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What is the ‘Sound of the Revolt’ and how to Make Music-Analytical Sense out of it?

ABSTRACT

In the first decade after the turn of the millennium, German writers on music coined the term ‘sound of the revolt’ in order to describe music considered to be closely connected with the student and protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. Although the term immediately appealed to readers and researchers on ‘1968’ and, therefore, became soon included in the general discourse, it is by no means obvious to which acoustic-auditive phenomenon or phenomena the expression refers. What is clear from the context in which the term has been used is that the ‘sound of the revolt’ refers to music — not just all kinds of sounds and noises having occurred in the context of the social movements of this time period. The article reconstructs the complexity of the term ‘sound of the revolt’ with respect to selected music usually considered to epitomize the spirit of ‘1968’. It analyzes which kind of pieces, bands and musical styles speakers who used the term had in mind during the time-period of the student and protest movements. It clarifies what ‘sound’ in ‘sound of the revolt’ means.

1. THE INVENTION OF THE SOUND OF THE REVOLT — CONTRADICTIONS

In 2006, the filmmaker, author and tv director Oliver Schwabe, at this time forty years old, produced a tv film on the relationship between youth rebellion and rock music, especially that one of the 1960s and 70s. Schwabe titled his film ‘Der Klang der Revolte’ (‘The Sound of the Revolt’) and, in doing this, he invented the phrase that has increasingly become popular in the past eleven years (Schwabe 2006). Schwabe’s film on youth revolt and rock music was inspired by the *zeitgeist* prevailing in the first decade of the new millennium. This *zeitgeist* looked back to ‘1968’ and became increasingly influential the closer 2008, the year of the 40s anniversary of the student and protest movements approached.

In preparation for this event, in the early 2000s, journalists and young scholars from diverse disciplines — contemporary and cultural history, sociology, media sciences, semiotics and musicology — became interested in the reconstruction of the history of ‘1968’. This interest was not only directed toward understanding the development of the student and protest movements, including the role of the media, the manifestation of the spirit of ‘1968’ in other than Western capitalist countries, and the turn of some activists to violence (DeGroot 1998; Ross 2002; Carey 2005; Klimke and Scharloth 2008; Bhambra 2009; Hilwig 2009; Fahlenbrach, Klimke and Scharloth 2016), but also toward the reconstruction of the music and its significance for the movements (Zolov 1999; Dunn 2001; Perone 2004; Rubinoff 2006; Jacobshagen 2007; Kutschke 2007; Robb 2007; Adlington 2008; Brown and Kutschke 2008; Kutschke 2008; Drott 2011; Adlington 2013). One of the publications on ‘music and protest’ that were released in 2008 was a monograph on the ‘cultural revolution

around 1968’ by Detlef Siegfried (Siegfried 2008). The contemporary historian adopted the title of Schwabe’s film as the title of his book. In this light, the term ‘sound of the revolt’ appears to have originally referred to the sound of the music that was performed during the 1960s and 1970s.

Today the expression has become a part of the general discourse on culture in Germany and, in this course, extended its meaning: ‘the sound of the revolt’ has been the title for exhibitions, journal articles and film series such as an article on the socio-critically oriented Brazilian band *MetàMetà* (Sartorius 2016) and the film series in the Hamburg ‘Kino in der Pony Bar’ (in English: ‘Cinema in the Pony Bar’).¹

Despite the term’s popularity in the German discourse on music,² it is by no means clear to which acoustic-auditive phenomenon or phenomena the phrase refers. What is clear from the examples is that there is a tendency that people using the term mean music, not just all kinds of sounds and noises and that they consider the term particularly suitable to describe the music of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. However, it is unclear what kind of pieces, bands and musical styles from the broad spectrum of music composed and performed during these decades had speakers in mind when they used the term. Moreover, why have they used the rather diffuse word ‘sound’ instead of simply speaking of the ‘music of the revolt’?

A specific aspect in the discourse on the sound of the revolt gives a hint. In the above examples, the exact phrase is always ‘sound of the revolt’, never ‘sounds of the revolt’, i.e. sound is always singular, never plural — although it is obvious that a single song such as ‘Where have all the flowers gone’ does not contain one sound or one sound event, but an uncountable number of different sound events with diverse characteristics. Thus, if we take the expression ‘Sound of the revolt’ seriously as a formulation that in fact says what the speaker means, the sound of the revolt cannot be a real sound event. For which tenth of a second of ‘Where have all the flowers gone’ should be more characteristic for the sound of the revolt than another tenth of a second?

¹ In 2007, the Hamburg ‘Kino in der Pony Bar’ titled a film series ‘Der Sound der Revolte’ [The Sound of the Revolt] and advertised the series with the slogan ‘Jede Protestkultur hatte ihren eigenen Sound und ihre eigene Musik’ [Each protest culture has its own sound and its own music]. See <<http://www.hamburg.de/tickets/e/8119942/aus-der-reihe-der-sound-der-revolte-quadrophenia-1979/>>; press articles using ‘Sound der Revolte’ are, for instance, Rada (2007) and Sartorius (2016).

² In the British-American discourse, less the ‘sound of the revolt’ than the ‘sound of protest’ refers to music, especially protest music (Hughes 1969; Cunningham 2001; Anonymous 2017), but also soundscapes of protest actions (Fowkes 2014).

In light of this discrepancy between the physical facts and the discourse, I suggest to consider the sound of the revolt as a generic word: a word that primarily refers to a mental concept that, in turn, emerges from a multitude of concrete experiences — here: experiences with sounds — that an individual has made and on the basis of which he/she has developed the concept.

2. SOUND AS CONSTRUCT

If my assumption that the sound of the revolt refers to a mental concept that, in turn, does not refer to a single, but a multitude of diverse phenomena is appropriate, the question arises: Is it possible to reconstruct which of the ‘real’ sounding music has shaped the concept of the ‘sound of the revolt’? Does the concept entail ‘real’ music at all or is the sound of the revolt pure fiction, a unicorn, a null denotation in Nelson Goodman’s terminology (Goodman 1968, 25–26)? A negative answer suggests itself at the first glance: although today ‘1968’ is considered as a global phenomenon because, by the end of the 1960s, the spirit of protest had spread to numerous countries in all five continents, the new-leftist activists of each region developed their individual, local ‘1968s’. This was so because, in each area, the spirit of dissent and revolt responded to a given political situation: in Western Europe and North-America this was the capitalist system, in the Eastern bloc and South America the socialist-communist narrow-mindedness and dictatorship, and in the post-colonial world the discrimination of ethnic groups (Hempenstall and Rutherford 1984; Katsiaficas 1987; Kurlansky 2004; Carey 2016). The double character of internationalism and globalization, on the one hand, and regionalism, on the other (Brown 2009), also applies to the music of this time-period. Everywhere individual music scenes emerged in which musicians related ‘their own’ music to the socio-political dissent (Kutschke and Barley 2013). Furthermore, since individuals shape their mental concepts on the basis of concrete experiences and no individual shares completely his/her listening experiences with that of another individual, it is likely that there exists an unlimited number of endlessly nuanced concepts of the sound of the revolt.

The regional music scenes and sounds, however, were complemented by a kind of international protest music that was distributed through the mass media and travelling musicians. In the course of this process, some musical styles, pieces and bands became particularly popular and shaped the pool of the music that, today, is considered as THE protest music. This can be demonstrated by means of the statements of two West-German contemporaries. In a recent interview Wolfgang Kraushaar, one of the leading sociologists on the historiography of the student and protest movements, mentioned that, in the mid-1960s, his politicization was closely aligned with enthusiasm for rock music. In addition to musicians and styles in which he was less interested — the politicised folk music and singer songwriter scene in West Germany and the US represented by Franz Josef Degenhardt, Dieter Süverkrüp and Hannes Wader on this side and Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean —,³ Kraushaar lists — as his favourites — the Beatles, the Rolling Stones,

³ Kraushaar’s reservation with respect to politicised folk music is not typical for the preferences of the New Leftists, but rather an exception.

Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Janis Joplin, Steppenwolf, and the Beach Boys (Bauer, Mörchen and Kraushaar 2016). Similarly Irmin Schmidt, the composer and keyboardist of the Krautrockband CAN that achieved its greatest successes in the early 1970s, underscores his intense interest in the US-American rock scene at this time: Velvet Underground, Sly Stone, Frank Zappa, James Brown, and Jimi Hendrix. Rock music complemented two other musical styles at his musical horizon: avant-garde and minimal music (Schmidt studied with Stockhausen in the 1960s; Zahn and Schmidt 2006, 63–4.)

3. ANALYSIS

It is these styles, pieces and bands shaping an international scene of popular music that constitute the foundation of the concept ‘sound of the revolt’ and secured that individuals could have communicated about the sound of the revolt with each other without experiencing significant clashes, contradictions and misunderstandings that would have emerged if each speaker referred to an entirely different concept. If this observation — the existence of paradigmatic styles, pieces and bands — is appropriate, which were their characteristics? Of which elements did the shared pool of listening experiences consist?

From the perspective today, four genres appear to have been prominent among the new-leftist students, intellectuals and artists of the 1960s revolts: first, the genre of protest song that originates in the US-American workers movement and communist party (Rodnitzky 1976, esp. iv); second, rock music; third, soul; and, fourth, pieces that belong to the genres 1 to 3 and were sung together on political occasions. The four genres are marked by the following characteristic acoustic-auditive properties to be derived from well-known examples.

Pete Seeger’s *Which Side Are You On* serving as example for the first genre shares with other protest songs various aspects: a vocal soloist with unartificial vocal technique that is based on a comparatively moderate vocal range and a limited use of his/her body’s resonance spaces;⁴ a clear articulation of the lyrics that ensure their comprehensibility; acoustic guitars and banjos as accompaniment marked by an overall light, thin and delicate timbre that rapidly fades out after the impulsive transient; and broken chords as protest-typical accompaniment figures.

In contrast, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* by the Beatles exemplifying the second genre ‘rock music’ is marked by powerful rhythms of the drumset, the controlled distortion of the signals of the electric guitars,⁵ a groove typical for rock music,⁶ the intentionally blurred articulation of the lyrics, mumbling and slang, and — particularly important — the sound properties of the amplifiers and loudspeakers possessing the technical standard of the late 1960s and ,subtle choral effects that make the sound more distinct.⁷

⁴ This singing technique requires a microphone because of its limited volume.

⁵ On early Fuzz boxes, see Hicks (1999, 18f).

⁶ The groove consists in a specific temporal organization of tones in relation to each other within a voice or between different voices in the range of microseconds. The groove that is characteristic for rock music has an energetic, weighty drive; and, thus, it often appears to be aggressive and pushy.

⁷ Choral accompaniment intensifies its profile and contour by means of manual and artificial double tracking — the same audio track with one

The third genre that is a constituent of the sound of the revolt is soul possessing a strong rhythmic emphasis of the drumset' and 'Shouting of vocal voices' such as that one in James Brown's *Say it Loud*.

The fourth and last genre that shaped the sound of the revolt is joint singing — especially of pieces of the genres 1 to 3. The sound character of choral singing is mushy and soft resulting from the diffusion of the individual voices in the vocal mass. During the famous protest March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of 1963 the protesters sang *We shall overcome*. This example is interesting because it exemplifies the genre No. 4 'joint singing' by using a composition that has been classified as a 'protest song' and, thus, is usually associated with sound qualities of genre No. 1. Even though the singing of *We shall overcome* by the protesters does not fuse the characteristics of the two genres, it stimulates the protesters participating in the event and the event's observers to consider both genres as belonging together and shaping a supergenre.

The same is true for Country Joe McDonald's 'I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag' as it was performed during the Woodstock Festival of 1969. The song combines the acoustic-auditive characteristics of the protest song — acoustic guitar plus vocalist, genre No. 1 —, rock music — the impulsive, slightly aggressive performance of the accompaniment figures and blurred articulation of the lyrics, genre No. 2 — and joint singing — the young participants of the festival join in, genre No. 4.⁸

The mixing and blending of different genres as seen in 'We shall overcome' and the 'I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag' explains why the mental concept of the sound of the revolt comprises diverse styles. Because genres and their characteristics are mixed and fused in the musical practice, the sound of the revolt similarly consists of a 'wild' mixture of sound characteristics — a mixture that might be completed by 'sounds' of later music that an individual relates to protest and dissent.

Taking into account that the fusion and mixing of diverse idioms and styles is not only characteristic for the concept of the sound of the revolt, but also of other musical concepts, the question arises why the term 'sound of the revolt' was invented not earlier than in respect to the student and protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. Why did preceding revolts such as the peasants war of the Reformation era, the French and Hungarian revolutions of 1789 and 1848⁹ and the October revolution of 1917 did not inspire historians to claim the existence of a specific sound of the revolt? A key reason for this peculiarity seems to be that the revolts of '1968' were the first in cultural history, that took place in an acoustic environment which was distinctly shaped by technical equipment. Although the elec-

tronic manipulation of sound can be traced back to the mid-1920s, only up from the mid-1940s, because of the availability of tape recordings, editing and overdubbing became possible and 'a notion developed that songs and records were of a piece — that is, the sonic rendering completed the song. Production, then, moved from a craft of sonic rendering to an integral component of compositional practice' (Zak 2001). The music of the 1960s heavily draws on this development.¹⁰ Sonic technicians created characteristic sounds as trademarks for bands, first and foremost the Beatles,¹¹ that soon became considered the sonic label of the student and protest movements and the New Left as the wider socio-political context of the bands. In contrast, activists in preceding revolutions and protests relied on acoustic instruments which they shared with other social contexts of music performance. The Woodstock Festival and the widely-received, Oscar-premiered movie on Woodstock of 1970 most likely contributed to this development. Looking back at those decades from the present, the music of the revolt of 1968 is in the first place a set of characteristic sounds and modes of articulation, not a collection of favorite tunes or harmonic schemes like in the past, in brief: the *sound* of the revolt. This is also demonstrated in *I can't get no Satisfaction* by the Rolling Stones. Both historiographers of the student and protest movements such as Klaus P. Fischer (2006, 327) and musicologists writing on the history of the shaping of the rock sound such as Jay Hodgson (2010, 106) equally emphasize the song as significant for their field of research, just because of its sound: its distinct timbral distortion of the guitar riff produced by the Fuzz box Gibson Maestro FZ-1 Fuzz-Tone.

In conclusion, 'sound' in the 'sound of the revolt' refers to a concept that is different from the psychoacoustic one. It means less a sonic profile that is usually mainly defined by timbre — a highly complex phenomenon as such —, than rather a multi-parametric acoustic-auditive configuration resulting from diverse aspects such as musical gestures and idiomatic figures, timbres, timing and articulation, performance and mixing techniques. Moreover, it is intimately characterized by the socio-political and cultural environment in which it is embedded.

KEYWORDS

'Sound of the Revolt', Mental Concepts, Popular Music of '1968', Distortion, Student and Protest Movements.

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vocal (or instrumental) part, often the lead voice, is played back from two tape machines, simultaneously, but in a temporally slightly shifted manner this had to be carried out manually in the 1960s. This procedure as well as numerous other techniques for manipulating sound, were developed by the Beatles together with the music producer George Martin (Ryan und Kehew 2006, esp. 426–427).

⁸ The 'whoopie' in the chorus is to be classified as an extremely shortened form of jodeling, as it can be found in Country Music.

⁹ Both revolutions did not stimulate the creation of specific sounds, but idiomatic figures of the revolt such dotted rhythm that do interestingly not only resemble each other, but were also merged into each other (Pethő-Vernet 2022).

¹⁰On the early history of echo and delay, see Hurtig (1988, 51).

¹¹See footnote 8.

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