Sound and Secularity: Introduction

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Sound and Secularity
Margarethe Adams and August Sheehy

The articles in this special issue of the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* were first presented as talks at a day-long symposium in the spring of 2019 at Stony Brook University.¹ That event’s aim was to spur discussion among scholars representing various disciplines—music, history, religion, and anthropology among them—about the relationship between sound and/or music and the once-normative, but today questionable, idea that the world is becoming or indeed has become “secular.” The symposium yielded rich and fascinating work and we looked forward to sharing it with a broader audience. Needless to say, the two years between then and now have been challenging, not least because of the upheavals wrought by a global pandemic. Like so much else today, the issues aired here have only intensified. Debates about religion in public life and the role of secular thought continue. Sound (necessarily) and music (for many reasons) remain ever-present. So it is immensely gratifying now to introduce these essays by Abigail Fine, Andrew Mall, Oksana Nesterenko, Lauren Osborne, Shobana Shankar, and Braxton D. Shelley, as well as Jim Sykes’s thought-provoking response.

The broad question animating our efforts, then as now, can be posed in two ways. First, how can recent scholarship in secular and postsecular studies—from writers including Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, and Craig Calhoun, to name only a few—inform the ways scholars think about music and sound in the twenty-first century?² Second, what might training our attention on music and sound studies contribute to the understanding of “secularism,” “the secular,” or—our preferred term—“secularity”? These are not merely academic questions. If we live, to use Taylor’s locution, in “a secular age”; if, to borrow an expression from Habermas, there is a “sense of something missing” from secular modernity; if, as Asad, Mahmood, and others have argued, “secularism” itself is a product of a contingent history driven by, among other things, the intellectual genealogy, myths, and convictions of Protestant Christianity; and then, finally, if, as (ethno)musicological scholarship amply attests, musics are often intertwined with religious practices and discourses about religion—if all of these conditions are acknowledged to be the case, then the urgency of our questions becomes clear.

This introduction is necessarily brief, and each of the articles included here stands on its own, but we hope it will be useful to reflect on our key terms, “sound” and “secularity,” and to offer our perspectives on methodologies for investigating their intersection. As an ethnomusicologist (Adams) and a historian of music theory (Sheehy), respectively, we imagine historiography and ethnography as two intersecting axes along which to explore the ways in which sound and music both contribute to and reflect what Asad has called “formations of the secular.”

In using the word “secularity” rather than “secularism” or “the secular,” we wish to highlight the variegated experiential aspects of social life premised on, lived in opposition to, or, at any rate, entangled
with secular beliefs. To our ears, “secularity” suggests something less ideological. Whereas “secularism” — or, especially, “the secular” — suggests a well-defined framework for understanding contemporary public life, “secularity” points to the complex mediations introduced by efforts to understand human life immanently. It signifies less an integrated philosophy than an interdependent set of conditions to be worked through. Secularity has a more lived-in, well-worn feeling than secularism. It is not a doctrine or set of deductive, linear arguments, but rather consists of many overlapping ideas, trajectories, swaths; it is intensely variegated, worn differently by each person. We believe that listening — to the sounds of the past, however mediated, and to those of the present — has an essential role to play in the effort to understand these conditions.

We chose “sound” rather than “music” to describe our efforts in part because it is the broader category of things to which we listen. Sound includes music, of course, but is not limited to it or by it. “Sounds” are the sonic constituents of the environments in which we find ourselves, including those sounds within and without religion. They include speech, noise, animals, natural phenomena, and the in-between. “Sounds” encompass experiences that are not music, such as spoken liturgical texts, and experiences that are not yet music, as in the “tuning up” in Black churches that establishes the framework for the performance of gospel music. Following the efflorescence of sound studies, “sound” has the capacity to dislodge some disciplinary shibboleths and expand the purview of inquiry in productive ways. Still, we should be wary of too readily accepting what Jonathan Sterne has called the “audiovisual litany[,] which] carries with it the theological weight of the durable association among sound, speech, and divinity, even in its scientific guise.” To elevate sound as the remedy to the ideological blindspots carried within “music,” we suggest, may therefore risk uncritically recapitulating the latter’s historically fraught relationship to secularity. “Sound” may take us just far enough from music that we may return to it with ears and minds newly attuned to what Jim Sykes describes in his response essay as its “secular resonances,” and allow us to imagine what Ashon T. Crawley calls “otherwise worlds.”

In a 1969 interview for Melody Maker magazine, Jimi Hendrix famously asserted, “Music is my religion.” Though he has been quoted by fans and echoed by many music lovers, Hendrix’s claim is curiously paradoxical. It both denies the need for “religion” in the sense bound to a specific church or theology and, at the same time, affirms the value of “religion” in order to appropriate that value for another kind of experience. This paradox lies at the heart of “secularity” — a set of historical conditions that destabilize the meaning of “religion” to the point where it becomes exchangeable. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of such exchangeability is the nominal equivalence of religions with one another. This concept, famously enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, is a foundational tenet of the secular state. As concerns public life and governance, each “religion” is the same as any other. Thus, one is legally free to practice any religion or no religion at all. But such exchange opens the door to a more radical possibility. By removing its details from public life, “religion” may be privately
redefined as beliefs and practices that would not previously have been understood as religious. What publicly comes to define “religion,” then, is neither the church as an institution nor theological doctrine, but rather a function vis-à-vis one's own form of subjectivity and actions.

What interests us most here, of course, is not only the idea that something that is neither explicitly theological nor connected to a church could “be” a religion. It is also, more specifically, that music can occupy the place of this “something” fulfilling a religious function. Drawing on Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman's recent work, we suggest that the function may be an experience of transcendence—that is to say, transcendence of one's own historical and material particularity to an experience of existence in general. That sound is a perceptual mode particularly well suited to this task and connected to religion as traditionally conceived becomes evident in Engelhardt and Bohlman's citation of its role in multiple traditions: being is sung into existence in the Rg Veda; existence sounds and resounds in the OM of Buddhism; ritual acts of recitation and singing are foundational in the Hebrew Bible.8

Secular thought severs the connections between religion and music by defining the former exclusively in terms of church and/or theology. By removing musical practices from religion, it can reconstitute them within its own mythologies—as culture, as organized sound, as creative utterance. But as this last formulation intimates, theological overtones can continue to resonate within secular thought. Moreover, and paradoxically, only decoupling music from church and theology makes it possible for it to function as religion itself. As long as music is part of a religion, then it cannot be a religion. The latter, mutually exclusive relation between music and religion was prefigured in efforts to separate and sometimes exclude some forms of music-making from religion—in Augustine's Confessions, for example, in which music overwhelms the sense of faith and anchors the listener in the particularities of the material world; in Calvinism's prohibition on instruments; in the discursive exclusion of “music” from Qur’anic recitation in Islam (despite its apparent “musical” qualities to some non-Muslims).

A pivotal historical moment in the explicit realization of music's potential to “be” a religion was Friedrich Schleiermacher’s coinage of the term “art-religion” (Kunstreligion) in 1799. “Art-religion” articulated a sense of equilibrium between its two conjoined terms—a possibility predicated on Schleiermacher’s efforts to locate religion’s essence in subjective feeling. The potential for exchange resonated in the work of contemporary Romantic authors such as Wilhelm Wackenroder, who translated religion into acts of musical faith and devotion in stories such as “Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger” (The Remarkable Musical Life of the Musician Joseph Berglinger). Evidence for the shift of religious sentiment into concert halls can be gleaned from debates that erupted in the early nineteenth century over what constituted “church music,” with writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gottfried Weber arguing in essays along Schleiermacherian lines that it was less a matter of musical style than of a certain religious feeling.

If Schleiermacher’s focus on subjective feeling enabled the exchange of art for
religion, the actualization of this possibility was bolstered by other changes within theology. The historicist view of religion that emerged in Tübingen, but soon spread to other intellectual centers, tended to undermine faith-based forms of knowledge, creating an opening for other epistemic and axiological practices. By 1830, a Parisian writer could exclaim, “In our nineteenth century, a century that no longer believes in anything, music has become a kind of religion, a last belief to which society is clinging with all its might, exhausted as it is by dogmas and words.” The watershed event that both reflected and precipitated this crisis of faith was the publication of Protestant theologian David Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined) in 1835–36, which examined its titular subject as a historical matter. By the late nineteenth century, composers such as Richard Wagner, perhaps opportunistically, would figure art as a continuation of religion. As German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus observed, this did “not mean that art should be venerated as religion—or as pseudo-religion for the holder of fundamentalist Christian views—and works of art worshipped as religious icons, but that religion—or its truth—has passed from the form of myth into the forms of art.” The blurring of sacred and secular genres in nineteenth-century Europe reached its apogee with the virtual sacralization of symphonies (especially by Mozart and Beethoven) on the one hand, and the movement of sacred genres into the concert hall (e.g., Requiem settings by Mozart and Verdi) on the other. Beyond the concert hall, Strauss’s efforts to secularize the life of Jesus found their counterpart in Anton Schindler’s efforts to sacralize Beethoven. The overall effect of this blurring was a sacralization of music neatly captured by the ecclesiastical term given to that very body of musical works: a canon.

Music’s canonization, however, had a curious dialectical consequence. Its newly elevated status made music worthy of study in ways precisely analogous to the study of religion. On the one hand, this meant it was in need of hermeneutic interpretation (a term borrowed from biblical exegesis, as Ian Bent reminds us). But on the other hand, just as happened with religion, newly emergent disciplines sought to create musical knowledge from reason and material evidence. Music, too, was subject to disciplinary forms of inquiry such as textual exegesis (score analysis), historicism, and comparative anthropology. Through the work of scholars such as Eduard Hanslick, Guido Adler, Erich von Hornbostel, and Curt Sachs, these paradigms were converted into the foundations for today’s tripartite division of music scholarship—at least in North America—into music theory, historical musicology, and ethnomusicology.

This somewhat breathless history implicates European-derived music studies’ disciplinary history in the dynamic between sacred and secular. Its dialectical twists sketch the contours of the condition we have called secularity as it pertains to music. That alone would be enough to justify a fresh look at our secular condition today. But the figuring of music studies as an ersatz theology was not purely intellectual. Modern academic disciplines emerged in nineteenth-century Europe not only from epistemic and aesthetic efforts, but also from the state institutions that supported them. The University of Berlin, the first modern research institution in Europe (and the model for American research universities), employed Adolf
Bernhard Marx, the music theorist whose framing of Beethoven’s music as spirit was disseminated in an influential theory of musical form. Not coincidentally, the Jewish-born Marx, who described his father as “neither Jew nor Christian, but rather a follower of Voltaire,” was invested in transcending the differences that marked him as other within German culture. As Asad has written, secularism “is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices such as class, gender, and religion.”

Music was a material means by which this transcendence could be achieved. The institutions founded to promote it were bound up with the creation of modern nation-states and the formation of cultures and citizenries that allowed these states to become models of modern governance.

The building of the secular nation-state was, in part, the consequence of upheaval and transition in the organization of public life—most spectacularly by the French Revolution. That music might resound when the place of religion is destabilized or even denied in public life resonates in this issue—most obviously in Abigail Fine’s careful parsing of the Jewish Viennese aesthetician Edgar Zilsel’s admonition that music not be treated like a religion, and in Oksana Nesterenko’s demonstration that music’s religiosity reappeared under state atheism in the USSR. But we see as well how music flourishes in destabilized spaces such as the Beer & Hymns festival described by Andrew Mall, or the public spaces theorized in Braxton D. Shelley’s article, in which the religious-political exhortations of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II resound.

As Shobana Shankar’s article on Hinduism in West Africa and Lauren Osborne’s consideration of media technology for the practice of Qur’anic recitation in Oman powerfully demonstrate, there are important histories to be told beyond the Eurocentric horizon. Yet, they are not beyond secularity. Thus, Shankar pushes back against the “secular-minded Westerners” and “Eurocentric secularist assumptions” about Africa. Given the ways in which European history entwined “music” with Christian theology—the deeper genealogy of which is further explored by Jim Sykes in his response to the articles in this issue—it is perhaps telling that Shankar’s article puts as much emphasis on sound as it does on music.

As Thomas Christensen and Thomas Irvine have recently shown, musical thought in Europe was shaped by Europeans’ imagined musical superiority to colonized others, each imagined to have their own “tonality” that could place them on a hierarchy of historical-musical development. And Kofi Agawu has argued that European tonality, as a musical concept and set of practices, itself functioned as a colonizing force that would remake the world in the mold of Europe and thus preserve its dominance. In this history, music assumes a missionary function, again taking on a religious aspect.

Much of what has been written from an ethnographic standpoint regarding sound and secularity (i.e., in ethnomusicology, sound studies, and anthropology) emerges from a concern for the urgency of the present moment, especially the incendiary politics of religion across the globe, and the increasing instability of life in the gig economy. Among the essays included here, some focus on marginalized communities and examine the ways that religious sound is connected to communality and belonging. There is attention to the space between secular and sacred, where morality meets...
politics, where the personal and the political edges blur. These articles show how sound transgresses these boundaries, contributes to the making of the present, and perhaps even helps to construct, in this moment, a platform for change.

Within this scholarly focus in ethnomusicology and sound studies, several aspects emerge together to focus on our humanness and materiality in public worship. Ashon T. Crawley calls for openness, vulnerability, “creatureliness,” and plurality, as opposed to enclosure, asceticism, and denial and mortification of the flesh. 

Crawley draws a direct line from our creatureliness to our citizenship, arguing for inclusion and acceptance of all bodies in the public domain. He encourages the acceptance of myriad perspectives on religion, gender, race, and modernity, and cautions against perceiving “the only world” of Western secularism, and instead allowing “otherwise” worlds. Following Crawley, and also Asad, we understand that the narrow intertwining of religion and modernity—the fact that the conditions of secularity would come to define key aspects of religious worship and modern life—works to frame modernity in the singular: only one world. But, in resisting this only-world-making, according to Crawley, it is possible to work against the violence of this exclusion. Isaac Weiner similarly pushes back against the Protestant values of secular citizenship—“muted, inner, understated”—that view “good religions” as producing ideal democratic citizens. Weiner argues that sound is a key part of regulating and excluding the public religiosity of marginalized groups. Like Charles Hirschkind, Weiner argues for a “scholarly turn to ways of sensing the world” and for attention to the material practices of everyday religious life, toward the “how” of religion, rather than a focus on inner practice.

While many scholars have wrestled with questions of secularity from the perspective of citizenship and everyday life, the scholarship on Islam and citizenship is particularly rich and salient. Indeed, it has become increasingly critical to consider secularism and secularity from Muslim standpoints. In her Politics of Piety, Saba Mahmood discusses how Muslim women in Egypt’s piety movement aim “to make daily lives congruent with our religion while moving with the world.” Mahmood describes how the piety movement sometimes clashes with state interests as it does not serve a political agenda in promoting Islamic faith. In considering how faith and modernity interact in different ways across the globe, Mahmood argues, with Hirschkind, that disparate modernities can (and do) persist simultaneously. Akeel Bilgrami critiques the Western-focused fundamental concepts of a democratic society, and examines the “moral psychology of politics,” particularly in religiously pluralistic societies. Bilgrami takes issue with the understanding of liberty and equality as guiding principles of democracy, and argues that, instead of using these historically fraught terms, we should “fasten on an appropriately more fundamental concept, . . . something that speaks more immediately to our experience and our ordinary lives. . . : the concept of an ‘unalienated life.’” Our ethnographically informed contributions here take up just such concerns—the quotidian ways that the sacred and secular, in Saba Mahmood’s phrasing, “move with the world,” and contribute to a communally rich, socially just life.

In the arguments of Crawley and Weiner, of Bilgrami and Mahmood, where morality,
inclusion, and citizenship meet the embodied, everyday experience of the now, several of the threads of our Sound and Secularity articles come together. Shobana Shankar discusses African Hinduism as an embodied experience, and stresses the importance of participatory modes performed in a public space. Braxton Shelley, too, calls attention to the power of bodies sounding in public space, describing “unlikely collectives bodying forth,” and Andrew Mall similarly shows the communality that singing (and drinking) together can help create. The ambiguity of the event’s purpose and the ambivalence of some participants toward organized religion seem to point to the opaque nature of secularity. The dual nature of the sonic conveyance, whether popular music and hymns or political and sacred speech, further encourages this ambiguity. The inclusivity of these diverse assemblages is characteristic of spaces between sacred and secular and the dialectical exchanges such spaces afford.

The place of communal (religious) sound can be seen to be particularly important in the precarity produced by an uncertain economy. The instability and marginalization of the gig economy serves as fertile ground for industries and institutions that capitalize on the need for belonging. As Mall describes, the Beer & Hymns events in Boston involve a mode of congregating that is neither sacred or secular, but which provides communality and celebration/libation, with song as the connective tissue. Taking up Jeffers Engelhardt’s view that “the secular is made and remade relative to religion,” Mall traces the intertwinnings of evangelical Christianity and popular song through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, and discusses the importance of media and the music industry in forging “hip evangelicalism.” Like Mall’s, Osborne’s study points to the role of the media industry in religious economies. Osborne examines the use of media and incentive-based learning in her discussion of religious education in Oman, which, in Abdulrahman al-Salimi’s words, “allows students to see their relation to the broader culture around them, and . . . precludes a myopic view of Islam’s relation to the rest of the world.” Approaching religious sound and education with this expanded purview allows for a more global, outward-looking perspective. Osborne describes a religious pedagogy that leans on gamification, using secular modes of behavior and ways of thinking, to learn sacred sound, the recitation of the Qur’an.

Secularity as we have described it lends itself to pluralistic forms of religion and social activism. Shobana Shankar’s article attends to the pluralism of transnational Hinduism and focuses on the ways in which Hinduism as a discourse of antiquity highlights inclusiveness. Describing a female swami who is not a follower of a particular religious organization, but rather a teacher for our times, Shankar points both to the blurring of religious boundaries and to the urgency of the present. Braxton Shelley, too, voices this urgency in his contribution describing the political and emotive power of Rev. Dr. William Barber II’s public speaking. Placing politics and morality under the same acute lens, Shelley describes a “morality that uses sacred language to interrogate allegedly secular affairs.” By using the sound of the Black sacred, leaders like Barber draw on the power of this speech that is situated “at the intersection of political speech and ecstatic sermon, sacred inspiration and public influence.” Shelley also connects
to ideas of pluralistic communal, moral, and political groups filling a void where perhaps religious organizations have fallen short, and using the familiar sounds of the sacred to bind these “unlikely collectives.” In describing the potent political power of the sounds of the Black sacred, he invokes what Ashon Crawley calls the “collective possibility for belief in otherwise worlds.” Shelley, like Crawley, would have us call for social change with a preacher’s voice, to stand in opposition to those who, in the words of Barber, “want to harden and stop the heart of our democracy” and to instead serve as “the moral defibrillators of our time.”25

In conclusion, we should make explicit a caveat implicit in what we have written here. We and the other contributors to this issue of the Yale Journal of Music & Religion share a crucial frame of reference: North American universities and the intellectual (and financial) economy in which they function. As the history sketched earlier indicates, this is hardly incidental to the issue of secularity; today’s research university was also produced by, and helped to produce, secular modernity. The university conditions us as subjects, framing our modes of thought and rewarding select disciplinary imperatives. In certain respects, then, the work we present here is a microcosm for the broader condition we are calling secularity. It is not a condition with an “outside.” What the articles presented here do, each in its own way, is to excavate some of the foundations of contemporary thinking about sound and music, turn over the soil in which our disciplines have been nurtured, and, we hope, fertilize it with fresh ideas for future growth. In general, we suppose that the readers who have the most to gain from this are likewise living and working within this framework. We cannot and do not claim to speak for scholars or points of view originating in all the places that have been affected by secularization.

Our discussion of the articles presented here represents a broad understanding of sound and secularity, from music’s sacralization in European history and the elevation of music to the transcendent realm, to the political power of sacred speech. If music has played a neighboring role in shaping the historical path of secularity, perhaps now we witness music and sound’s part in holding together secularity’s curious ambiguities and contradictions. Each of the studies in this issue examines a set of discourses and practices shaped by local contingencies and global trajectories. Each offers a historical dimension, though they unfold on different scales. At the same time, each writer has a living, auto-ethnographic relation to the history they write—not in the tautologous sense that writing necessarily constitutes a relationship between author and subject, but rather in that an existing relationship motivates and shapes the research and its presentation. Through our differing methodologies, historiographies, and ethnographic case studies, we understand music (including the cadences of sacred speech) as mediating the coming together of personal, political, and social realms; as a communicative and affective mode; and as a communal way to create belonging and a sense of wellbeing. Of course, this role is not new, but perhaps it characterizes the recent and ongoing conditions of striving to live an “unalienated life” in late modernity.
NOTES

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7 An online search for “[____] is my religion” generates a host of music-related returns: Ziggy Marley’s song *Love Is My Religion*, “Punk rock is my religion,” and numerous hits for “Music is my religion.”


12 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 5.


17 Ibid., 9.


20 Ibid., 129 (italics added).

21 Shelley in this issue, 116.


23 Osborne in this issue, 76.

24 Shankar in this issue, 97ff.

25 Ibid., 109, 105, 114, 113, 104, ibid.