

# The Amplification of Muted Voices: Notes on a Recitation of the Adhan

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## Abstract

Where do we begin? On Tuesday January 13th, 2015, my first-year students and I gathered for the second meeting of our seminar, "Soundscapes: Artistic, Social, and Biological Approaches to Acoustic Environments." We were just a few steps away from the iconic Duke chapel, almost in its shadow.

## Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Arab/Arab American Studies, Article, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound



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*Where do we begin?*

On Tuesday January 13th, 2015, my first-year students and I gathered for the second meeting of our seminar, “Soundscapes: Artistic, Social, and Biological Approaches to Acoustic Environments.” We were just a few steps away from the iconic Duke chapel, almost in its shadow.

The chapel is an example of a revivalist architectural style known as “Collegiate Gothic.” Its steps were constructed with soft stone, intended to wear down quickly and provide an accelerated impression of age and prestige. The chapel’s cruciform blueprint is an unambiguous symbol of its Methodist Christian roots, as is the university’s motto: “eruditio et religio” (“erudition and religion”). In true Gothic revivalist style, the phrase is a Latin translation of a line from an 18th-century, English-language Methodist hymn titled “Sanctified Knowledge.”



On Tuesday, January 13th—the second day of my Soundscapes seminar—[Duke’s Office of Communications](#) announced that the Islamic call to prayer, the adhan, would sound from a bell tower of its iconic chapel in Durham, North Carolina. According to a press release, Duke’s chapel administrators and Muslim Students Association felt the three-minute long, “moderately amplified” recitation “represents a larger commitment to religious pluralism” on campus and that the sound of the adhan “connects the university to national trends in religious accommodation.”

The story was picked up by [WRAL](#), the television news outlet based in nearby Raleigh. The web-based stories included a photo of the student slated to be the muezzin, the person appointed to recite the call to prayer. In the photo, the student was shown rehearsing from the bell tower. I read

the announcement just before walking to class and thought the event would be a historic opportunity for my students and I to make field recordings of their university soundscape.

*Where do we begin?*

The adhan was scheduled to take place on the afternoon of Friday, January 16th. On Wednesday, January 7th—a week before the announcement of the adhan at Duke—[twelve people were murdered during an attack on the Paris offices](#) of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. Ostensibly, the murders were committed on behalf of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a retaliation for the newspaper's cartoon depiction of the prophet Mohammed.



*Image of “Je Suis Charlie” solidarity demonstrations in Hamburg, Germany, by Flickr user Konrad Lembcke*

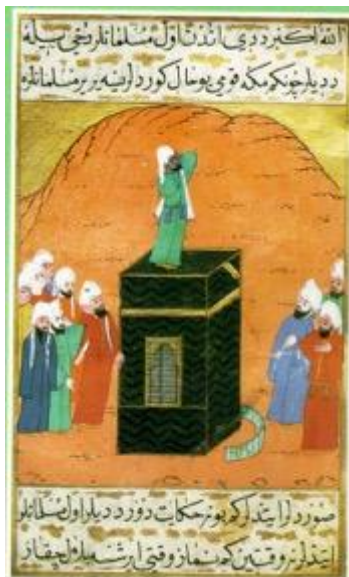
*Where do we begin?*

Islamic theology posits that the adhan is not music. It is recited, not sung. Likewise, the text of the *Qu’ran* is not poetry. These sacred texts are certainly musical and poetic, but they are neither music nor poetry. These theoretical distinctions have complex and profound implications: more than soundscapes or sound art or acoustemology, the Islamic premise underlying recitations of the adhan and *Qu’ran* provoked my students to reconsider entire constellations of historical, cultural, linguistic, political, and—indeed—spiritual phenomena.

My students and I conducted a survey in which they asked classmates to identify a recording of the adhan. Only 2 out of 48 students recognized it as a recitation of the Islamic call to prayer; most guessed it was “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” music, but it seemed universally familiar as a “soundtrack” for a film sequence. One student who had lived in Morocco recognized the adhan immediately; another recognized it as the sound of his Lebanese grandmother’s alarm clock,

automated to remind her to pray. We became acquainted with *Cairo in One Breath*, a documentary film project about post-revolutionary Egypt's 2010 Adhan Unification Project, an effort to “replace individual muezzins with a single voice, broadcast to Cairo’s [thousands of] mosques from a radio station.”

<https://vimeo.com/26308210>



We also became familiar with the mythology of the first muezzin: Bilal, who was born in Mecca to Abyssinian slaves—in other words, a black man who was freed from slavery.

*Where do we begin?*

On Wednesday January 14th, the [Reverend Franklin Graham](#) posted a reaction to Duke’s announcement on his Facebook account. Franklin is the son of evangelical Baptist preacher Billy Graham, close friend and advisor to American presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush and known as “America’s pastor.” Franklin Graham is a resident of High Point, North Carolina (an hour’s drive from Duke) whose salary from tax-exempt, non-profit religious organizations is reported to be \$880,000 per year.



Graham’s post “went viral,” and his threat of financial sanctions—aimed squarely at donors and alumni—seemed to land on its mark. Within hours, [Duke’s proposed adhan recitation became the subject of a flood of media coverage, and the university received “credible threats” of violence;](#)

public relations and financial concerns were quickly compounded by “safety concerns.” My students and I—whose safety was being threatened—wondered whether the phrase “safety concerns” was a euphemism for terrorism, or vice versa.

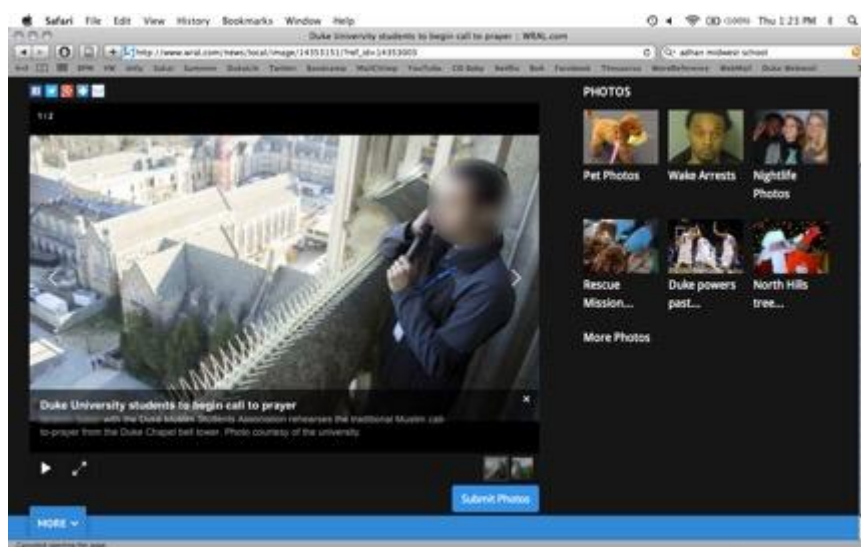
On Thursday January 15, the university’s administration [announced that they were canceling the planned recitation from the chapel bell tower](#). Instead, the adhan would be recited just *outside* the chapel, at the top of the steps leading to the chapel’s front doors. Franklin Graham celebrated the decision—again, on Facebook.



Later in the day, [Richard Hays, the dean of the Duke Divinity School](#), released a letter outlining his [objections to the proposed recitation](#). Hays’ letter revealed a somewhat obscure but significant division between the Divinity School and the chapel administration, each of which see themselves—in their own ways—as custodians of Duke’s Christian image. For the *Divinity School* administration, the chapel is a symbol of the university’s Christian identity. For the *chapel* administration, its Christian heritage is an aspect of a fundamentally pluralistic identity.

It is worth pausing here to emphasize that the controversy—now national in scope—was provoked by the mere *prospect* of sound. More specifically, a sound amplified at “moderate volume.”

By this point, the student muezzin and his family requested that his photo and name be removed; like the university, the young man and his family expressed “safety concerns.” Duke removed his image and name from the official online version of the announcement immediately. WRAL, the Raleigh television station, have still not removed the student’s image or name from their website.



Screen Capture of WRAL's website by author

*Where do we begin?*

On the morning of Friday, January 16th?

The adhan was scheduled to take place at 1PM. At 12:30, I met two of my students—Tanner Waters and Jee Yoon—near the chapel. A large crowd was already gathering. Tanner, Jee, and I equipped ourselves with identical digital audio recorders so we could make a trio of stereo recordings, each from a distinct position; later, we would synchronize the recordings, mixing them in different ways to experiment with sonic “versions” of the event.

A half-dozen news vans were parked around the circular driveway leading to the chapel, their satellite antennas projecting into the clear blue sky. This was news. The news’ cameras were arranged on tripods in a straight line at the rear of the crowd; university security were maintaining a perimeter around the chapel that kept broadcast media at a distance. As I approached with my headphones on and my audio recorder in my hand, a chapel staff member asked mildly, “Excuse me, sir. Are you with the media?” I smiled and shook my head. No.



*Photo by Elysia Su, The Duke Chronicle*

A small PA sat at the top of the steps. Very small. There were no cables attached to it, and a small radio antenna extended from the top. It took me a few minutes to realize that *this* was the amplification, the moderate “loudspeaker” for the adhan. It took me another moment to realize the student muezzin would not appear: instead, he would transmit his recitation remotely. I was told later that he was just behind the closed doors of the chapel. Like so many recitations of the adhan, the transmission, amplification, and conceptual layers of it seemed uncannily like a sound art installation.

We all faced the loudspeaker, waiting for sounds to happen. The crowd went from murmurs to whispers, then silent. After a few seconds, the voices of members of the Muslim Students Association began to broadcast from the loudspeaker.

A young man's voice introduced the adhan—a brief, prosaic context for what we would hear. Then a woman's voice (also young) offered a literal English translation of the the adhan's Arabic text. She spoke plainly, without the melodic contours of a recitation.

Now, before sharing recording of the Duke student muezzin's recitation, I offer a bit of context—not an explanation or translation, but a comparative musical example. First, let's listen to an iconic recitation style—albeit with a bit of YouTube-style hyperbole—recorded in Medina, Saudi Arabia. This recitation lasts four minutes—a fairly typical length of time for a complete recitation.



<https://youtu.be/wr4X8Wx1o4A>

Now, let's listen to the entire recitation of the adhan at the Duke chapel.

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The prevailing quality of the Duke recitation is extraordinarily subdued. It is a vocal expression of the “moderate” sound and Muslim identity at the center of the controversy. At one minute and thirty seconds, it is less than half as long as most recitations.

*Where do we begin?*

Perhaps we might analyze this adhan as a peculiar instance of acousmatic sound: the student muezzin, like Pythagoras or the Wizard of Oz behind a curtain, was separated or dissociated from a discernible source by a curious bit of technology. When I asked Omid Safi, the director of Duke's Islamic Studies Center, about this aspect of the story—the unseen and moderate voice of the student—he responded that for Muslims at Duke, the entire episode was about “safety and inclusion.”



*Author's screencapture of comments underneath a CBS.com broadcast about the Duke adhan.*

Safi is a Duke alum. He studied there as undergraduate, co-founding the Muslim Students Association as a freshman, and went on to earn his Masters and PhD degrees at Duke. Since returning as director of the Islamic Studies Center two and a half years ago, he has been vocal and visible in the mass media. Safi himself has been labeled a “radical Muslim professor” by white conservatives and subjected to online “takedown articles,” particularly surrounding this event. Safi told me,

*Part of the reason why ... there was amplification but no person in sight [was] that people were scared. And it sounds hysterical ... In retrospect, knowing what took place in Chapel Hill a few weeks later, [it was] not so unreasonable.*

On Tuesday February 10, 2015, three Muslim college students—Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu-Salha, and Razan Abu-Salah—[were murdered in their Chapel Hill home](#), just a twenty-minute drive from Duke. Less than a year earlier, Yusor Abu-Salha had been interviewed by her third-grade teacher for the StoryCorps oral history project.



*Click on image to hear Story Corps interview*

At horrifying moments like these, I think to myself, “This is why people pray.”

I was deeply ambivalent about discussing the murders with my students. After speaking to a handful of students individually and discreetly, I found most of them were completely unaware of the murders. I wondered—mostly silently, to myself—what impact the news might have on them, then decided to share the story obliquely: I discussed *StoryCorps* (“listening is an act of love”) in class, an important resource for those of us interested in oral history and I concluded by mentioning the recording of Yusor Abu-Salha. I never asked if they listened to Yusor’s voice, and I cannot know how they might have been affected. I simply did not know what to ask, nor what to say.

Less than one year later, in September, I surveyed my next cohort of incoming freshman. Less than half of them knew anything about the adhan controversy. Among the few who had heard *something* about it, the event had already acquired dubious mythological qualities: in one account, Muslim students were forced to move their call to prayer from the chapel tower to the nearby Sara Duke Gardens.

Analyses of the event varied considerably. In an op-ed for Duke’s student newspaper titled “[Deconstructing the National Fear of Duke’s Adhan](#),” freshman Eidan Jacob—an Israeli Jew—offered a brilliant context and synthesis, expressing “surprise and disappointment” that the adhan was

“so poorly received.” He observed that in his hometown of Haifa, “recitations of the adhan are simply part of the soundscape.”

A broad cultural and political context reveals that xenophobia and—more specifically—Islamophobia, remain cultural common sense in the post-9/11 United States. Both supporters and opponents of the adhan at Duke were disappointed by the controversy, and I do not discern a tidy moral to the story.

The sounds and discourse of the adhan at Duke suggest a narrative preoccupied with “[decibels and debate](#),” but the subtle dynamics and textures of thoughtful, moderate conversation suggest an audible alternative to the loudness and noise of mass media discourse. The diverse qualities of the voices in this story—musical and otherwise—are more than poetic metaphors: the “voices of moderates” and “moderate-sounding voices” deserve close attention; regardless of the causes or motives underlying their subdued tones, their very quietness demands nuanced, high-fidelity listening. The literal and metaphorical *amplification* of voices might be a distraction from more important matters of *range* and *intimacy*.

*Where do we begin?*

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*In May 2015, the Duke chapel was closed for [restoration](#). It is scheduled to reopen in May 2016.*

*Plans for a weekly adhan recitation elsewhere on the Duke campus are under consideration.*

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*Featured Image by Elysia Su, The Duke Chronicle*

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