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Bang, Rattle, Pop: Sound, Technology, and the South African War

Introduction

"No music is as thrilling and as immensely captivating as to listen to the firing of the guns on your own side. It is like enjoying supernatural melodies in a paradise."[1] So begins the wartime diary of Solomon "Sol" Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932). Plaatje, a Tswana man born in the Orange Free State and educated in the Cape Colony, worked as a journalist and court interpreter in the frontier town of Mafeking/Mafikeng in what is now the North West province of South Africa.[2] Between October 1899 and March 1900, he chronicled daily life as the British garrison in the town was besieged by forces of the Boer Republics during the South African War. Through his writing about this key event, Plaatje raises an intriguing question: does war sound like music?

To a contemporary audience, the answer to this question may seem obvious—no. War sounds like machinery and mayhem: the growl of engines, the staccato bark of machine gun fire, the shriek of a fighter jet, the low *whump-whump* of a helicopter, or the whistle of missiles

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[1] Solomon Plaatje, *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*, ed. John L. Comaroff (London: Macmillan, 1973), 1. The diary, which was never intended for publication, came to light during fieldwork amongst the Barolong boo Ratshidi in Mafikeng undertaken by the anthropologist John L. Comaroff in the 1960s, and the manuscript is housed at the University of the Witwatersrand. It provides a unique perspective as the only known written account by a black South African of the siege.

[2] Although not the focus of this essay, Plaatje's work offers one entry point into the racial dynamics of listening in South Africa—a topic which would benefit from further study. For an overview of black participation in the war, see Peter Warwick, *Black People in the South African War, 1899–1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

followed by huge explosions, all mingled with the screams of furious and terrified human beings. This response is shaped by pervasive audiovisual illustrations, from Hollywood films to video games to carefully edited newsclips. Yet these lurid soundscapes are not necessarily what any given war sounds like; rather, they are the result of how twenty-first-century listeners imagine and describe the sounds of war (or rather, modern weaponry) in general. This distinction is significant because although "armed conflict has been a noisy, grunting, clanging business throughout history," the battles of Thermopylae, Xiangyang, Waterloo, Isandlwana, Leningrad, and Hamburger Hill sounded different to one another.[3] The observation that wars have distinct sonic signatures may seem trivial, easily explained by alterations in battle tactics and weapons over time, yet a deeper investigation of these sonic contours reveals changes in human perception and experience that go beyond the recognition of diverse points of audition. If we don't hear weaponry as music, what might it mean that Plaatje and many others did? More broadly, how have weapons of war been heard, and how have those ways of hearing sustained, suppressed, and shaped the understanding of war as a sonic phenomenon?

To address these questions, I examine historical experiences of sound, the senses and sense-making, as well as technology's influences on perception, during the South African War of 1899–1902.[4] This conflict between the British Empire and the allied forces of the Orange Free

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[3] Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

[4] The naming of the war is a matter of ambivalence in scholarly sources (cf. Bill Nasson, "The South African War/Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902 and Political Memory in South Africa," in *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, ed. T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper [London: Routledge, 2000], 111–27; and Louis Changuion, "To Name a War: The War of 1899–1902," *Historia* 44, no. 1 [1999]: 101–9). Terms such as the Boer War, the Transvaal War, the *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Second Freedom War), or the *Engelse oorlog* (English War) reflect a narrow view of the affected parties. In particular, these names overlook the participation of large numbers of non-white South Africans on both sides, as well as people from Europe, North America, and the various British

State and the South African Republic, though greatly overshadowed by the conflicts of the later twentieth century, offers the opportunity to trace a particular set of listening practices at the turn of the twentieth century—an inflection point both in the history of warfare and the history of listening and perception. Although the South African War has been popularly framed as the last imperial war or the last "gentlemen's war," its intertwining of technology, sound, and musical metaphor indicates that it might better be considered the first sonically *modern* war. To claim that this or that war shows hallmarks of modernity is not in and of itself new: the historian Steve Attridge made this very claim about the South African War at the turn of the 21st century.[5] However, Attridge backdates modern warfare based on parallels in military endeavours between the South African War and the First World War and he does not engage with the senses or with sound. In contrast, I argue that the hows, whens and whys of hearing—the audile techniques—signal modernity in the South African War. In other words, it is precisely the ways the noises of the South African War were heard, and often heard *as* musical sound, that make it distinctively modern.

In recent years, sonically-attuned explorations of the human sensory experience in war have attempted to deepen understanding of the embodied experience of conflict, often by examining lesser-known corners. For example, Suzanne Cusick and others have detailed the use of music and sound as a technique of no-touch torture, suggesting that the twenty-first century's War on Terror has made its own distinctive contribution to the intertwining of sound,

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nations and colonies (most famously Mohandas Gandhi, who formed the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps in 1900). No name is perfect, and while I use "Boer" to describe the forces arrayed against the "British", I refer to the conflict here as the South African War.

[5] Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

technology, and violence.[6] Meanwhile, Daughtry, Steve Goodman, and Jim Sykes have used ethnographic research to draw out subthemes within the sounds of twenty-first–century warfare that range from machinic noise to rock music to protective chants, with a focus on the experiences of soldiers (Daughtry and Goodman) and civilians (Sykes).[7] Looking further back in history, Gascia Ouzounian details the intersection of acoustic science, technology, and defense in the First World War, while in *The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege*, Mark M. Smith counteracts the dominance of photographs in documenting the American Civil War by fleshing out its story through each of the five senses.[8] Each of these projects attempts to grasp how the perception of phenomena has shaped the mediation and representation of the world: how the senses have contributed to sense-making, or sometimes, the un-making of sense.

In this context, the lack of attention paid to the South African War is notable, though an exception is Erin Johnson-Williams's recent study of the transformation of the concertina from an instrument closely associated with the Boer farming community to a weaponized metaphor for cultural degeneracy to a reclaimed signifier of Afrikaner cultural trauma.[9] Another key text is Anne-Marie Grey's 2004 doctoral dissertation on vocal music of the period, which draws out the

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[6] Suzanne Cusick, "'You are in a Place that is out of the World': Music in the Detention Camps of the 'Global War on Terror'," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–26.

[7] Daughtry, *Listening to War*; J. Martin Daughtry, "Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence," *Social Text* 32, no. 2 (2014): 25–51; Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); and Jim Sykes, "Ontologies of Acoustic Endurance: Rethinking Wartime Sound and Listening," *Sound Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 35–60.

[8] Gascia Ouzounian, "Powers of Hearing: Acoustic Defense and Technologies of Listening during the First World War," in *Stereophonica: Sound and Space in Science, Technology and the Arts*, 37–60 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021); and Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[9] Erin Johnson-Williams, "'The Concertina's Deadly Work in the Trenches': Soundscapes of Suffering in the South African War," *Nineteenth Century Music Review* 20 (2023): 119–51.

significance of singing, and of religious music in particular, to Boer identity and morale during the war by focusing on diaries and a collection of hand-notated scores drawn from prisoner-of-war and concentration camps.[10] Much other work within music studies has focused on later periods of South African history, including the lingering and reconstructed memories of the British-Boer conflict refracted through genres such as *volksliedjie* and *boeremusiek* or events such as the Voortrekker centenary in 1938.[11] The musical traditions of black South Africans also have received sustained attention in recent decades, though again these usually focus on later eras. Even Denis-Constant Martin's seminal discussion of South Africa's creolized soundscapes in *Sounding the Cape* pays scant attention to this time period.[12]

Part of the challenge is that as we move further away from the present, eliciting wartime sensoria and perception from the historical record increases in difficulty, due both to the availability of source materials (or lack thereof) and to changes in human perception. In the case of the former, written references to sound from the South African War are found in material scattered across languages, countries and continents. Moreover, extant records largely chronicle the experiences of the literate middle- or upper-classes, thereby excluding almost all of South

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[10] Anne-Marie Gray, "Vocal Music of the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), Insights into the Processes of Affect and Meanings in Music," (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2004).

[11] Annemie Stimie, "Songs, Singing, and Spaces in South Africa: Afrikaans Folk Songs in Nationalist Publications," in *Music and Propaganda in the Short Twentieth Century*, ed. Massimiliano Sala, 375–90 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014); Willemien Froneman, "Seks, ras en boeremusiek: agter die retoriek van gebrekkige sanglus by die 1938-Voortrekkereeufees," *LitNet Akademies* 11, no. 2 (2014): 422–49; "The Ears of Apartheid," *Social Dynamics* 49, no. 1 (2023): 100–115. Although it focuses on the relationship between music and literature and a much later period (1980s–), Carina Venter's 2015 article "Negotiating Vision: Listening with the Eyes and Hearing Landscape Critically," *SAMUS: South African Music Studies* 34–35, no. 1 (2015): 364–90 offers intriguing points of contact with the discussion of sound, vision, and landscape later in this essay.

[12] Denis-Constant Martin, *Sounding the Cape: Music, Identity and Politics in South Africa* (Somerset West, South Africa: African Minds, 2013).

Africa's black majority population as well as large numbers of the white population.[13] What remains is a necessarily fragmentary account of how the war was heard. As for making the link between the description of sounds and perceptual changes, it is worth remembering with Smith that "what is loud, quiet, and noisy now was qualitatively and quantitatively different in a preautomobile, prejet, preelectronic age."[14] This experiential gap warns against anachronistic explanations for the senses even as it invites the exploration not just of historical sensory experience, which is in many ways as irrecoverable as it is intriguing, but of what Jonathan Sterne calls "the conditions under which that experience became possible."[15] By tracing the rise and fall of distinctive ways of hearing or listening through particular technological forms, we can investigate Sterne's "audile techniques" in specific historical moments.

Thus, Gavin Williams, in his introduction to the pioneering collection *Hearing the Crimean War*, identifies six lenses through which historical wartime sound and its perception might be investigated: organology, voice/writing, time and mediation, silence, archives, and vibrational ontology.[16] Over the course of that volume, perceptions and sounds are linked to technologies both antique and emergent, from the development of military music imitating the sounds of war to the rise of the telegraph which whisked news from the warfront to the home front faster than ever before. The Crimean War (1853–1856) is thereby positioned as a turning point within a century in which the capacity of these technologies to implicate various publics in distant battlefields expanded, from the telegraphed dispatches of the Crimean War to the painstaking

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[13] In this essay, I have chosen to refrain from capitalising the racialised identities of black and white, as to do so in a South African context often evokes the official apartheid-era categories of White, Black, Indian, and Coloured.

[14] Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege*, 3.

[15] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

[16] Gavin Williams, ed. *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound and the Unmaking of Sense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

photographs of the American Civil War (1861–1865) to the staged films of the Spanish-American War (1898).

As Williams and the other volume contributors suggest, the Crimean War sits at the dawn of an era of rapid telecommunication that would radically shift the long-distance ways war could be perceived, yet on the battlefield its military technologies and techniques are recognizably contiguous with earlier methods of war. In contrast, the end of the nineteenth century evinces a deeper shift evident in the confluence of new weapons, adapted military techniques, and advanced media technologies characteristic of the South African War. The South African War is ideally placed as an example of how emerging auditory perceptions of war were mediated through new technologies in a rapidly changing media/cultural landscape. Its scale and positioning within that landscape make it a more significant site for the development of intersections between media and perception than its contemporary the Spanish-American War. Yet one point of connection with earlier wars persists: although the South African War stands at the dawn of the recorded age, there are no known audio recordings of the war itself. It remains the last silent war. Thus, I undertake what Ana María Ochoa Gautier has called "an acoustically tuned exploration of the written archive," or what might more broadly be termed a listening out for those traces of audibility made legible in written and visual forms.[17] This includes published diaries and memoirs kept by combatants, civilians, and journalists sent to report on the conflict, as well as news reports and letters. Drawing out historical perspectives on the connection between sound perception and technologies of war traces the impact of war's bang, rattle, and pop on the way the South African War was heard in its own time and offers a glimpse of how those perceptions continue to influence how we might hear it today.

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[17] Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

The South African War

The South African War began on 11 October 1899 and had two clear phases. The first featured conventional battles dominated by the Boers (culminating in multiple British defeats during the "Black Week" of December 1899) and prolonged sieges of British garrisons, before an imperial troop surge in early 1900 allowed the British to lift the sieges at Ladysmith, Kimberley, and Mafeking and occupy the two Boer republics by June 1900. At this point, the war transformed; rather than face the British directly, the Boer forces broke into small groups and went on commando, a form of guerilla warfare in which bands of mounted men harried troops and sabotaged railways and telegraph offices whilst living off the land. The war dragged on under increasingly harsh conditions until the 1902 Peace of Vereeniging formalized the annexation of the Boer Republics as British colonies.

The Boers' recourse to guerilla warfare links the South African War with other contemporary colonial wars, including the Cuban Independence War (1895–1898), the Philippine Revolution (1896–1898), and the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). So too the imperial response, wherein the British commanders Lords Milner, Roberts, and Kitchener sought to deprive the commandos of all means of support by forcibly clearing large sections of land and building chains of military outposts known as blockhouses to protect infrastructure. In an echo of Spain's treatment of Cuban farmers, the British scorched-earth policy included removing Afrikaner and black civilians to concentration camps, destroying homesteads, and killing or confiscating livestock and other foodstuffs. Over the course of two years, up to 200,000 civilians were interned in appalling conditions as part of the effort to force a surrender. It is estimated that ten per cent of the Boer population, amounting to more than 25,000 people, alongside up to 20,000 black Africans, perished in the camps. In both cases, most of the casualties were women and children who died of disease, exposure, and starvation and it is for this that the South

African War is best-known.[18] The imperial weaponization of civilian populations would characterize the later German genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in present-day Namibia (1904–1907) as well as playing a role in the genocidal campaign carried out by the Ottoman Empire against ethnic Armenians (1915–1916); it is notable that the expulsion of civilian populations in pursuit of military objectives continues to feature in twenty-first-century warfare.

Despite these similarities to other colonial conflicts, the South African War stands out as the longest, bloodiest, and most expensive war fought by the British Empire in the century between 1815 and 1914. Beyond its human, economic, and environmental cost, the historian Thomas Pakenham adds that for the British it was the "most humiliating" conflict of the period.[19] Over the course of two and half years, 450,000 soldiers drawn from across the Empire struggled to overcome a Boer force that numbered less than twenty percent of their total. Among the difficulties faced by the British was the fact that, unlike in most colonial wars of the period, their opponents shared many of the same technologies, whether military or information and communication. This shaped the course of the conflict and the sensory experiences of those caught up within it. From that confluence emerges a distinctively modern form of wartime listening that would soon spread around the globe.

Sound Out of Sight

Today, the distance between Cape Town and Pretoria by rail is almost 1,000 miles across rugged terrain, while the railway lines linking Pretoria to the port cities of Maputo (in 1899 the Portuguese-held Lourenço Marques) and Durban are 350 and 500 miles, respectively. The sheer

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[18] For more, see Fransjohan Pretorius, "The White Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Debate Without End", *Historia* 55, no. 2 (2010): 34–49, and B.E. Mongalo and Kobus Du Pisani, "Victims of a White Man's War: Blacks in Concentration Camps During the South African War", *Historia* 44, no. 1 (1999): 148–82.

[19] Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Abacus, 1979), xv.

physical spaces involved in the South African War, and the necessity of transmitting information across those spaces give us a first indication of modern technology's impact on the war. Beyond the struggle over the railways, the war is notable for its deployment of what were at the time cutting-edge technological advances in communication: for example, it featured the first successful use of wireless telegraphy during a military conflict by the Royal Navy in Delagoa Bay.[20] Both sides in the conflict were interested in these new technologies, although attempts to use wireless telegraphy to coordinate troop movements by the British Army were unsuccessful due to the difficulties Guglielmo Marconi's equipment had in weathering South African geophysical and atmospheric conditions, while the Siemens and Halske equipment ordered by the South African Republic was captured by the British and never saw service.[21] Despite this limited success for wireless transmission, wired telegraphy and the field telephone (another brand-new technology) played key roles in coordinating military movements, especially in the first phase of the war.

At the outbreak of war in 1899, the Boer Republics had a total of 215 telegraph offices as well as field telegraphs and heliographs.[22] In his 1902 report on the war, published as *With Steyn and De Wet*, the telegraphist Filip Pienaar recounts the ingenious way that the Boer forces instituted a mobile telegraph for communication between military laagers by using insulated fence wire and a vibrator: "an instrument so sensitive that the most faulty line would carry

[20] Brian Austin, "Wireless in the Boer War," *Journal of Defence Science* 6, no. 2 (2001): 119–25, at 123.

[21] Austin, "Wireless in the Boer War", 120–22.

[22] T.D. Potgieter, "Nineteenth Century Technological Development and its Influence on the Anglo-Boer War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2 (2000): 116–35, at 122.

enough electricity to work it."[23] In the Orange Free State, where all farms were required to have wire fencing, a ready-made telegraphing service came into earshot:

> Soon messages were gaily buzzing to and fro over the fence. There was naturally a great loss of electricity, but not enough to prevent the working of the sensitive little vibrator.
>
> As with the cable in Natal, however, there were frequent interruptions. A herd of cattle would knock a few poles over, a burgher hurrying across country would simply cut a passage through the fence, or a farmer in passing through a gate would notice the cable, dig it up, and take it along, swearing it must be dynamite, and that the English were trying to explode the Free State with it.[24]

The vibrator also allowed a sensitive listener to intercept messages coming through the telegraph lines. Pienaar was one such skilled listener, and his account of wiretapping is worth quoting at length.

> After breakfast I walked down to the telegraph line connecting Heilbron and Frankfort, which ran past this point. Taking about ten yards of "cable" wire, I cleaned about a foot of it in the middle, tied one end to my spanner, and threw the latter over the line. The swing carried it over a second time, the two ends hanging just above the ground. Attaching one end to the instrument, I heard the English telegraphist in Heilbron calling up Kroonstadt, and the Boer telegraphist in Frankfort working to Reitz.
>
> I immediately climbed the pole and cut the Frankfort side of the line. Then I took another piece of cable, and connected the earth terminal of the vibrator with the telegraph pole. The British signals now came through beautifully clear. The first message that passed was one from General Hamilton to Lord Roberts, announcing his arrival at

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[23] Philip [Filip] Pienaar, "Spion Kop," in *With Steyn and De Wet* (London: Methuen & Co., 1902), n.p. Project Gutenberg, retrieved 23 October 2023 from https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/15224/pg15224-images.html

[24] Pienaar, "The Free State," in *With Steyn and De Wet.*

> Heilbron, the details of the two engagements fought during the march, the number of killed and wounded, and the state of his force—"often hungry, but cheerful." […]
>
> We two rode on until almost on top of the hill overlooking Heilbron, when we dismounted. Drawing the horses behind a low stone wall, we attached the instrument to the line. I listened. There were no fewer than five different vibrators calling each other, some strong and clear, others sounding weak and far, like "horns of Elfland faintly blowing." Presently the disputing signals died away, and one musical note alone took up the strain.
>
> Never was lover more absorbed in the thrilling sound of his divinity's voice than I in the notes of that vibrator, seemingly wailing up from the bowels of the earth.
>
> Nor was my attention unrewarded.
>
> "From Chief of Staff, Honingspruit," came the words, "to General Hamilton, Heilbron." Then followed orders. How Hamilton was to march from Heilbron; how Broadwood was to move from Ventersburg, the entire plan of campaign for the next few weeks! A mass of information to gladden the heart of our steadfast chief. "Hurrah!" we whispered to each other, as I carefully put the precious message in a safe place.
>
> Then some harsh, grating sounds were heard in the microphone. The wires were evidently being overhauled in Heilbron. Complete silence followed.[25]

Though the telegraph and its affordances for eavesdropping were not new in 1899, listening in these ways demonstrate how the military forces in South Africa adapted both the landscape and the available technologies. Together with control of the railway lines (the importance of which had been demonstrated in the American Civil War and the two Prussian wars of the 1860s and 1870s), these technologies and the audile techniques they engender represent military attempts to

[25] Pienaar, "The Free State," in *With Steyn and De Wet.*

compress the vast distances of South Africa into a space both communicable and controllable through metallic taps and the hiss of tape and wire.

If we narrow our focus to the battlefield, other distinctive sonic contours emerge. In the early months of the war, new weapons technologies, including long-range bolt-action magazine rifles, smokeless powder, improved artillery, and a combination of trench warfare (in the initial part of the war) and guerrilla tactics (later on) served to shape the battlefield as one of long-distance bombardment and sniping. In particular, the range of the Boers' Mauser rifles (up to 4000m, with good accuracy at over 2000m), combined with their marksmanship and skill in using natural cover made them deadly and often unseen opponents. As the American war reporter Howard Hillegas (1872–1918) wrote of the battle of Sannaspost in March 1900:

> the use of smokeless powder, causing the panorama to remain perfectly clear and distinct, allowed every movement to be closely followed by the observer. Cannon poured forth their tons of shells, but there was nothing except the sound of the explosion to denote where the guns were situated. Rifles cut down lines of men, but there was no smoke to indicate where they were being operated, and unless the burghers or soldiers displayed themselves to the enemy there was nothing to indicate their positions.[26]

British soldiers complained vociferously about both their inability to see the enemy and the slowness of their military commanders to adapt tactics.[27] Shortly after the end of the war, an

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[26] Howard C. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), 164.

[27] "You never see your enemy, even at 900 or 500 [yards]; and the Boer is a busy fellow if he feels so inclined. He will stay and fire 300 shots at you before you can clap your hands. If he wants to go to a better place he will go, but you can't see him move." An officer in the Devonshire regiments, quoted in Edward M. Spiers, "Re-engaging the Boers," in *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 159–79, at 173. For more, see Keith Surridge, "'All You Soldiers are What We Call Pro-Boer': The Military Critique of the South African War, 1899–1902," *History* 82, no. 268 (October 1997): 582–600.

officer wrote in the *United Service Magazine* that "War is not what it was when armies maneuvered in sight of each other […] That was old-time fighting and some sport about it too. Now Bill is killed at 2400 yards, and Bill's pal hasn't an idea where the shot was fired. That is modern warfare."[28] It is striking to note that the primary technological advantages identified with the advent of modern rifles (namely, their long range and flat trajectory, magazine loading mechanisms, and the use of smokeless powder) have the effect of increasing the importance of sound as a delimiter of battle by expanding the range of fire, increasing its rate, and rendering its location invisible, respectively.

Although the British rarely matched the Boers in terms of marksmanship, they carried similarly powerful rifles (Lee-Metfords) and were amply endowed with artillery, which they deployed in large batteries that could be accurate at a range of several miles. In a curious paradox, artillerymen on both sides encountered the problem of too much sight, rather than too little, as South Africa's exceptionally clear atmosphere rendered range-finding difficult.[29] Nonetheless, when the range was found it could be devastating. Deneys Reitz (1882–1944), a young Free State commando, described the effects of shelling during a battle at Ladysmith, saying:

> There came the sounds, once heard never forgotten, of shells tearing towards us and exploding around us, and overhead, with deafening concussions.
>
> By now, what with the thunder of the British guns and of our own, the crash of bursting shells and the din of thousands of rifles, there was a volume of sound unheard

[28] "Not by a Staff Officer", "Some Remarks on Recent Changes", *United Service Magazine*, October 1904, 47. Quoted in Spencer Jones, "'Shooting Power': A Study of the Effectiveness of Boer and British Rifle Fire, 1899–1914," *British Journal for Military History* 1, no. 1 (October 2014): 29–47, at 32.

[29] Cf. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 108; and Jones "'Shooting Power'," 31.

> in South Africa before. I was awed rather than frightened, and, once I had got over my first impression, I felt excited by all I saw.[30]

A short time later, Reitz was on the Tugela line when he first encountered lyddite shells, a kind of British artillery round that combined hearing, sight, taste, and smell when they "went off with an appalling bang, emitting acrid green and yellow fumes that gave one a burning sensation in throat, and chest."[31]

Whether in entrenched positions, out in the comparative open, or manning gun posts, soldiers learnt to distinguish between different types of ordnance and to recognise the relative distance and direction of incoming shells. For example, the "pom-pom" gun, the 37mm Maxim-Nordenfeldt or Vickers-Maxim automatic cannon, gained its nickname from the distinctive sound it made as it spat out dozens of rounds per minute. The rapid onslaught of noise and shell arriving with no visual warning was terrifying; as the professional film-maker William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson recalled, at the Battle of Spion Kop in January 1900:

> the British were being mowed down by rifle and cross-fire from the "door-knockers," or Maxim-Nordenfeldt repeating guns, making it quite impossible for our men to escape. […] Our men shudder at the very sound, the moment they hear it; and no wonder, for the accurate shooting accomplished with this murderous weapon is something fearful to see—men disembowelled, legs and arms carried away, and the ground torn to pieces.[32]

These descriptions highlight the crucial role of sound in orienting oneself on a battlefield that was a maelstrom of the "pop" and "crack" of rifles, the "rat-tat" of the Maxim machine gun, and

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[30] Denys Reitz, *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War*. Rpt. (N.p.: CruGuru, 2008), 22. Originally published 1929 by Faber & Faber, London.

[31] Reitz, *Commando*, 38.

[32] William K.-L. Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle*, Rpt. (Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books, 1995), 134–35. Originally published 1901 by T. Fisher Unwin, London.

the "roar" of artillery. In the open battlescapes of South Africa, the sounds of munitions travelled unaccompanied by visual signals of their origins and enfolded within multiple sonic echoes as the reports ricocheted off the rugged landscape. Successfully navigating this sonic environment required directing attention "not toward the visible source of sound, but toward the path of sound."[33] In short, the South African War demonstrates how the inadequacy of sight and the corresponding ascendence of sound within the war's technological apparatus shaped its conduct.

A dozen years later, the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo recognized the significance of the inversion of prior sensorial hierarchies heralded by the environment of the South African War. In his 1913 treatise *The Art of Noises* Russolo asserts that:

> In modern warfare, mechanical and metallic, the element of sight is almost zero. The sense, the significance, and the expressiveness of noise, however, are infinite. […] From noise, the different calibres of grenades and shrapnels can be known even before they explode. Noise enables us to discern a marching patrol in deepest darkness, even to judging the number of men that compose it. From the intensity of rifle fire, the number of defenders of a given position can be determined. There is no movement or activity that is not revealed by noise.[34]

For Russolo, this new noisiness came about first in war, and it not only revealed the necessity of coming to grips with the changes to humanity wrought by technological progression, but also demanded a new artistic paradigm that heard musicality in what was called noise. Although the South African War's audience was more immediately concerned with questions of physical safety

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[33] Ouzounian, "Powers of Hearing," 60.

[34] Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press 1986), 49–50. Originally published 1913.

and military advantage than with art, in their recollections of wartime sound we can hear an echo of a peculiar music made of and by the noisiness of guns.

Guns 'n' Music

For those civilians who found themselves within earshot of the guns, navigating by the sounds of ordnance took on additional meanings. The quotation from Sol Plaatje that opens this essay comes from one of the most evocative descriptions of the sounds of battle in South Africa. His impressions are particularly striking for their equation of music and gunfire alongside his observations about the effects of the guns on the minds and bodies of those who hear them. Immediately after his discussion of the guns' "thrilling" sound, he writes:

> It is like enjoying supernatural melodies in a paradise to hear one or two shots fired off the armoured train; but no words can suitably depict the fascination of the music produced by the action of a Maxim, which to Boer ears, I am sure, is an exasperation which not only disturbs the ear but also disorganizes the free circulation of the listener's blood.[35]

From the very opening of the siege Plaatje draws a distinction between the guns of the two sides in terms of both musical quality ("supernatural melodies") and listener pleasure. Moreover, Plaatje imagines that those sounds which to him are "captivating" beyond all music have an equal, but opposite effect on the Boers, causing physical symptoms such as disorientation and nausea. This is congruent with a widespread discourse amongst white British observers that framed the Boers as both racially degenerate and unable to appreciate so-called high culture.[36]

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[35] Plaatje, *Boer War Diary*, 1.

[36] For more on this, see Johnson-Williams, "The Concertina's Deadly Work in the Trenches", 124–31.

Throughout the early portion of the diary, Plaatje is disparaging towards the Boer guns, referring to the sound made by the high-velocity Mausers as a "sickening rattle"; he is somewhat more deferential to the bang of the Boer's long-gun, whom he calls "Au Sanna", particularly as the siege progresses and damage and privation begin to wear.[37] In contrast, he is unstinting in his pleasure in the British guns. Describing one encounter, he writes:

> All of a sudden four or five "booms" from the armoured train quenched their metal. It was like a member of the Payne family silencing a boisterous crowd with the prelude of a selection she is going to give on the violin. When their beastly fire "shut up" the Maxim began to play: it was like listening to the Kimberley R.C. choir with their organ, rendering one of their mellifluous carols on Christmas Eve; and its charm could justly be compared with that of the Jubilee Singers performing one of their many quaint and classical oratorios.[38]

Although Plaatje's references to the Payne family and the Jubilee Singers are somewhat obscure today, his rich description comparing the guns to these contemporary musical groups and traditions reveal him as a person of extensive musical experience and knowledge of art, religious, and popular styles.[39] Later on in Plaatje's diary, the guns themselves become musical performers. He writes: "we enjoyed that sweet and enchanting music from our musketeers. It gave us an entertainment of the sweetest music imaginable when slow volley after volley was directed at the

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[37] Plaatje, *Boer War Diary*, 2.

[38] Plaatje, *Boer War Diary*, 1–2.

[39] The reference to the "member of the Payne family" may be to the Payne Family of Bellringers, a musical troupe of singers and instrumentalists who had toured the Transvaal earlier in 1899. The Kimberley Roman Catholic diocese was established in 1886; Plaatje grew up nearby and moved to Kimberley in 1894. The Jubilee Singers are likely to be the Virginia Jubilee Singers, a group modeled on the Fisk Jubilee Singers and led by Orpheus McAdoo who also toured South Africa in the 1890s.

angry Boers: now and then a 7-pounder would harmonize the proceedings with an occasional boom in sweet bombardment."[40]

As striking as this rhetorical conflation of musical performance and gunfire is, Plaatje was not alone in hearing the mechanisms of war in musical terms. In the later months of the war, Pienaar describes riding into a battle at Bethlehem "Quite cheerfully […] listening to the music of the bursting shells and the lively rattle of the small-arms" while an evocative narrative of a skirmish describes how "the bullets all went high, singing overhead like a flight of canaries."[41] Dr James Alexander Kay, a British surgeon in besieged Ladysmith, occasionally described the firing of guns as musical, as in the following extracts from his diary, written during the final month of the siege of Ladysmith in 1900:

> 5 February. Today the music of the guns from Colenso cheered us all and towards afternoon it was one continuous roar. […]
>
> 9 February. Some enthusiasts say they can hear rifle-firing. […]
>
> 22 February. We've had such lovely music again—heavy firing from Colenso for three days, and today it sounds quite close[42]

Kay's use of "lovely music" to describe gunfire here indicates a moral-aesthetic approval that echoes Plaatje's description of the British guns at Mafeking. It also signals the anticipatory quality of listening required by life under siege: a life in which increasing or decreasing volumes of

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[40] Plaatje, *Boer War Diary*, 20. Musicalized military sound would continue to be a feature of writings of the First World War, such as in these evocative lines by the poet and composer Ivor Gurney: "Got gassed, and learnt the machine gun, how it played / Scales and arpeggios." Qtd. in Oliver Soden, "Like Buttermilk from a Jug," *London Review of Books* 44, no. 18 (22 September 2022): 31–32, at 31.

[41] Pienaar, "In the Mountains" and "Skirmishes", in *With Steyn and De Wet*.

[42] Henry John May, *Music of the Guns* (London: Jarrolds, 1970), 57, 60. In this volume May edits together journals by Kay and by Freda Schlosberg, a young Boer girl in Ladysmith. Schlosberg's diaries do not indicate the same sensitivity to sound as Kay's.

sound was often a primary material for interpretation and discussion by Ladysmith's beleaguered inhabitants as they waited for relief.

A month later in March 1900, Hillegas would take a different line on musical gunfire in his description of the battle of Sannaspost, writing that "Men and horses continued to fall, the wounded lay moaning in the grass, while shells and bullets sang their song of death more loudly every second to those who braved the storm."[43] Even musical rhythm gets a brief metaphorical life in his description of how "the regular volleys of the British rifles seemed to be beating time to the minor notes and irregular reports of the Boer carbines."[44] This last comment is not merely a poetic device, however, but a musicalized comment on the varying rhythms of sonic participation in the battle that were themselves the result of different tactics (volley-fire versus individualized marksmanship) and technologies (the higher pitch of the high-velocity Mauser rifles favored by the Boer forces) combined with the reverberant features of the landscape.

Plaatje, Pienaar, Kay, and Hillegas were all choosing to remain within earshot of the guns; so too was the filmmaker William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, but his account also includes a brief note of those (both human and animal) who remained not through choice, but because they had been hired to assist the filmmaker. At the battle of Colenso, he comments:

> Our horses, trembling and jumping at every shot, behaved splendidly, however, never moving from the spot, but scared out of their wits. My companions used cotton-wool in their ears to prevent the tremendous concussion, but as I wished to hear which way the shells were coming I preferred to drop the jaw at the word "Fire," a trick I learned at

[43] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 161.

[44] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 164.

> Sandy Hook, U.S. [the U.S. army's artillery proving ground], at the firing of the 10in., which answered the purpose very well.[45]

Likewise, Hillegas notes that while he describes the sounds of battle relatively dispassionately, not all were so sanguine. A group of British women and children caught up in the fighting at Sannaspost

> were in perfect safety so far as being actually in the line of fire was concerned, but bullets and shells swept over and exploded near them, and they were in constant terror of being killed. The nervous tension was so great and continued for such a long time that one of the children, a twelve-year-old daughter of Mrs. J. Shaw McKinley, became insane shortly after the battle was ended.[46]

In a tragic counterpart to Plaatje's assertion that the sound of British guns "disturbs the [Boer] ear" and "disorganizes the free circulation of the listener's blood," Hillegas offers a glimpse of how the disturbing and disordered music of gunfire could cause what in the nineteenth century was called neaurasthenia or traumatic neurosis and what would later be called shell-shock, combat stress reaction, or post-traumatic stress disorder.[47] Although these are but brief asides in stories that otherwise exhibit deep admiration for the overpowering sound of the guns they are salutary reminders that such military "music" was not heard by everyone.

Music Away from the Front

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[45] Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle*, 74.

[46] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 308–309.

[47] For more on neurasthenia, see Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, *Cultures of Neurasthenia: From Beard to the First World War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

The musicalized sounds and silences of military machines are prominent in many accounts from the war, but overlapping with the sound of guns were other, less immediately threatening melodies. Music, whether provided by military bands or more casual singing or instrumental playing, had long been a characteristic of British military life and troops in South Africa were no exception.[48] In particular, the British military still used fife and drum bands, pipers, and buglers to rally troops on the battlefield. In addition to the rallying effect of these traditional military instruments, folk instruments such as the concertina may have been used as entertainment and occasionally to lure curious soldiers to expose themselves to enemy fire, as detailed by Johnson-Williams.[49] Amongst the British troops, two buglers won renown in early battles in South Africa: first was John Shurlock, a fourteen-year-old with the 5th Royal Irish Lancers who shot three Boer soldiers at Elandslaagte on the 21st of October 1899. His exploits were transformed into a popular music-hall song "Only a Bugler Boy" just days after they were reported in the British press.[50] Scarcely a month later at the British defeat at the Tugela River, bugler John Francis Dunne continued to sound the charge even after he had been seriously wounded. Dunne's feat earned him a commendation (and a new bugle) bestowed by Queen Victoria, alongside a form of immortality in the song "Bugler Dunne."[51] Patriotic accounts of the war from both sides were

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[48] For more, see Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow, *Music & the British Military in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Emma Hanna, *Sounds of War: Music in the British Armed Forces during the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[49] Johnson-Williams, "The Concertina's Deadly Work in the Trenches", 124–31. As Johnson-Williams notes, the newspaper accounts of these incidents may well be apocryphal; indeed, the quoted description given by the war correspondent of the use of the concertina at the siege of Mafeking suggests an intimacy between troops that is not evident in the extant maps of troop positions—though a shorter distance would certainly facilitate the hearing of the concertina requisite for the Boer soldiers' curiosity to be aroused.

[50] Anon., *The Era*, 18 November 1899, 21.

[51] See the lyrics to "Bugler Dunne," www.netley-military-cemetery.co.uk/passing-through-convalescents/bugler-dunne/ (accessed 16 October 2023).

sung across a wide range of venues in South Africa and beyond, and while South Africa lacked recording facilities, in Europe, recordings were an important means of galvanizing support. The setting of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Absent-Minded Beggar" is the most famous song from a British perspective, but also notable in this regard is Ian Colquhoun's "Marching on Pretoria" from 1899, which is the earliest known mention of South Africa in recorded song.[52] In January 1900 recordings were made in den Haag and in Berlin of the national anthems of the Transvaal Republic and Orange Free State, and pro-Boer songs were popular across a wide swathe of Europe, from the Netherlands and France to Hungary and Russia.[53] Here the music-making of the home and war fronts collided with wider geopolitical sentiments and the nascent recorded music industry.

Off the battlefield, music provided a means of rest and entertainment and included civilians and their instruments as well as the latest audio technology such as the gramophone. Thus, Dickson notes with some fondness the night of 22 February 1900, in which

> we were regaled by a soldier's concert of the very best; bright spontaneous humour prevailed; clever impromptu songs and dances; a gramophone was handled very well by an officer; the accompaniments were played by the landlord's daughter. The piano had been hauled out on the porch, and the little intervening space between the little inn and the store covered over. All was bright and happy, and the war was forgotten for a time.[54]

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[52] Schalk D. van der Merwe, *On Record—Popular Afrikaans Music & Society 1900–2017* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2017), 1. See also https://www.flatinternational.org/template_volume.php?volume_id=150 (accessed 16 October 2023) for more information about the tangled history of "Marching on Pretoria" and as well as a link to a 1902 recording by Colqohoun.

[53] For a more complete list, see Aletta Swanepoel, "Music Inspired by the Afrikaner Cause (1852–1902), with Special Reference to the Transvaal Volkslied," Master's Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1979.

[54] Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle*, 156.

Similar reports of concerts and their salutary effects on morale appear in several accounts, including Kay's brief description of a somewhat slapdash attempt at entertainment during the Ladysmith siege. He notes in a letter that:

> We frequently hold open-air concerts at Intombi [the neutral camp and hospital at Ladysmith where Kay worked]. If the music is not first-class and the songs are not drawing-room, we none the less appreciate them.
>
> We have no band, but a small harmonium, and the omission is much felt. A band is most enlivening, and although a scratch band has been raised, with amateur made instruments which emit sound but not music, it is meant more as a burlesque than as a substitute for a band.[55]

Amongst the Boers, music was equally important, with religious music featuring particularly strongly. The Dutch Reformed tradition of hymn- and psalm-singing was a twice-daily feature in many laagers, and even in commando bands, instrumentalists and singers kept morale high with marches, dances, and comic songs.[56] In towns such as Pretoria, "a victory was celebrated in the Dutch church by the singing of psalms, and a defeat by the offering of prayers for the success of the army."[57] The American war correspondent Richard Harding Davis was in Pretoria during the final days before the British Army occupied the city; he notes that "up to the very last, the Boer residents gave concerts for the benefit of the sick and wounded, at which one could hear the best classical music excellently played and sung."[58] Even under British occupation, music had a place in the city, though public forms of music-making often came under military

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[55] May, *Music of the Guns*, 59–60.

[56] Pienaar's diary mentions a banjoist ("De Wet Once More") and an impromptu "smoking concert" that featured selections from Byron as well as camp and comic songs ("Off to the Transvaal"). In *With Steyn and De Wet*.

[57] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 37–38.

[58] Richard Harding Davis, *With Both Armies in South Africa* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 225.

scrutiny. Johanna Brandt (*née* van Warmelo) recounts that she had to request a special permit from the British General Maxwell on behalf of the Pretoria Ladies' Vocal Society in order to hold rehearsals. The general did so, on the condition "that you promise to talk no politics and to be in your own homes before 7 p.m."[59] Rehearsals were duly held, and at home Brandt played the piano and sang every evening.

Music also provided occasional moments of seeming unity amongst combatants, such as Key's description of Boer soldiers at his hospital who: "once attended one of the concerts, and 'Soldiers of the Queen' was a great favourite. This did not cause them much uneasiness but when it came to 'God Save the Queen,' they gradually disappeared and did not attend the concerts again."[60] Hillegas recounts a further musical incident involving the same popular tune as entertained soldiers at Intombi, this time in the aftermath of a skirmish won by the Boers:

> A soldier commenced to sing another popular song, British and Boer caught the refrain, and the noise of tramping feet was drowned by the melody of the united voices of friend and foe singing—
>
> "It's the soldiers of the Queen, my lads,
>
> Who've been, my lads—who've seen, my lads,
>
> * * * *
>
> We'll proudly point to every one
>
> Of England's soldiers of the Queen."[61]

The image of Boer soldiers happily singing a song praising their opponents in these circumstances is striking, but "Soldiers of the Queen" appears to have been a particular favorite among those on either side of the conflict in South Africa as well as among wartime audiences in

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[59] Johanna Brandt, *The Petticoat Commando, or Boer Women in Secret Service* (London: Mills and Boon, 1913), 39.

[60] May, *Music of the Guns*, 59–60.

[61] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 172.

Britain.[62] Lest this give the impression that wartime songs were exclusively patriotic, uplifting, and free from "popular Music Hall effusions",[63] Kay also includes in his diary a bitingly satiric lyric from the conflict's early days, that alludes to Liberal and radical opposition to the war while repurposing the tune of "God Save the Queen":

> God save our gracious foes,
> Long live our noble foes,
> God save our foes.
> Send them victorious
> Long to laugh over us,
> Always pro-Boer-ious, God save our foes.
>
> May we be always meek,
> Turning the other cheek,
> Though it should hurt.
> Confound Chamberlain Joe
> Frustrate John Bull and Co.
> Bring Empire builders low, make them eat dirt
>
> May every nation thrive,
> Plan, scheme, lie, threat, and strive,

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[62] For more on the musical life in Britain during the South African War, see Frank Gray, "*Our Navy* and Patriotic Entertainment in Brighton at the Start of the Boer War," in *Early Cinema and the National*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini, 79–89 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Simon Popple, "Fresh from the Front: Performance, War News, and Popular Culture during the Boer War," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8, no. 4 (2010): 401–18.

[63] Anonymous, qtd. in Emma Hanna, *Sounds of War: Music in the British Armed Forces during the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 76.

While we give way.

This be our lofty tone,

Long live each land and throne,

Except, of course, our own—Hoo bloomin ray![64]

Lighter moments of music-making such as these may seem far removed from the environment of the battlefield, but they indicate (and encourage) a listening orientation that frames military action through music. At other times, the sounds that emerge from the written record coalesce into a palimpsest of the musical and the military. One such moment echoes in Hillegas's report that before the Boer forces crossed the border into British-held Natal at the outbreak of war on 11 October 1899, they held a service in which "hymns were sung and for a full hour the hills, whereon almost twenty years before many of the same burghers sang and prayed after the victory at Majuba, were resounding with the religious and patriotic songs of men going forward to kill and be killed."[65] The religious fervour of such services overlapped with patriotic commitment, and both took musical forms. Yet despite the Boer army's strength, it would not be long before those same hills that had witnessed the British Army defeated in 1881 would again echo with the death song of rifle fire as the Boer force retreated back over Laing's Nek.

Understanding the uses and perceptions of music within South Africa's wartime soundscape offers further grounding for the discussion of military technologies as tools of perception featuring a distinctively musical sensitivity. The persistence of music as a metaphorical description for gunfire during the South African War is arresting, and it points to the intersection of multiple layers of perception in the wartime soundscape. No longer was musical sound the preserve of military bands or of informal performance; now, the very

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[64] May, *Music of the Guns*, 9–10.

[65] Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, 84.

machines that generated death and destruction could also be heard as musical. Moreover, even though the experience of gunfire as overwhelming or terrifying was shared across battlelines, the ability to classify the sounds of one's enemies as sickening and those of one's friends as lovely allowed individuals (and, via journalistic dissemination, larger audiences) to make sense of the field of battle in and through sound.

Conclusion

For all their significance, the vibrating sounds of the South African War have vanished. However, the war left behind a rich archive of visual, written, and oral information, often from people who were witnesses of the ear as much as of the eye. Examining these accounts reveals how links between munitions and music framed the experience of war and point to what Alyson Tapp has called "the sense-making work of consciousness, the ways we perceive, mediate, and represent the world to ourselves."[66] To those under siege or in the open field the sounds, rhythms, and music of the guns were a defining characteristic of the South African battlefield and the positive and negative impressions they made on both soldiers and observers would influence the way the war was further mediated and represented. Beyond the battlefield, music continued to fulfill other roles, but remained a key means of defining and describing a soundscape that was in many ways newly heard.

Such attention to sound and to the senses was characteristic of the late nineteenth century, an era John Picker describes as full of "unheard-of loudness"—much of it generated by new technologies or through new, and often colonial, encounters.[67] This inspired multiple

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[66] Alyson Tapp, "Earwitness: Sound and Sense-making in Tolstoy's Sevastopol Stories," in *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound and the Unmaking of Sense*, ed. Gavin Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 196–213, at 196.

[67] John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

attempts to cultivate novel ways of hearing. In his *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology*, the nineteenth-century philosopher of technology Ernst Kapp (1808–1896) argues for the products of technology to be understood as what he calls "organ projections".[68] In this framework, bodily organs serve as both models for machines and the lenses through which human activities, including music, are interpreted. Thus, the vibrating fibres of the organ of Corti in the ear furnish connections to the harp and piano, and Kapp enjoins his readers to "recall that the ear drum, the tympanic cavity, the Eustachian trumpet already took their names from musical instruments (even the *cochlea* recalls the violin's scroll)."[69] The ear itself is figured as a medium which in its very structure connects instrumental technologies to the cultural phenomenon of music. The accounts from the South African War are not concerned with the intricacies of human organs, but a similar instrumentalization of the body and the human sensorium as a lens for understanding technology is evident, as when Pienaar connects the buzzing of the vibrator on the telegraph line to the vibration of the throat as he listens to a voice "wailing up from the bowels of the earth."[70]

Given the technological and perceptual changes that separate the turn of the twentieth century from today, it is worth returning briefly to the question of how listeners today do or do

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[68] Ernst Kapp, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jeffrey West Kirkwood and Leif Weatherby, trans. Lauren K. Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Kapp's work has been discussed further in Jeffrey West Kirkwood and Leif Weatherby, "Operations of Culture: Ernst Kapp's Philosophy of Technology," *Grey Room* 72 (Summer 2018): 6–15; Maurizio Esposito, "En el principio era la mano: Ernst Kapp y la relación entre máquina y organismo," *Revista de Humanidades de Valparaíso* 14 (2019): 117–38; and David Trippett, "From Distant Sounds to Aeolian Ears: Ernst Kapp's Auditory Prosthesis", in *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination*, ed. David Trippett and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 134–54.

[69] Kapp, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology*, 71.

[70] Pienaar, "The Free State", in *With Steyn and De Wet*. Implicit in this account, as in many others, is that the voice, body, and senses in question are both white and male.

not hear the South African War. As I suggest at the beginning of this essay, within music and sound studies, we hear relatively little of this conflict at all, and what we do hear comes from a set of sources that, with very few exceptions, privilege the audile techniques of the white minorities (both Boer and British) in South Africa. Moreover, shifting cultural ideas about the power of sound, technology, and the nature of music render these historical experiences enigmatic. We cannot escape our twenty-first–century ears. Yet even with these caveats in place, a clear sense emerges of the South African War as a significant moment in the global history of listening, one which expands the contexts for thinking about auditory culture.

In this, sensory perception, musical metaphor, and military technology are revealed as deeply intertwined. That these peculiar descriptions speak alongside other descriptions of more conventional experiences of music offers another approach to interpreting Paul Virilio's suggestion that "weapons are tools not just of destruction but of perception."[71] We understand the world at once through our sense perceptions and through the tools both metaphorical and material that form the basis for utility, knowledge, and being. For at least some audiences in South Africa, the changes in the sensorial hierarchy encountered via new forms of wartime sound were made comprehensible through recourse to music. This opens the question of what sorts of perceptions of technology are audible in our vastly changed, yet still conflict-ridden world?

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