

Anthropology of Music Masterclass *** 26th - 29th of June *** Prof. Steven Feld

“I like jazz, but it is too complex for the atmosphere here”: The transformation of modes of individual listening in Czech prison

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In the title of this paper I quote a convict from one of the Czech prisons who told me during my excursion to the prison clergy circle: “I like jazz, but it is too complex for the atmosphere here. I have no patience for that.” This sigh belonged to a prisoner who – unlike most others – had an opportunity to own a discman and a "library" of CDs (which the family sent to him on request) and unlike most of his fellow prisoners, could listen to music of his own choice. Despite this opportunity, he couldn't even imagine listening to his favorite jazz. Why? What is the "atmosphere" in jail that jazz does not suit? Does listening to jazz require a way of listening that a convict cannot achieve or even afford in prison? Does listening to music such as jazz demand any special attention that makes the activity incompatible with staying in prison where it is perhaps necessary to use ears for something else?

Based on my current research I can say that staying in prison can influence the way people listen to music. In order to understand this transformation between “outside” and “inside” it is important to address some aspects that effect convicts’ acoustic experience. I therefore try to capture what music makes it into prison, how it works in this specific setting, what kind of acoustic environment it enters and what prisoners experience. In my presentation, I will present findings of my own and other authors in order to show how a stay in prison impacts hearing and listening to acoustic stimuli, and how it transforms individual listening and experiencing music. The study is based on my ethnographic research of music and acoustemology in Czech prisons, that I started as a master’s student and have been further developing as a doctoral student at Charles University in Prague, Department of Musicology, where I am in my first year.

In my master’s thesis, it was just music that was my primary focus. Since it is completely uncharted terrain in the Czech Republic where even the Prison Service does not know what music gets performed or listened to in prisons, it was necessary to map the overall situation. I

began by trying to answer several simple questions: What kind of music, how, and when can convicts listen to and perform? Are prisoners allowed to play musical instruments in prison? What are or supposed to be functions of music in Czech prisons? How does the prison service use music? And how do prisoners experience it? Is the way of experiencing music transformed by imprisonment in any way?

I conducted ethnographic research in four prisons in the Czech Republic. It turned out that music enters prison in three different forms such as recorded music (radio, television, CD), live music (concerts) and active music making. When thinking about the effects of music on convicts, I had assumed that musical experience is transformed by imprisonment. In prison one inevitably faces a lack of sensory stimuli and listening to music on the radio, for example, becomes something extraordinary and the sensory experience it triggers tend to have sharper features effects than listening to it “outside”.

During this initial research, I came to the realization that in order to understand ways of listening to and experiencing music in prison, I must consider the very sound environment into which the music enters. I assume that, first, already the prison soundscape itself influences the prisoner and, second, this effect fundamentally impacts any hearing experience including listening to music. The specificity of the prison institution that I observed in the case of listening to music is equally reflected in experiencing its non-musical sound environment. The convicts are imprisoned not only in the area bounded by walls of the prison but also forced to stay in a certain acoustic environment they can neither control nor escape. In order to "survive", all prison sounds require to be attended to and analysed for meaning, and the convicts must learn to negotiate with that sound environment.

Respectively, my current research suggests that convicts are surrounded by different types of sounds to which they must devote different kinds of attention in order to survive, and that also structure their days. Prison environments consist of sounds that they actively listen to (clinking keys, opening/closing doors, sounds of impending danger), sounds calling for action they must obey (call of the guard, buzzer), sounds they try to escape from (shouting of fellow prisoners, sounds of daily use) and sounds structuring their days ("buzzer", "clinker"). The acoustic environment clearly is an integral part of prison daily life and routine. It constitutes an important part of convicts' experience and an ultimate backdrop against which all sounds that enter, including music, need to be studied.