
Article:
Phillips-Hutton, A orcid.org/0000-0001-9501-9529 (2022) Destroying the Imagined City. Twentieth-Century Music, 19 (2). pp. 227-234. ISSN 1478-5722

https://doi.org/10.1017/s1478572222000111

Destroying the Imagined City

What do ruins sound like? If you were an American radio listener during late 1940 and 1941, you might have turned on your set one evening to hear Columbia Broadcasting System journalist Edward R. Murrow intone 'This…is London' before describing the sights and sounds of a blacked-out London during the Blitz. These *London After Dark* programmes were among the earliest live, on-location radio broadcasts. Part of their communicative power was the very real sense of urgency imparted by Murrow's surroundings, whether the air raid siren blaring in Trafalgar Square during his first broadcast on 24 August 1940, or the sound of anti-aircraft guns booming ('like someone kicking a tub') and bombs exploding ('that hard, stony sound') from an undisclosed London rooftop from 21 September 1940.[1] At the time, few Americans who had not served in the military would have been familiar with such sounds. Murrow's evocative language to describe the destruction struck a chord with his listening public, leading the American poet Archibald MacLeish to declare, at a testimonial dinner on 2 December 1941 (just a few days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), that Murrow had 'destroyed … the superstition that what is done beyond 3,000 miles of water is not really done at all; the ignorant superstition that violence and lies and murder on another continent are not violence and lies and murder here … the black and stifling superstition that what we cannot see and hear and touch can have no

[1] Murrow's recordings can be heard at the BBC https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/ww2/blitz; and on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za2Lus0CkRc (accessed 9 November 2021). See also Elmer Davis, *This is London* (London: Cassell, 1941), 196–97.

meaning for us'.[2] In the early 1940s it was the intimate communication of the radio that made the far-off destruction of London audible in a new and ethically charged way.

In a contemporary era saturated with live updates and 24/7 news coverage, Murrow's broadcasts may seem quaint, but they were among those that inaugurated a new era of journalistic reporting, one that relied on innovative uses of technology to grant a renewed sense of live eye- (or ear)witnessing.[3] As such, they also provide an opening to think carefully about the role of recorded sounds in establishing and transmitting that witness, particularly in post-catastrophic contexts. In this short contribution, I am concerned with contemporary practices of composition that project aspects of the historical archive of destruction beyond itself by turning sonic rubble into ruin. Though this may initially seem far-removed from Murrow's wartime reportage, I suggest that composer Mary Kouyoumdjian (b. 1982) deploys archival recordings of wartime sounds of destruction alongside recorded testimony and live music for stringed instruments to reconfigure the relationships between physical, mental, and social spaces and echo *London After Dark*'s insistence on sound as witness. In mining the archive for sonic material, her commemorative work *Bombs of Beirut* (2014) promotes a kind of secondary witness to the

[2] Archibald MacLeish, speech given at the Waldorf-Astoria on 2 December 1941, quoted in John K. Hutchens, 'Radio Notebook', *New York Times*, 7 December 1941, 16.

[3] The concept of the earwitness has been further developed by Carolyn Birdsall in 'Earwitnessing: Sound Memories of the Nazi Period', in *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld and José van Dyck (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009).

destruction caused by the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990).[4] Moreover, when performed, this memorial superimposes the records of physical destruction and aesthetic reconstruction—conjuring up the war's rubble and refashioning it momentarily as a ruin.

As other contributions to this colloquy demonstrate, the transformation of physical rubble into ruins has historically been understood as a simultaneously aesthetic and political process, and one that is accordingly fraught with questions about power. Who chooses which rubble is rearranged into ruins and which is carted off? Whose interests do the resulting ruins serve? These questions of physical rebuilding are relevant to the music I consider here, but so too are questions about the authority to shape accepted and acceptable knowledge out of the rubble: in other words, questions about the archive and the resulting relationships between knowledge and power. These lead into issues of musical performance, the capacity of sound to co-produce physical and mental spaces, and the manufacture of memory.

The archive, understood here as both a collection of objects and a system of knowledge, is a kind of cultural memory in which the activities of collecting, labelling, and disseminating sculpt the rubble of the past into ruinous shapes. As Achille Mbembe has argued, the archive is inescapably 'the product of a judgement, the result of an exercise of a specific power and

[4] For more on secondary witnessing, see Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991) and Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). For an exploration of the composer as potential secondary witness, see Amy Lynn Wlodarski, *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

authority'.[5] Nonetheless, no archive has an exclusive claim to the power to mould understandings of the past. Alongside archival knowledge are other knowledge-producing activities, including what performance theorist Diana Taylor calls the 'repertoire'. Among Taylor's examples of repertorial knowledge are folk traditions of gesture, dance, and music which in their embodied performance enact alternative 'system[s] of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge'.[6] Taylor's discussion of music is limited to live performance, but a broader view of musical activity as balanced between the archive of objects (such as scores and recordings) and the repertoire of embodied performance suggests that music is a hybrid archive-repertoire medium that can transfer knowledge across space and time.

The apparent spatial quality of sound means that studies of space in music have often focused on the physical surroundings of music-making alongside the small-scale geographies and architectures of sound. Nonetheless, it has also led to considerations of how sound moves through spaces, whether physical (local, global) or metaphysical. As sounds and the people who make them are displaced in space, so too are they dislocated in time. The centrality of this phenomenon has led to the development of key concepts, such as Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, or memories of 'those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their

---

[5] Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits', trans. Judith Inggs, in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, *et al*., (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 20.

[6] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16. I have discussed the intersection of performance, archive, and repertoire at greater length elsewhere. See Ariana Phillips-Hutton, 'Performing the South African Archive in *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony*', *Twentieth-Century Music* 15/2 (2018), 187–209.

birth' that are 'mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation'.[7] The concept is a response to the intergenerational reverberations of the Holocaust, but Hirsch also argues that postmemory is a broader system of knowledge that brings with it what she calls a 'diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn'. [8] In the case of Kouyoumdjian's *Bombs of Beirut*, the composer pieces together fragments of her family history that were destroyed before her own birth and which continue to reverberate in her life in the diaspora. Considering how the spatial aspects of sound intersect with the temporal aspects of memory to produce, transmit, alter, and preserve knowledge reveals how family histories and world events alike are disassembled and reassembled in creative commemorative practices.

Dislocations in space/time and the consequent disjunctures in the workings of memory are thus key themes within any study of post-catastrophic music-making. In the remainder of this contribution, I examine how Mary Kouyoumdjian layers oral history and archival recordings to create—and then to destroy—a version of the Lebanese city of Beirut. To adapt a phrase from the scholar of Holocaust literature Lawrence Langer, in Kouyoumdjian's work we can see that it is the confluence of sound and memory that 'excavates from the ruins of the past fragile shapes to augment our understanding of those ruins.'[9]

---

[7] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

[8] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 245.

[9] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 128.

Kouyoumdjian's composition *Bombs of Beirut* was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet as part of their 'Thirty under Thirty' programme for young composers. Kronos premiered the piece in 2014 and have performed it regularly since.[10] Stylistically, *Bombs of Beirut* takes inspiration from the cinematic and quasi-documentary style of music composition epitomised in contemporary commemorative music by Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988) and *WTC 9/11* (2010), both of which were also commissioned by the Kronos Quartet. There are clear structural and conceptual parallels between *Different Trains* and *Bombs of Beirut*, but Kouyoumdjian also draws on her experiences in documentary film scoring; in fact, Kouyoumdjian has described *Bombs of Beirut* as 'a documentary film without the film component'.[11] It combines music for a live-processed string quartet with pre-recorded sound and fragments of interviews conducted with the composer's family and friends living in Lebanon and elsewhere detailing their experiences of life in Beirut between the 1950s and the 1990s.

Bombs of Beirut is split into three sections simply entitled 'Before the War', 'The War', and 'After the War'. The implication is of the war as the central disruptive event of the piece, but the lack of audible breaks or traditionally concluding musical gestures separating movements renders the overall temporal progression more ambiguous. Listener orientation is made more difficult by the retrospective character of the texts. The interviews were conducted long after the

[10] A live recording from 2014 is available on Soundcloud: https://soundcloud.com/marykouyoumdjian/bombs-of-beirut-kronos-quartet-live-at-the-greene-space (accessed 9 November 2021).

[11] Mary Kouyoumdjian, interview with Anthony Joseph Lanman, *One Track Podcast* #95, S8E7, http://1trackpodcast.com/1-track-contemporary-classical-podcast-s8e7-mary-kouyoumdjian/

experiences they recount, and the casting of these memories as inevitably past or inaccessible experiences heightens the emphasis on Beirut as an imagined and imaginary space for both exiles and residents. This is apparent from the opening, which matches wandering, obsessive fragments in the strings with a recording of a young man repeating: 'I always fantasize about Lebanon before the Civil War'. At each repeat, the electronic processing of the recorded voice becomes more evident, rendering the vocal timbre distant and watery. This is followed by another speaker, who declares, 'I just wish that [my happy childhood] could have continued on instead of having the civil war. I just imagine what an amazing place Lebanon would be right now. It's just a completely different world than what it was destined to be.' This fantasy about a lost past is complemented with reminiscences by an older woman who remembers a peaceful life in Beirut as the glamorous 'little Paris of [the] Middle East' in the 1950s and 1960s. Seen in the golden glow of memory, an imagined Beirut of the past takes shape for the contemporary audience.

These half-remembered and half-imagined constructions of Beirut and its surroundings slowly ratchet up in tension as other speakers recall the effect of the war on their childhoods. Such nostalgic reminiscences create a sense of multiple temporalities overlapping within the ebb and flow of the piece before they are brought to a brutal halt at the end of the second section.[12] After a series of high trills and pitch bends, the quartet drops out and the performance space is plunged into a darkness that heralds the beginning of a nearly four-minute-long recording of the

[12] There is a resonance here with Svetlana Boym's theorization of nostalgia as a rejection of modernity's unidirectional conception of time in her *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

bombing of a civilian neighbourhood in Beirut in the late 1970s.[13] The recording begins quietly, with hollow booms from far-off guns, followed by the shrieking sounds of incoming missiles and the thunder of detonation. In between the impacts of bombs and crackle of gunfire one hears snatches of movement, distant screams, sirens, and an incongruous car horn. Stripped of textual and musical commentary, this explodes 'to shattering effect'.[14]

In a deliberate attempt to make the physical force of war present to her audience, Kouyoumdjian requests that the playback volume be sufficient to make the floor of the performing space shake. The accompanying programme note warns:

> The performance of *Bombs of Beirut* includes actual recordings of the sounds of warfare, including incoming missiles and the detonation of bombs, all at high decibel levels. […] 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 to such sounds.[15]

---

[13] *Music of Armenia*, 'Mary Kouyoumdjian: "Bombs of Beirut"', *Music of Armenia* (blog), 24 January 2014, http://musicofarmenia.com/mary-kouyoumdjian-bombs-beirut (accessed 9 November 2021).

[14] George Hall, 'Kronos Quartet Review: Sonic Slinkys and Exploding Bombs', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/10/kronos-quartet-review-barbican-london (accessed 9 November 2021).

[15] The programme for the Kronos Quartet's performance of *Bombs of Beirut* on 7 February 2015 is available at: https://hancher.uiowa.edu/kronos (accessed 9 November 2021).

In comparison to the (often literally) muffled representation of war in mass media, the experience of listening to this is both immersive and disturbing—so much so that audience members have walked out of performances on multiple occasions. The composer is unmoved, suggesting that 'the discomfort that an audience feels for four minutes in a concert where they are safe, they've paid for a ticket, they're sitting in a padded chair […] if they can just feel a little bit of that [discomfort], then that is like the tiniest fraction of the discomfort of somebody who's actually living in that moment.'[16] While the collision of present safety and past peril is evocative, practical and ethical questions persist, from whether emotional experiences with music in a concert could or should replicate wartime experiences to how such experiences might influence action outside the walls of the concert hall.

As the sounds of bombardment begin to fade with the end of the second movement, the quartet re-emerges and the final section returns to long-held, slowly shifting harmonies combined with Middle Eastern-inflected microtonal melodic fragments in the strings. This is overlaid by a few fragments of text in which speakers reflect on their current relationship to Beirut. One declares 'I have never been back to Beirut since I left', another laments the difficulties inherent in the choice to stay and 'to live through this hell', while the final speaker comments on how emotional it had been to emerge from the war and to see the destruction of neighbourhoods she had known before. The extreme compression of these texts and the concurrent domination of the music's texture by the strings suggest that Beirut in 'After the War' is no longer a place where these speakers can create new memories. Contemporary Beirut—we

[16] Kouyoumdjian, interview with Lanman, http://1trackpodcast.com/1-track-contemporary-classical-podcast-s8e7-mary-kouyoumdjian/

might even say the real Beirut—is presented as existing only in relation to the destruction depicted in the earlier movements.

In interviews, Kouyoumdjian is frank about the role that the recorded text plays in conveying the story of *Bombs of Beirut*. She characterizes the piece as presenting 'a sonic picture of what day-to-day life is like in a turbulent Middle East not filtered through the news and media, but through the real words of real people'.[17] The impact of this word-painting is certainly powerful, but equally striking is what this analysis passes over: namely, the ear-shattering recording of war that serves as the non-linguistic counterweight to those 'real words of real people'. Moreover, the refusal to frame the central sonic picture of war with visual or verbal content encourages the audience to confront the fact that these are real sounds that occurred in a real space, even though they took place at a place and time far removed from their present re-incarnation. Thus, while Kouyoumdjian certainly draws on a testimonial aesthetics[18] of veracity created by recorded testimony and archival sound, *Bombs of Beirut* also creates a sonic image of the city that blends a version drawn from the descriptions of its life by past residents with traces of an imagined version of what those same spaces might have been. 'Beirut' itself takes on a palimpsestic character as a space where history and imagination, rubble and ruin overlap. It is at once this imagined city and a real neighbourhood that is destroyed during the second movement.

---

[17] *Music of Armenia*, 'Mary Kouyoumdjian: "Bombs of Beirut"', 24 January 2014. http://musicofarmenia.com/mary-kouyoumdjian-bombs-beirut (accessed 9 November 2021).

[18] Amy Lynn Wlodarksi, 'The Testimonial Aesthetics of *Different Trains*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63/1 (Spring 2010), 99–141.

To what purpose is Beirut built and destroyed in *Bombs of Beirut*? In evaluating this work, it is important to note that this account of Beirut is one that is constructed by someone who did not experience the trauma of its destruction. Kouyoumdjian was born in the United States to parents displaced by the war. Her interviews grow from the overriding question familiar to the children of exiles: what was it like? By putting together (re-membering) *Bombs of Beirut*, Kouyoumdjian is engaging in what Hirsch might call a postmemorial act, one that seeks to understand the deep trauma of previous generations through creative engagement. As the composer says: 'my family, the generation before me and the generation before that were never in a position to speak up about what was happening around them and I am the first generation in a long time that hasn't had to flee my home…yet.'[19] With privilege comes a responsibility the composer feels towards her own family and heritage, but this is more than a reclamation of a particular personal history—it is simultaneously a responsibility she seeks to share with her audience. In the textual fragments and aerial bombardment spread over the twenty-two minutes of *Bombs of Beirut*, Kouyoumdjian picks through the sonic and imagined rubble of the Lebanese Civil War and consequent experiences of loss and exile in search of Langer's 'fragile shapes', but whether these wisps of memory can aid wider understanding remains an unanswered question.

* * *

Events have overtaken me since I wrote the first version of this essay. In particular, ever since a poorly maintained store of ammonium nitrate exploded with deadly force in the port of

[19] Kouyoumdjian, interview with Lanman, http://1trackpodcast.com/1-track-contemporary-classical-podcast-s8e7-mary-kouyoumdjian/

Beirut on 4 August 2020, the collision of bombs and Beirut evokes new and different scenes of destruction—another layer in the palimpsest of destruction.[20] My own experience of the 4 August explosion was visual before it was aural, and it was, of course, mediated by its multiple appearances on social and mass media. This seems to confirm Susan Sontag's claim in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that 'being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience' and one that is amply provided for by what she calls 'those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists'.[21] Nonetheless, Kouyoumdjian's work reminds us that vision is not the only sensory possibility for witness. As an audience we are enveloped in the sounds of ruin, while the descriptions of places and lives that once were are reminders that ruination, in the sense of Ann Laura Stoler's definition as 'an act perpetrated, a condition to which one is subject, and a cause of loss' persists across different temporal scales.[22] *Bombs of Beirut* thus combines imaginative and physical spaces in ways that press upon its audience the position of secondary ear-witness to destruction.

Beyond Kouyoumdjian's work, the striking prevalence of archival material in contemporary commemorative works of Western art music seems to reflect a trend towards the documentary in wider contemporary memorial culture. This is perhaps yet another working out

---

[20] The layers here are manifold: as Kouyoumdjian notes in her discussion of the song cycle *Ervoom Em* (I am Burning), casualties of the August 2020 blast included members of her own family. http://www.marykouyoumdjian.com/projects.html (accessed 9 November 2021).

[21] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2013), 18.

[22] Ann Laura Stoler, 'Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination', *Cultural Anthropology* 23/2 (May 2008), 195.

of the continued influence of notions of the authentic and the ruin that Andreas Huyssen argues are central to modernity.[23] Creative performances of archival material, as demonstrated by *Bombs of Beirut*, offer a way of understanding and transmitting knowledge and memory across archival and performative boundaries. To extend this idea, the sonic and textual resources might itself be seen as a kind of archival rubble; composers, then, are excavators who sift through the masses of archival material in order to re-fashion it into new kinds of ruin. What remains to be seen—or rather, to be witnessed—are the imagined spaces they will build from these musical spoils.

[23] Andreas Huyssen, 'Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity', in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 18. See also Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), and Maria Cizmic, 'Music of Disruption: Collage and Fragmentation as an Expression of Trauma in Alfred Schnittke's Concerto for Piano and Strings', in *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe*, 30–66 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).