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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. However, which kind of pieces, bands and musical styles out of the vast spectrum of music which was composed and performed during the student and protest movements have speakers had in mind if they have used the term?

A small detail in the discourse on the sound of the revolt gives a hint. In all examples that can be found in the media, the phrase is ‘sound of the revolt’, never ‘sounds of the revolt’, i.e. sound is always singular, never plural – although it is obvious that just 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. Consequently, 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. It rather seems to be a mental concept that the word’s user has developed on the basis of various concrete experiences with sounds. Those concrete experiences, however, do not filter into the expression one-to-one and, similarly, using the expression the user refers not to the total set of acoustic-auditive characteristics shaping the concept, but just a segment of it that comes to mind in response to an appropriate trigger such as listening or remembering a concrete piece of music. (Note that, by using the terms acoustic and auditive, I distinguish between real and measurable sound events, on the one hand, and their perception, on the other, that can be different from the measurable facts and are investigated in psychoacoustics.)

If the sound of the revolt is merely a mental concept or construct, however, to what degree can we reconstruct the ‘real’ sounding music to which the concept of ‘sound of the revolt’ primarily refers? Does this mean that the sound of the revolt is pure fantasy, a unicorn, a null denotation in Nelson Goodman’s terminology? There are pros and cons for this perspective. Even though 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 activists of each region developed an individual ‘1968’. This was so because, in each area, the spirit of dissent and revolt responded to a given political situation: capitalism,

socialism, dictatorship, post-colonialism etc. This also applies to the music. Everywhere individual music scenes emerged that related ‘their own’ music to the socio-political dissent. In this light, it makes sense to assume that people living in those regions developed diverse concepts of the ‘sound of the revolt’. Furthermore, since individuals shape their mental concepts on the basis of concrete experiences such as music they listen to, it is likely that there exists an unlimited number of endlessly nuanced concepts of the sound of the revolt. For no individual shares completely his/her listening experiences with that of another individual. On the other hand, the regional music scenes were complemented by the global distribution of protest music via the mass media, that was perceived and enjoyed by an international listenership. In this light, it is not surprising that, in the course of these dynamics, some styles of music, pieces and bands were increasingly classified as THE protest music.

I claim that these styles of music, pieces and bands considered to be paradigmatic 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.

If this observation is appropriate, which were those musical styles, pieces and bands and their characteristics that shaped the shared pool of listening experiences? From the perspective today, four genres appear to have been prominent among the agents of the 1960s revolts: first, the genre of protest song that originates in the US-American workers movement and communist party in the first half of the 20th century; second, rock music having emerged in the early 1960s; third, soul becoming defined in the course of the civil rights movement of the later 1950s and 60s; and, fourth, pieces that belong to the genres 1-3 and were sung together on political occasions. Their characteristics are – regarding genre no. 1 – a solo voice with unartificial technique, clear articulation of the lyrics that aims to ensure their comprehensibility, the timbre of acoustic guitars and banjos as accompaniment, broken chords as protest-song typical accompaniment figures, – regarding genre no. 2 – powerful rhythms of the drumset, controlled distortion of the signals of the electric guitars, a groove specific for rock music, the intentionally blurred articulation of the lyrics, and the sound properties of the amplifiers and loudspeakers possessing the technical standard of the late 1960s, subtle choral effects resulting from manual and artificial double tracking, – regarding genre no. 3 – strong rhythmic emphasis of the drumset and ‘shouting’ of vocal voices, and – regarding genre no. 4 – the mushy, soft sound character of choral singing

In contrast to my meticulous differentiation and systematization, in practice the characteristics of the four genres have not always occurred separately. Instead, numerous pieces tend to combine the characteristics of the genres with each other;

they form hybrids, fusions. This constellation is most likely the reason why the concept of the sound of the revolt is similarly inconsistent: it mixes up various genres with each other, not least since the concept's formation happens most likely not rationally and systematically, but unconsciously.

A last question, however, is remaining: why was the term 'sound of the revolt' invented not earlier than in respect to the student and protest movements of the 1960s and 70s while preceding revolts such as the peasants war of the Reformation era, the French and Hungarian revolutions of 1789 and 1848 and the October revolution of 1917 did not inspire historians to claim the existence of a specific sound of the revolt? I suggest the following key reason for this peculiarity: the revolts of 1968 were the first in cultural history, that took place in an acoustic environment which was distinctly shaped by technical equipment. The latter created characteristic sounds as trademarks not only for bands such as the Beatles, but also for sociopolitical movements. On this basis, the new focus on timbral characteristics permitted to perceive the music, including the music of the revolt of 1968, in the first place as sound and not as melody or harmonic scheme like in the past.

Methods

Historiography of concepts and terms; discourse analysis; contemporary historiography; analysis of 'styles' and genres

Keywords

Sound of protest; '1968'; mental concepts and words referring to the concepts; music as acoustic, auditive and mental phenomenon

This abstract is not suited to be published yet. It represents work in progress and has not been proofread by an English native speaker yet.