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Book Review:

Alexander J. Fisher, *Music, Piety, and Propaganda: The Soundscapes of Counter-Reformation Bavaria*, (Oxford: New York, 2014)

Simeon Koole

University of Oxford

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Music, Piety, and Propaganda: The Soundscapes of Counter-Reformation

Bavaria, Alexander J. Fisher, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 2014,

384 pp., £35.99, ISBN 978-0-19-976464-8

It is hard to add anything new to the concept of the soundscape. The term was coined back in 1977 by R. Murray Schafer to capture the aural bounding of space and the meaning invested in it through historically contingent ways of listening; soundscapes have since had a healthy historiographical career.ⁱ It is even harder to contribute to the notion that human action and perception produce space and order social relations within it. Besides the subsequent elaboration of Lefebvre's constructivist concept of space there has since been considerable interest in the way the phenomenological experience of space constitutes social identities, despite obvious differences in these approaches.ⁱⁱ On the face of it, then, Fisher's argument that the aural production of sacred and profane spaces in Counter-Reformation Bavaria - through for example vernacular song, liturgical music and bell ringing - articulated confessional identities might seem, though meticulously supported, unexceptional. Similar arguments have been made for places where the Counter-Reformation was unnecessary (Milan) or, in a broader discussion of sixteenth-century theological understandings of the senses, where it was rejected (England).ⁱⁱⁱ But the real challenge of this book lies elsewhere, more in the problems it encounters when tackling the relation between sound and power than in the solutions it provides.

Following his earlier study of music in Counter-Reformation Augsburg (1580-1630), Fisher provides a broader account encompassing religious change in urban and rural areas across the whole Bavarian region.^{iv} Drawing on minute books, song books,

campanological treatises and records of visitations and litanies of eleven archives he moves from the contained spaces of the cathedral and court chapel of Munich to the open spaces of city streets and the pilgrimage routes threaded across Bavaria. He shows how in each of these spaces the Wittelsbach dukes and their Jesuit supporters deployed different sounds to consolidate lay Catholic identity and maintain their own authority. Within the privileged walls of the ducal chapel, preserve of the elite, this meant cohering an already existent Catholic identity through chapelmaster Orlando di Lasso's new compositions of the Magnificat, the hymn of the Virgin Mary sung at Vespers (83-84). Where public religious observance was more lax it could mean direct compulsion, as when Munich city council attempted to force its inhabitants to kneel in the streets and "pray for the needs of Christendom" at the daily ringing of the 'Turk bell' (204-205). At the same time, it proved difficult for the authorities to monopolize both the production and meaning of sound, an indeterminacy threatening the consistency of Catholic identity and offering a space for Protestant resistance. Pilgrim routes, for example, were highly variegated, potentially spiritually unharmonious, soundscapes. The singing of officially approved canticles bled into that of profane and even 'heretical' songs, disrupting the spiritual geography of the journey and the confessional integrity it was intended to reinforce (316-317).

Although closely anchored in the confessional conflicts of Bavaria, some of these chapters do not significantly diverge from earlier soundscape studies. The discussion of the way that bells define a community's spatial boundaries, mark sacred and secular time, call the community together, and drive off evil spirits and storms closely hews to Corbin's study of village bells in nineteenth-century France. But even in these cases the extraordinary detail provided, right down to the names, weights and inscriptions of every bell in the church of Unsere Liebe Frau in Munich in 1617 (196-

201), makes this as much a valuable source book to be mined as a standard monograph. Fisher generously includes song transcriptions and extracts of sheet music, and frequently extends his already lengthy references onto the book's companion website where enthusiasts will also find inventories of printed music and, intriguingly, the salaries of Munich court chapel musicians for almost every year between 1590 and 1651. This encyclopedic approach makes the book a useful repository for scholars of early modern music but also indicates Fisher's attempt to place sacred music within the wider soundscape of non-musical artificial sounds that it inhabited; an unusual integration of musicology with soundscape studies (4). This sometimes does not come off, especially when technical terms are left unexplained and formal analysis is not related to context, but for the most part the internal structure of chapters and the scalar progression of the book through a typology of soundscapes results in a subtle layering of different sounds. The parallel reading of non-liturgical polyphony in confraternities and monasteries with the sounds of funerals and military celebrations (105-189) is both meticulous and bold.

However, haunting all of this is the occasionally worrisome figure of Michel de Certeau. Fisher frames his account of confessionalization through a distinction between elite 'strategies' of aural control and popular 'tactics' to resist and modulate this, through for example the subversive singing of Lutheran hymns. Although he is careful to stress that the ducal use of sound was not always propagandistic and that apparent tactics of vernacular singing had a longer and more innocuous history (16-17), he often falls into an unhelpful binary of dominance and resistance that glosses the multiple intersections of these planes and overlooks de Certeau's point that tactics only work *within*, and lack autonomy from, the strategies they oppose: '[t]he space of a tactic is the space of the other'.^v In part this is because the particular nature of

sixteenth-century Bavaria as a patchwork of Protestant and Catholic enclaves makes it necessary, Fisher claims, to emphasize the disciplinary element in the Counter-Reformation (14-16); there was a greater need to enforce Catholic orthodoxy amidst religious heterogeneity. But it is also because even in his positioning of tactics within strategies de Certeau maintains, *contra* Foucault's explanation of power as effect rather than object, an opposition between those who 'have' power and those who do not; a product of his reliance on the military strategists von Bülow and von Clausewitz.^{vi} Through his reliance on a vocabulary of strategies and tactics (10, 26-26, 216-217) Fisher replicates this artificial binary in explanations of power relations rather than pushing for a more complex model. This is a pity given the glimmers of a different way of thinking about power during confessionalization. The studied deconstruction of simple differences between sacred and secular, public and private in vernacular singing (170-172) for example hints at a much more heterogeneous soundscape which refuses a binary of strategies and tactics.

Another only half-seized opportunity to rethink the soundscape comes in the difference between de Certeau's emphasis on vision and Fisher's on sound. For the former, the strategic delineation of space 'makes possible a panoptic practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and "include" them within its scope of vision.' Tactics, on the other hand, are characterized by 'blindness'; by the impossibility of finding a single panoptic point.^{vii} Fisher makes an important contrast with this model in his suggestion that the particular ephemerality of sound may have made occasional, distinctive sounds like the polyphony of Corpus Christi processions especially powerful means of fixing confessional identity (23). The temporary nature of pan-aural sound was precisely the cause and condition of its power. But the

intersection between power and the particular phenomenology of sound could be pushed further in the following chapters. How, for example, did the often indeterminate locus of sound, in contrast to that of panoptic vision, affect its power to impose confessional identity—or to ‘resist’ it through tactical ‘deafness’?

None of these knotty questions should obscure the significant value of this book as a bridge between musicology and soundscape studies. But the lacunae they address suggest even great potential for rethinking the relation between sound and power.

Simeon Koole

University of Oxford

ⁱ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, (New York, 1977). For influential examples see Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom, (London, 1999); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: London, 2002); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, (Oxford: New York, 2003); Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, (Ithaca: London, 2003); Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology, and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945*, (Amsterdam, 2012)

ⁱⁱ For an introduction see Mark Paterson, 'More-than Visual Approaches to Architecture: Vision, Touch, Technique', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12, 3, (May 2011), pp. 263-281. For an exemplar see Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 3rd edition, (Chichester, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert L. Kendrick, *The Sounds of Milan, 1585-1650*, (Oxford, 2002); Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, (Farnham: Burlington, VT, 2011)

^{iv} Alexander J. Fisher, *Music and Religious Identity in Counter-Reformation Augsburg, 1580-1630*, (Aldershot, 2004)

^v Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: London, 1984), pp. 36-37

^{vi} *Ibid.* pp. 35-36

^{vii} *Ibid.* pp. 35-38