

Sound of Power – Power of Sound in premodern societies and media

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Relationships between power and sound are multidimensional. According to biblical tradition, the highest imaginable power, God, becomes manifest in loud sound (II Sm 22,14; Iob 37,2–5; Apc 1,10) as well as in silence (III Rg 19,12); deep powerlessness can be accompanied by both extremes, too (Mc 15,37; Act 8,32). There are two linked possibilities concerning the relationship between power and sound: power (e.g. of a sovereign) can make use of sound; and sound can possess power itself, even directed against humans. Such relations between power and sound in premodern societies, as they can be deduced from material evidence as well as from visual and written media, are the conference's topic.

The two possible relationships between power and sound mentioned above can include various phenomena if one defines the terms 'power' (from subject-oriented concepts to structural actor models) and 'sound' (for current research regarding sound studies see e. g. Daniel Morat and Hansjakob Ziemer, regarding the 'audible turn' see Jürgen Müller; William Layher) in the widest sense. These terms then need to be specified in each case.

On the one hand, loud sound accompanies human power, e. g. when music, bells, applause, rattle of arms etc. go along with the 'adventus' of a sovereign or bishop, translation of relics, election or coronation. Here, the roles of sound range from decoration to 'immaterial regalia' (Andreas Wagner). We will investigate at what times sound is considered as a representative mirror or as a means for claiming, demonstrating or enforcing power – and also whether power is attributed to sound itself. Warriors use battle cries and instrumental noises (horns etc.) on the one hand to encourage themselves and on the other hand to intimidate the enemy. In this case, sounds are not only prestigious, but also instruments to gain power. Plainly, the trombones and the shouting which together make the walls of Jericho collapse, are important means of war in the Bible (Ios 6). Here, sound itself gains agency, albeit as people's instrument. Sounds are also used as quasi-magical instruments of power, as in the custom to 'retrieve' the moon in the event of a lunar eclipse by shouting and howling, which is reported by Hrabanus Maurus ('Homiliae de festis praecipuis', PL 110,78f.). Furthermore, benedictory power is attributed to chimes, which is why bells were put on women giving birth and why they were rung for sick people. The power of music not only to heal (I Sm 16,14–23), but also to ensnare is a topos that is mirrored in pontifical criticism and religious orders' bans of polyphonic vocals in liturgy. Sound's power to ensnare therefore appears to be independent of text or of human intention. For premodern listeners, the supposedly self-produced sound of automata seems to be a literally tremendous power (Reinhold Hammerstein). The „Tonraum [soundscape]“ of Romanic and Gothic church architecture wields traceable power over the body, insofar as it amplifies acoustics and the long-lasting, reverberant sounds force speakers to articulate solemnly and slowly. This exceptional "acoustic enclosure", where acoustic sources cannot be located and which surrounds people with sound, changes humans' heartrate and breath as well as perception of time change (Horst Wenzel). As an autonomous

power, sound is directed against people, e.g., in the form of the forces of nature. The very noise of thunder knocks a strong knight to the ground in Hartmann von Aue's 'Iwein' (v. 650–652); in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's 'Lanzelet', the 'screaming marsh' is deadly not only because of its heat, but explicitly because of its sound, too, which causes the animals' death (v. 7062–7065). So sound has deadly power and agency. What properties are attributed to silence and low sounds is another question.

Such notions of sound need to be seen in connection with contemporary sound theories. For in medieval times, sound is considered as something mobile in space (e.g. Boniface Letter 115, MGH Epist. sel. 1 [sound across the celestial shells]; Johannes de Muris: 'Notitia artis musicae') and in music theory as something at least close to materiality ('materialior' in comparison with numbers according to Robert Kilwardby). In premodern scientific discourses (especially since Boethius), sound, even in music, is marginalised in favour of abstract numerical proportions. Ephemeral and perceptually unreliable sound phenomena were explained by 'beautiful' computable mathematical principles. As a result, praxis, the experience of sound, remains subordinated to computing theory. If we follow Foucault in seeing science as a disciplining order and power structure, then sound is not on the side of power in this case. Because of its spacial-empiric and quasi-material quality of sound, however, the power of sound can also be visualised in the 'quiet' pictorial medium, for instance, God's power in the Angelic Salutation to Maria (e. g. Benedetto Bonfigli; Verdun altar Klosterneuburg).

Sound and power pervade many areas of medieval life: everyday life and astronomy, piety and church, war and politics, medicine and physiology. What does power sound like, and how powerful is sound? The double perspective implied in the title of the conference aims to work out the web of complex relationships between sound and power, including as central nodes questions of production and reception, space and time, noise vs. music, emotion, (im)materiality, mediality, performativity, ritual and ceremony.

We welcome contributions from all disciplines and interdisciplinary areas in the field of premodern studies, especially from early career researchers. The conference is public and requires no invitation, but registration is requested for organisational purposes. Talks should last 30 minutes and can be held in German and English. Speakers' travel expenses can be refunded. The conference will take place at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. Please send an abstract by 31th May 2019 (contact: sophie.marshall@uni-jena.de; jan.stellmann@uni-tuebingen.de).