 2006).² Certainly, the Eichmann trial – notably the testimony of Zindel Grynszpan – convinced Arendt that the testimony of survivors deserved to be heard publicly. Moreover, the Eichmann trial can be seen as significant from a legal perspective, too: namely that the witnesses called to the stand did not necessarily have a direct connection to the accused. They were summoned in part by virtue of their role as survivors (*superstes* in Latin, meaning the one who

² Others have noted additional confluences, for example, the appearance of English translations of Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* in 1958 and of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* in 1960. Wiesel himself thought that it was his generation that invented testimony in its current form (1977: 9). More broadly, there is a long history within Jewish cultural and religious practices of bearing witness that shape post-Holocaust ideas of testimony in the Western imagination.

outlives or who stands by) to give a complex and as-full-as-possible account of the Holocaust, thereby blurring the boundary between a strict legal understanding of testimony to the facts as used in a trial and a more social understanding of testimony as a public recounting of relevant personal experience. This foregrounding of the pedagogical and emotional value of testimony within the solemn legal framework of a trial leads Wievorka to argue that it was at this moment that the witness gained a new and crucial function, that of a ‘bearer of history’ (2006: 88). Over time, bearing witness to the Holocaust came to encompass attesting to its events not in the context of a legal trial, but in the context of moral life and historical knowledge. As Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Wiegel suggest, the contemporary victim-witness has an ‘aura of the sacred’ (2017: xxv).

As the number of direct witnesses to the Holocaust dwindled in the later twentieth century, a growing desire to preserve extant memories of the Holocaust and thereby propagate knowledge about its events led to rapid changes in the position of the survivor-witness. Archives, such as the Fortunoff Video Archive Library for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, proliferated. This historical moment also signified the advent of what Wievorka calls a ‘double delegation of witnessing’ that anoints a new generation of witnesses in the ‘children who grew up during the war and for whom the memory of a traumatic past no longer resides in the recollection of particular events, about which nothing can be said, but in the irremediable shock those events created in their young lives’ (2006: 145). Such a delegation shifts attention to the role of commemorative processes in perpetuating witnessing across time and space via an intersubjective relationship between witness, testimony, and audience, or ‘*testimony constellation*’ (Krämer and Weigel 2017: x), that provides a necessary – and necessarily relational – frame for understanding the intergenerational transmission of testimony.

The Holocaust continues to exert a centripetal force in the theorization of witnessing and truth in Western circles of trauma studies, but the accompanying linguistic frame for truth has been challenged by scholars working in other fields.³ In her essay ‘Performing Ruins’ (2009), performance scholar Diana Taylor outlines three layers of the commemorative process, from *revelation* (establishing a factual account of the past), to *witnessing* (generating a social history that acknowledges individual experience), to *transmission* (expressing facts and experiences in ways that allow these histories to be shared). This division distinguishes between activities oriented towards producing knowledge (Taylor’s revelation) and those oriented towards acknowledgement (witnessing, and, to a lesser extent, transmission). It also traces a temporal progression from the production of facts to their anchoring within the immediate social fabric and expansion to encompass other social groups. Music, however, operates across these layers depending on needs and knowledge of its audience and its position in society. Performers in genres closely related to protest music often assert factual truths in opposition to the state or other institutions, thereby engaging in revelation, while commemorative works tend to engage with the latter two of these layers, often through adopting a testimonial aesthetic that positions the audience (or, less commonly, the performers) as secondary witnesses.⁴ In the next

³ The focus in early trauma studies on oral history as testimony privileges certain kinds of transmission processes. I will engage with ideas of embodied sound later, but wish to highlight Alexander Cannon’s (2021) work on physical gesture and Rachel Harris’s (2012) examination of melody and performance style as two challenges to the dominance of language in transmitting cultural knowledge and trauma across time. Diana Taylor’s (2003) theorization of the repertoire as knowledge is another key text in this area.

⁴ The boundaries between music as contestation and music as commemoration are often idiosyncratically drawn (for example see Ritter 2014: 221–22 on the distinction between

section, I unfold the mutual implications of music, sound, and testimony through examples from Western art music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Sonic Aesthetics of Testimony

I have highlighted the role of the Holocaust in this brief history of testimony in part because it remains at the centre of much scholarship into trauma and memory, and in part because it has provoked a range of artistic responses that engage with testimony and witness. Adorno's infamous dictum about art after Auschwitz aside, writers, painters, poets, and musicians continue to grapple with the Holocaust as both event and symbol. As I alluded to in the opening, the addition of taped extracts from Holocaust survivor testimony in *Different Trains* represents a significant change in the testimonial aesthetics of Western art music. Not only are the words of concrete, identifiable individuals given new prominence, but also their voices (complete with characteristic timbre, pacing, and accent) are embedded in the musical texture.⁵ That this testimony is presented in a controlled, reflective fashion increases its power for Taruskin – though Wlodarski suggests that the compositional processes ‘alienate the distinct accounts from

‘protest’ and ‘testimonial’ music in Peru). This semantic slipperiness can make assessing the intentions and impact of a given piece difficult, and is perhaps one reason why music is rarely called upon as direct testimony or evidence in courts of law. One infamous exception, the trial of Rwandan musician Simon Bikindi for incitement to genocide, is discussed in Parker (2015).

⁵ This was not the first time Reich has included vocal recordings in his works, and these borrowings of others' voices are not straightforward. Sumanth Gopinath (2009), Siarhei Biareishyk (2012), and Martin Scherzinger (2005) have offered incisive readings of the political, racial, and power relationships evident in seminal works such as *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*. Robert Fink (2019) traces Reich's relationships with speech, song, and meaning in *Tehillim* and *The Cave*.

the experiences of the survivors, assembling them as Reich's own personalized remembrance' (2010: 116). In either reading, it is a rebuke of sentimentality, of excessive emotion, and of any maudlin focus on human suffering – accusations that dog memorial works in general. As Wlodarski points out, in this formulation, *Different Trains* succeeds on the basis of 'its singular moral victory' (2010: 102). But if *Different Trains* and its fellow works succeed via a moral victory, it is one that has been won on the dual basis of the compelling nature of testimony's verbal and sonic character and the consequent obscuring of compositional choices.

Reich's sparing incorporation of restrained, if evocative, vocal-textual fragments is not the only approach to testimonial voices. Consider Philip Miller's commemoration of South Africa's violent apartheid past in *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony* (2008), which draws on recordings from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC hearings, which took place between 1996 and 1998, were centrally concerned with establishing truth and allowed testificants from different segments of society to tell their stories in the hopes that such truths would, in the words of the TRC's motto, be 'the Road to Reconciliation'. During the hearings, sections of testimony were broadcast on the radio in multiple languages and on television; the seven-volume final report includes excerpts of transcripts alongside its many hundreds of pages of findings, interpretations, and recommendations. Yet once the drama of the hearings was over, how to establish those stories and the facts to which they attest in public knowledge?

For South African poet-journalist Antjie Krog, the answer to that question entailed transmuting testimonies into music. Inspired by the example of the *Cantata de los derechos humanos* (Human Rights Cantata, 1978) written by the Chileans Esteban Gumucio and Alejandro Guarello, she approached Miller with the idea for a

composition and provided recordings that offer an important alternative recounting to the official written archive of the TRC and of the truths proclaimed there.⁶ Miller, a white South African composer of Jewish descent, worked with fellow South African composers/arrangers Michael Dingaen and Mduduzi Mofokeng to surround the assembled collection of testimonies with pulsing music for string octet, large mixed-voice chorus, and four soloists who embody testimonial personae both identifiable (P.W. Botha, Ethel Nobantu Plaatjies) and anonymous. These are interspersed with pre-recorded mechanical sounds, most prominently the repeating figure of a cassette tape being rewound. This striking effect originated in Miller's experience of listening to the tapes and it is both a reminder of the fragile physicality of the archival record and signifies the authenticity of the sounds as they appear in the music (Miller 2015). Listening to how the elements of the piece's title – voice, tape, and testimony – are used in *REwind* shows how Miller employs sound to reinforce the 'truthiness' of language and musical narrative.

The cantata begins with the sonic trappings of the TRC as a modern quasi-legal undertaking: microphone testing, rustling of papers, and brief exchanges between parties, overlaid by driving strings and the sung declaration of an oath ('I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God') in multiple languages.⁷ Having sworn in the soloists and established the music, musicians, and – implicitly – the audience as present-day witnessing parties to the testimonies that follow, the piece then moves through a panoply of sonic and emotional registers over seventeen movements, from crying gasps and hesitant fragments of speech to dramatic

⁶ For more on the TRC and on *REwind*, see Phillips-Hutton (2018).

⁷ 'The Oath', mvt. 1 from *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony* (unpublished score). It also appears as Track 1 on the CD (Miller 2008).

pronouncements and hymn-singing. Some of the most dynamic moments come when the chorus interacts with the recorded testimonies to amplify and comment on the narrative, such as when the chorus responds to a recording of the apartheid supporter P.W. Botha's irritated question 'who's laughing?' with derisive laughter and the rhythmic stamping, ululations, and chants of the protest genre *toyi-toyi*.⁸ The impression made by such moments is, according to critic Percy Zvomuya (2008), 'a sort of postmodern Wagnerian opera minus the libretto'.

Although one might argue that the testimonial texts are themselves a kind of libretto, it is telling that the cantata's closing movement ('The Cry of Nomonde Calata') turns to a sonic moment beyond language in an effort to affectively encapsulate the TRC.⁹ The tape registers the moment in which one of the witnesses at the Commission's hearing collapsed during her testimony; as the written archive reveals, this occurred part-way through Nomonde Calata's description of her desperate search for her missing husband Fort only to discover that he had been brutally tortured and murdered by South African police forces in the case known as the 'Cradock Four'. In the cantata, the recording of Calata is echoed and expanded into a wordless melody by two female soloists accompanied by arching string lines. In Miller's instructions, these melodies are not sung, but cried, so that the performers both re-embody that cry and reinterpret it as both a point of deep individual pain and a collective expression of anguish.¹⁰ The power

⁸ 'Who's Laughing?', mvt. 13 from *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony* (unpublished score). It also appears as Track 13 on the CD (Miller 2008).

⁹ 'The Cry of Nomonde Calata', mvt. 17 from *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony* (unpublished score). It also appears as Track 17 on the CD (Miller 2008).

¹⁰ Miller, in Key (2009). In the audio recording (Miller 2008) and in the performance run at the Market Theatre (Johannesburg) from which it was taken, the soloists here are Sibongile Khumalo (mezzo-soprano) and Kimmy Skota (soprano).

relationships at play here between Miller, the Black singers Sibongile Khumalo and Kimmy Skota, the mixed-race octet and choir, and, of course, Calata herself, are complex. Nonetheless, via the amplification of Calata's embodied singer-doubles and the facilitation of technology, the sound of her broken voice is turned into art and reflected back at the audience and at the wider nation as a key moment of truth grounded in the traces of the physical.

This attempt to augment the rhetorical force of the music through recourse to archival recordings and to the body returns our attention to the composer and to the context of the music. Krog, who was reporting on the TRC for SABC radio at the time of Calata's testimony, notes that her vocalisation became 'the signature tune ... the ultimate sound of what the process of hearing truth is about' (2015: 8). In the cantata, this tune is further musicalized, forming the generative emotional moment for understanding what hearing these truths should do for its audiences. Miller's explicit linking of performers and audiences to recorded witnesses through the combination of texts and sounds that signify truth contributes to the intergenerational transmission of the role of the witness and to the further entrenchment of the facts of apartheid within the public consciousness of both South Africa and the wider world. Thus, at the culmination of *REwind* it is not – or at least not only – the words of testimony, but also the sounded body which is framed as ultimately truthful.

In his descriptions of choosing testimonial fragments from the tape recordings Miller points to the essentially sonic character of witnessing and of the mechanical sounds that accompany it. Other composers likewise have positioned sound as testimonial either alongside or instead of words. Mary Kouyoumdjian is the American-born child of Armenian refugees who, having settled in Beirut following the Armenian Genocide, then fled the Lebanese Civil War, which stretched from 1975 to 1990. Her

Bombs of Beirut (2014) interrogates the daily experience of life before, during, and after the war in Beirut by interweaving a live-processed string quartet and a pre-recorded spoken track containing fragments of interviews with the composer's family and friends.¹¹

Each of the three sections brings together oral history, environmental sounds, and musical gestures to reflect on that experience. In the first section, 'Before the War', half-remembered, half-imagined narratives from interviewees surface among swirling melodies and string drones. The centrality of personal memory is invoked initially in the repeated sentences beginning 'I was born' and 'I remember', but as the overall pace increases, a collision with history becomes inevitable. 'The War' opens with further spoken reminiscences, which come to an abrupt halt with a nearly four-minute-long recording of a missile barrage: a fragment of what J. Martin Daughtry (2015: 3–4) calls the 'belliphonic' transplanted to the concert hall. Heard live, the floor-shaking volume, pitch, and timbre of the sounds, in combination with the sudden blackout of the performance space, render this as war sonically re-created. This force is why one programme warns that 'audience members may wish to avoid this piece if there is any history of PTSD, anxiety disorders, or other psychological or medical conditions that would likely be exacerbated by exposure' (Kronos Quartet 2015). Yet, perhaps most disturbing for the audience is the growing realisation that these are actual recordings from Beirut as the sounds of bombardment reveal traces of its human cost: snatches of movement, distant screams, sirens and an incongruous car horn, and the occasional

¹¹ My description here is drawn from my experience at a 2016 concert given by the Kronos Quartet in London. Additional live recordings by the Kronos Quartet can be found on Soundcloud (Kouyoumdjian and Kronos Quartet 2014a) and on YouTube (Kouyoumdjian and Kronos Quartet 2014b).

close-at-hand gasp.¹² The disorientation begins to ease with the return of the string quartet mirroring the distorted sound of a tolling bell on the recording before slowly increasing in volume to challenge the sounds of war. Eventually, too, the voices return, but only briefly. Something has changed, and Beirut in ‘After the War’ seems nearly unrecognisable both for them and for the audience.

Kouyoumdjian’s compositional style is fundamentally concerned with music as documenting and telling truths: on her website she describes herself as a ‘composer/documentarian’. In this, as well as in several of its structures, *Bombs of Beirut* echoes Reich’s *Different Trains*. The two works were even commissioned for the same ensemble – the Kronos Quartet – and reflect each composer’s status as a mediated witness to the events detailed in the primary texts.¹³ Yet the testimonial intention of *Bombs of Beirut* seems to be to unveil the past as much as to commemorate it: by demanding that her comparatively wealthy, white, and Western audience confront the sonic traces of a war zone and its refugees, Kouyoumdjian seeks to expose what she sees as a truth often unheard.

Kouyoumdjian positions her work as truthful documentary by framing her use of interviews and archival sound sources as an antidote to the muffled sounds of violence and sensationalist visuals characteristic of reporting on the Middle East in the United States. She claims that *Bombs of Beirut* is ‘a sonic picture of what day-to-day life is like

¹² The recordings were taken by Hagop T. Bazerkanian from the balcony of his Beirut home.

See Kouyoumdjian (2014).

¹³ Reich’s (1988) comment that ‘if I had been in Europe at this time, as a Jew I would have had to ride on very different trains’ is well-known. Kouyoumdjian has said ‘I am the first generation in a long time that hasn’t had to flee my home [...] and I feel as though that gives me such [...] privilege [...] that I feel a responsibility [to tell these stories]’ (Kouyoumdjian 2019).

in a turbulent Middle East not filtered through the news and media, but through the real words of real people' (Kouyoumdjian 2014). These are certainly real words of real people, given testimonial force by real sounds; nonetheless, as in *REwind*, there are layers of reality to be found here. It is the composer who selects interviewees, sifts their statements, and situates those which become sonic witnesses to the devastation of the past. It is the listener who must determine how to interpret them and whether to heed them.

In these examples, Miller and Kouyoumdjian are functioning as what Su Zheng terms 'cultural broker[s]' (2010: 273); they are intermediaries who interpret and contextualise spoken and sung testimony for their audiences through the use of non-musical sounds. Yet, as studies across ethnomusicology have demonstrated, this is not the only possibility for musical witness. In Puerto Rico, efforts to change social relations frequently tap into vernacular lineages of performance as documentation such as the *plena* (see Miller 2004), while Jonathan Ritter traces the impact of *canciones testimoniales* (testimonial songs) within the traditional *pumpin* genre in Peru as providing the people with 'an unusual but deeply valued social space in which to process and reflect on their experiences of violence' (2014: 219–20). Drawing on fieldwork amongst the Acholi people in Northern Uganda, Lindsay McClain Opiyo (2015) suggests that testimonial music in which individuals can tell their own stories can help prevent violence, and Joshua Pilzer's (2014; 2015) research into several different kinds of 'survivor's music' reveals song, music, and dance as both adaptive resources for survival and key means of telling alternative histories. One striking summary of methods of testifying in and through music comes from María Elena Pinto García's work with survivors of Colombia's long-running civil conflict, which suggests that 'in a conflict scenario where partial truths and misinformation predominate, they have used

music with the purposes of telling the truth, reconstructing the historical memory of conflict, and avoiding the recurrence of violent events' (2014: 38). These examples are primarily concerned with the narration of conflict through language, but in the case of the effects of nuclear arms testing on the vocal cords and bodies of the Rongelapese people, Jessica Schwartz (2012) has shown how the sonic effects of conflict on the body serve as incontrovertible testament to the past.

The juxtaposition of these examples with those of Miller and Kouyoumdjian reveal numerous differences but also highlight some general trends within musico-testimonial aesthetics. The first is the use of music in a wide variety of styles as a form of personal expression for those whose voices were previously silenced. This expression may be directed internally, but it is often addressed to the wider public sphere. A second, related trend positions music as collective self-presentation by previously subjugated groups. Both practices often involve musical retellings of stories about experiences of conflict, thereby straddling the commemorative layers of revelation and witnessing.¹⁴ A third trend is the encouragement of music-making as a way of establishing new kinds of communal feeling based around shared experiences. All of these efforts engage musically with memories and history (both individual and social) as a means of transforming post-conflict societies through the establishment of compelling truths. If history can be considered to be 'a form of collective memory woven of truth-by-consensus' (Popova 2016), it behoves us to try to grasp how the

¹⁴ I have focused throughout this essay on music with text, but instrumental music might also form its own kind of testimony; for example, to the persistence of particular performance traditions or to the existence of oppressed identities. Sharing these traditions is one way of creating and perpetuating what Diana Taylor (2003) calls 'repertorial knowledge'.

combination of music and testimony plays a role in the creation and maintenance of that fragile weave.

Sonic Witnesses

The persistence of the connection between music as a general practice and testimony is sometimes suggested to be the result of a desire to keep memories of suffering alive, in acknowledgement of music's potential to offer new and powerful ways of transforming conflict, or even as reflecting a trend towards the documentary in the wider culture; yet these explanations seem incomplete. They do not address the import of the blurring of lines between the presumed truths of testimony and the essential excess of its aesthetic presentation wherein music's persuasive power can obscure or soften the choices and positions that lie behind the formal structure. Furthermore, they overlook the tension at the heart of formal commemorative works, which is that these works must create a semblance of truth and reality in order to move (or, in keeping with the linguistic theme, compel) their audiences, even as they must also maintain an appropriate distance from the painfulness of that reality if they are to avoid reproducing the damage they seek to commemorate.¹⁵ This challenge of fostering appropriate emotions or perspectives whilst avoiding both the false assurance of kitsch or the perpetuation of trauma suggests that a close examination of what testimony and music offer to each other in the realm of truth may provide an important standpoint from which to ask what kinds of things musical testimony reveals today.

First, what does testimony do for music? One of the most apparent consequences of the inclusion of testimony, or testimonial fragments, in music is to anchor the music

¹⁵ For more on this, see Goehr (2008: 171–203) and Sturken (2007).

in an external event. Whether this event is explicitly named in the music, or implied by context, or even only suggested in the paratexts of performance, the effect is to constrain possible meanings and guide interpretation. Testimonial music also focuses attention on lived experience, and often highlights the disjunction between the lived experience of the audience and the lived experience of the testificant. In pieces that include original recordings or where the testificant and the performer are the same, audiences are confronted with traces of the sounded body, while works that include multiple testimonies also multiply the experience of witnessing. Where testimony is adapted by composers who are not themselves directly affected by the event in question, this also functions as a way of reducing the perceived influence of the composer's own subjectivity by placing her alongside the supra-truthful witness. This might be seen as one way of containing music's aesthetic and affective excess and thereby limiting potential criticisms of sentimentality or exploitation.

Yet, when we consider what music offers to testimony, this aesthetic excess is key. It is the presentation of testimony within an aesthetic frame and the concurrent implication that these are the stories worth paying attention to that is part of what makes truths (both factual and testimonial) compelling. The presence of such a frame also makes these truths easier – one might even say safer – for audiences to approach. Music removes testimony from so-called ordinary life, aestheticizes it, and in the process creates a world in which uncomfortable truths may be more productively confronted.¹⁶ This is not free from the dangers of exploitation and co-optation: witness Saidiya Hartman's concern with the brutality of the materialisation of suffering through 'endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible' [1997: 4] or Arendt's excoriation of pity in *On*

¹⁶ One illuminating discussion of music's capacity for managing complex social relations and situations of social uncertainty can be found in Cross (2009).

Revolution. Nonetheless, music's aestheticization of testimony plays an important role in its dissemination.

In addition to the simultaneous distancing and intimacy occasioned by aesthetic framing, music offers an affective and emotive context for the narrative of testimony. Given that testimony itself is often fragmented or decontextualised, music can amplify and extend its emotive character as it fills in some of the gaps. Finally, music places testimony within an easily transportable and broadcastable package, one in which testimonies can be not only be heard by different audiences than it might have done in another setting, but actually experienced in enacted, embodied forms and transmitted via reproductive technology. This has the potential to extend the reach of testimony by translating it into new forms and contexts, making it available to new generations of witnesses.

These features bind together music and testimony, but perhaps the most important is the combination of what James Young (2004: 85) refers to as testimony's 'texture of fact' and music's aptitude for affective enhancement. Testimony and music have a symbiotic relationship that enfolds specific lived experience within an aesthetically powerful frame thereby setting up a cloud of witnesses that billows out from the original testificants to include composers, performers, and audiences. Whether in any specific case this might make factual truths about the past a more enduring part of human affairs remains to be seen, but it seems clear that testimonial music has the potential for making such facts compelling.

Sounding Out Musical Truth

Thus far, I have left aside the question of how and what kinds of truth might be made evident via testimonial music. In keeping with her focus on the historical and political

spheres, Arendt does not address other kinds of truths; nonetheless, thinking about the relationship between testimony and truth as extending to the aesthetic realm proves to be a productive avenue for exploration. Although Arendt does not address art as a truth-bearing endeavour, her one-time teacher Martin Heidegger considered world-disclosure as the primary function of art. This concept of disclosure, or unconcealment, for which he used the Greek term *alētheia*, is not precisely equivalent to either factual or rational truths, but rather indicates how the world is made intelligible by being unhidden or uncovered.¹⁷ Works of art may make a ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*) in which the world is unconcealed, but in themselves they may also set forth a world within which human life can be ordered and comprehended, if not wholly understood.¹⁸ Art which does so is at once world-disclosive, world-creative, and perpetually open to interpretation. It is this semiotic inexhaustibility in combination with the multivalent activity of disclosure and creation that renders art as truth-bearing.

Heidegger’s argument is concerned only with what he considers to be great works of art in the Western tradition and applying his ideas directly to other traditions may be ill-advised. Nonetheless, he posits a web of relationships between art, reality, and truth that is useful for thinking with in other contexts. In particular, given the ideas about music’s aesthetic excess unfolded previously, how might the nature and function of music (or perhaps musicking, to use Christopher Small’s term) as a potential agent for bearing compelling truths have an impact in the contemporary world? This question is especially significant in the context of societies that employ music as an effective means of establishing social agreement about facts and their significance in the wake of

¹⁷ Heidegger returned to (and revised) the concept of *alētheia* throughout his life, and fuller explanations can be found in his *Being and Time* (1927), *The Essence of Truth* (1943), and *On Time and Being* (1970).

¹⁸ This is a necessarily rough sketch of Heidegger’s key points: for more, see Heidegger (2011).

violent conflict. In light of this, I suggest three areas for exploring how the capacity to create and reveal musical worlds can anchor testimonial truths in society, before returning to Arendt in the context of moving towards (and beyond) reconciliation.

I. Embodiment

The study of embodiment in this context signifies the assessment of musical performance and listening practices as containing and producing embodied knowledge, or answering the question of how the fact of music as an embodied phenomenon influences its role in the propagation of memory and testimony. How does the enaction of testimony (for example, through sung performance) lodge truth in the performing and testifying body? How does its communication via gesture or other types of embodiment engender a sense of truthfulness in musical sounds?¹⁹

II. Performance

Closely related to these questions of embodiment are questions of performance and performative meaning. Recalling that the purpose of many testimonial musical endeavours is to create secondary witnesses to the events of the past, what subject positions or alternative historical narratives does a given performance offer to its audience? What, if any, perspective on the interpolated testimony or its associated history are they encouraged to take? How are these narratives constructed through sonic materiality or the paratexts of performance as well as through the testimonial text?

III. Memory

Music's susceptibility to technological mediation also suggests questions having to do with what Alison Landsberg calls 'prosthetic memory' – or how one adopts experiences that are not one's own through exposure to memorial technologies. In other words, how

¹⁹ Here I draw on the work of performance scholars, notably Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) and Diana Taylor (2003).

music might serve to create ‘privately felt public memories’ through the dissemination of testimonial narratives (Landsberg 2004: 19). How does the mediation and remediation of testimony render lived experience tangible? In an age of widely disseminated traumatic images or stories, how do the specific rituals of music performance create and sustain memory?

Finally, one key feature of music’s capacity to bear compelling truths lies in its connection to both empathy and imagination. Empathy has long been considered an important characteristic of mature human emotional life and of music’s function in post-conflict society, but in recent years it has become a catch-all, particularly in the wider media, for explaining how to generate positive social outcomes.²⁰ An understanding of empathy as powerful but limited is perhaps a step towards exploring another intriguing feature of music, namely, its capacity to expand the imagination. Proclaiming a role for the arts in cultivating imagination is hardly a new idea, but here I am taking another cue from Arendt, who claims that the ability to imagine something different than the status quo is the basis of all action, large or small – this also underpins the ability to lie, if not necessarily the ability to tell the truth (2006: 249–52). However, it is only through this imaginative ability to act that reconciliation, which she describes as the willingness on the part of those who have been wronged to walk alongside the wrong-doers and share their burden, is possible (Arendt 2003: 1:1–7). Far from being subsidiary, then, the ability to imagine a different kind of relationship, whether that is conceived as existing between former participants in conflict or between a present-day audience and a testificant to past conflict, is key to bringing about transformative action. In short,

²⁰ I discuss the relationship between empathy and music in greater detail in *Music Transforming Conflict* (2020).

music, as an activity that links mental, emotional, and physical spheres, can increase the performative force of testimony through instantiating novel sets of social relations.

Nice Audible Crying

In *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog's genre-bending reflection on being a white Afrikaner woman during South Africa's transition away from white minority rule, her narrator describes the process of transforming TRC testimonies for the news, turning them into 'complete stories with beginnings, middles, and ends [...] in a forty second report'. She notes with a mixture of fascination and horror how the combination of propriety, emotion, and brevity influenced assessments of the testimony itself: 'This is the perfect sound bite. (How quickly our language changes – "fantastic testimony", "sexy subject", "nice audible crying"...)' (1999, 47). The TRC was explicitly devoted to establishing the truth of what had happened under the apartheid regime and to situating those facts firmly within the social fabric of the new 'rainbow nation', and Krog's description intimates how the crucial role played by the witnesses in producing these truths was mediated through sound, but it also points to the power of those who choose which witnesses are heard, whether through mass media, literature, archives, or music.

The intimate connections outlined here between music and testimonial narratives should not persuade us that a musical performance that includes testimony is simply a receptacle for testimony. It is not, *pace* Taruskin, a case of outlining what happened when and where accompanied by 'a stony invitation to reflect' ([1997] 2008: 101). It is music's own world-creative and world-disclosive capacities that draw it into unstable, yet productive, relationships with testimonial truths. Ernst Bloch (1985: 283) claimed that music is 'nothing less than a seismograph of society', but testimonial performances

might be better thought of as metonyms of societies, profoundly shaped by the narration and commemoration of past experiences they embody. By engaging with this metonymic significance through real-time negotiations of memory and identity, audiences are drawn into relationship with witnesses and testimony such that they are better able to approach the truths they describe. The richness of this field highlights the ongoing need for rigorous investigation into how music might open up a space for people to act on truths made compelling through this distinctively sonic witness.

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