

(Dis)orienting the Bell: Aural Assault from A Game of Thrones to Richard Coer de Lyon

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Abstract

series co-editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman Hear YE! Below is the introduction to the latest installment of *Medieval Sound*, Aural Ecology, by series co-editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman. To read their previous introduction, [click here](#). To read the first run of the series in 2016, [click here](#).

Keywords

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Aural Ecology

What is considered music, noise, or harmony is historically and culturally contingent. For example, some medieval musical theory, or *musica speculative*, such as Jan Herlinger's "Music Theory of the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries" in [Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages](#), defined music as "contemplation that serves the moral edification of the mind" (293). Influenced by the work of [Boethius's De Musica](#), music is not just everyday music but "connotes harmony conceived broadly enough to encompass the relationships obtaining in the human body and psyche and governing the motions of planets" (293). This kind of ecological harmony is explored in the work of Boethius, especially in his discussion of abstract qualities in the prelude to the *De Musica, The Book of Arithmetic* (as translated by [Calvin Martin Bower](#)) "Indeed these things themselves are incorporeal in nature and thrive by reason of their immutable substance, but they suffer radical change through participation in the corporeal, and through contact with variable things they change in veritable consistency" (24). For Boethius these "essences" are concordant with mathematical properties expressed in music. Thus, music was both speculative and moral, and these intertwining purposes derived from music's phenomenological pleasures derived in the environment, "for nothing is more consistent with human nature than to be soothed by sweet modes and disturbed by their opposites" (Bower 32).

Boethius also comments on the psychological effects experienced in hearing music as they "affect and remold the mind into their own character" (Bower 34). Boethius gives examples of how certain groups of peoples, such as the Thracians or Lacedaemonians, delight in different kinds of music that harmonizes with their natures. For Boethius, music is transcendent in that it exists as a kind of eternal sound, but also an immanent sound, in that it appeals to various peoples depending on their nature and environment. Boethius' speculations lead him to think about harmony and sound as available to reason and sensory perception. Thus the notion of harmony itself is "the faculty of considering the difference between high and low sounds using the reason and senses. For the senses and reasons are considered instruments of this faculty of harmony" (Bower 295).

Harmony (and disharmony in the form of noise) became a marker of the aural ecology for an individual or group.

The essays in “Aural Ecologies” also address the issue of unharmonious sounds, sounds that often mark dissonant critical identities—related to race, religion, material—that reverberate across different soundscapes/landscapes. In this way, this group of essays begins to open up the stakes of Medieval Sound in relation to what contemporary sound studies has begun to address in relation to cultural studies, architectural and environmental soundscapes, and the marking of race through the vibrations of the body. —**Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman**

In the neo-medieval *A Game of Thrones* (2011), the medieval Saracen-inspired and violent Dothraki utilize bells as a symbol of victories in battle. Each time a leader or *khal* defeats a foe, he incorporates the bells from his foe’s shorn black braid into his own braid. Khal Drogo, *khal* of the most powerful *khalasar* in Essos, sports an uncut braid sensuously described by George R. R. Martin as “black as midnight . . . hung with tiny bells that rang softly as he moved. It swung well past his belt, below even his buttocks” (37).

Dothraki bells serve both a hypermasculine and deterritorializing function: esteem and prowess for Eastern men comes from the symbolic castration of their enemies and the eradication of civilizations. For the Dothraki, sexualized and territorial conquest is centralized around amplitude of noise made by an aggregate of bells adorning a phallic braid. Drogo is frightening because of his noise: he wears “[b]ells so his enemies w[ill] hear him coming and grow weak with fear” (802). In the pilot episode of Season 1 of HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, writers David Benioff and D. B. Weiss and director Tim Van Patten emphasized the contrast in noise between the copper-skinned Dothraki and the white Valyrians of the Free Cities:

<https://youtu.be/7gQyk9DmtHg>

East disrupts West in this scene through a racialized auditory disruption of white silence.

The association of the Middle East with noise pervades Western culture. One need only recall juxtapositions of quietly carefully groomed news anchors in sterile American news sets conversing with correspondents struggling to be heard in earsplitting raucous streets embroiled in Middle Eastern crises in countries like Iraq and Syria. See Aron Brown of CNN announcing the U.S. War on Iraq in 2003, for example:



<https://youtu.be/X9aQOFcGiks>

However, this association of the Arab world with noise is not a new one. In medieval literature, noise played a crucial role in distinguishing Saracen East from Christian West. Bells and particularly the cacophonous noise they cumulatively make came to be associated with a violent imagining of the East in literature of the medieval period. The late medieval crusading romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*, centered on the exploits of the twelfth-century crusading king, Richard the Lionheart, situates the pealing bell as its central object. [Note: *Richard Coer de Lyon* is cited by line number. All quotations come from the widely-used complete modern version, *Richard Löwenherz*, ed. Karl Brunner, *Wiener Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1913)].

As in Dothraki warrior culture in *A Game of Thrones*, bells gain symbolic power in the romance through replication and accumulation. *Richard Coer de Lyon* features pealing bells in two crucial episodes concerned with the East and a maternal rather than phallic male body: 1) the exorcism of Richard's demonic Eastern mother at Mass with a sacring bell (l.221-34); and 2) the appearance of Saladin's demonic mare arrayed in clamorous bells attached to her crupper at the climactic battle of Acre (l.5532-49, 5753-8). Drawing on both medieval treatises on the function of bells and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the refrain, I argue that the bell—initially a symbol of Christian order, the West, and patriarchy—becomes a disorienting aural force associated with chaos, the East, and maternity.

Early on in the romance, the king's men try the piety of Richard's mother, Cassodorien of Antioch, a bewitching foreigner whose only apparent fault is that she cannot remain in church to hear Mass, by physically restraining her during a service. To the shock of the English parishioners, at the ringing of the sacring bell, Cassodorien breaks free of her male captors, seizes two of her children, and flies through the church roof never to be seen again:

And whene þe belle began to ryng,
And when the bell began to ring,
The preest scholde make þe sakeryng,

*And the priest was about to do the sacring,
Out off þe kyrke sche wolde away...
Out of the church she tried to go away...
Out of the rofe she gan her dyght,
Out of the roof she began to make her way/transform,
Openly before all theyr syght...
Openly before all of their sight...
— Richard Coer de Lyon, 221-5.*

At this striking moment of contact between queen and masculine material object, the bell is forever altered, (re)oriented on a trajectory that transmogrifies it from a symbol of priestly power to a chaotic symbol of maternity and the East.



Sacring Bells in Aberdeen, Scotland. Image by Flickr User rethought (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Medieval thinkers conceptualized the church bell as an agent for revealing both foreign and demonic threats from within the community. In *The Rationale Divinorum Officiarum* of William Durand of Mende thirteenth-century French liturgical writer and bishop, William Durand explains

the significance of the pealing of bells– “when the bell rings . . . the people are unified with the unity of faith and charity” (51) –but also expounds on this exorcising function of the church bell:

[T]he bells are rung in processions so that the demons who fear them will flee . . . They are so fearful when they hear the trumpets of the Church militant, that is the bells, that they are like some tyrant who is fearful when he hears in his own country the trumpets of some powerful king who is his enemy (51).

Durand conflates the demonic with the East, both qualities embodied by Cassodorien who hails from Antioch (near the border of Syria and Turkey). He also imbues the bell with an emasculating quality; it renders even a tyrant fearful. The measured sounding of the church bells forms a tonal refrain, an aural sequence to familiarize Christian space.

The purpose of the aural refrain, for Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is to deterritorialize and then reterritorialize unfamiliar space. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they explain the refrain/‘ritournelle’ as a threefold place of disorientation, the familiar, and escape:

They are three aspects of a single thing, the Refrain (ritournelle).... Sometimes chaos is an immense black hole in which one endeavors to fix a fragile point as a center. Sometimes one organizes around that point a calm and stable “pace” (rather than a form): the black hole has become a home. Sometimes one grafts onto that pace a breakaway from the black hole (312).

The bell was arguably the most important and pervasive aural symbol in medieval Europe, one whose refrain regularly demarcated Christian spaces in times of chaos. Sound theorist R. Murray Schafer has called the medieval church bell “the most salient sound signal in the Christian community” in *The Tuning of the World* (53), and a unifying force “acoustically demarking the civilization of the parish from the wilderness beyond its earshot” (55). Yet, as the bell multiplies through contact with Cassodorien and Richard wanders into the wilderness or black hole of the East, its sound is layered and its signification coopted by the East and transformed into a disorienting force that decenters Saladin’s enemies.



Richard battles Saladin, Luttrell Psalter, BL42130, 4v

The bell resurfaces once more as Richard prepares for his epic battle against Saladin at the gates of Babylon. In this climactic battle with a second pairing of mother and son, reimagined in the form of a demonic belled “mere” and her “colt” summoned by Saladin’s necromancer, bells occupy a central place of prominence on the mare’s accoutrements. In 1192, Saladin reportedly sent two new horses to Richard after his horse was slain in battle (For an overview of this event, see page 73 of Sir Steven Runciman’s [A History of the Crusades, Vol.3: The Kingdom of Acre and the Later Crusades](#)). The mare, as one of only two mothers in the romance, uses the same aural symbol to assault the English Christians that they had used to exorcise Cassodorien. As Saladin’s mare proudly strides onto the battlefield, the poet emphasizes the deterritorializing effect of her cacophonous bells:

*perffore, as þe book vs telles,
Therefore, as the book tells,
Hys crouper heeng al ful off belles,
The mare’s crupper hung all full of bells;
And hys peytrel, and his arsoun.
From the armor, too, and the saddlebow,
þree myle men myȝten here þe soun.
For three miles men could hear the sound.
þe mere gan nyȝe, here belles to ryng,
His mare began to neigh, her bells she rang
Ffor gret pryde, wipouten lesyng.
With great pride, it is no lie.
–Richard Coer de Lyon, 5753-8.*

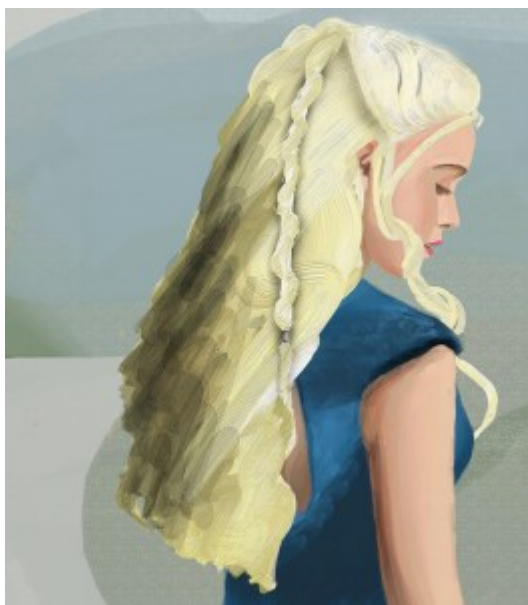
Fascinatingly, Brunner again diverges in this passage from Caius 175, and changes “þe mere” to “his mere,” further stripping the demonic mare of her agency.

Whereas the church bell is a singular symbol of order, symmetrical and “acoustically demarking” space with its meted refrain, the bells of the mare are multiple, discordant, chaotic, and cacophonous, designed to disorient rather than to unify (see Schafer 55). The medieval illuminator of the Luttrell Psalter (c.1325-1335) similarly emphasizes the clamorous quality of the belled mare, and distinguishes Saladin’s mount from Richard’s by the vast array of bells attached to its crupper and the noise these bells suggest.

The noise, suggested in the Luttrell Psalter by the movement and detail given to the crupper bells, can be heard on a smaller scale in the following video clip of a horse merely walking noisily with a smaller bell-laden crupper:

<https://youtu.be/7ictn7rT6PM>

One can easily infer the discordant sound a running mare might make with a crupper “hung all full of bells.” The poet suggests that the noise encompassed an aural disturbance of three-miles and disrupted the Christian crusaders. The bells also serve an insidious maternal purpose: they serve as a trap to lure her colt to abandon Richard and “knele adoun, and souke hys dame” (*kneel down and suck his dame*)” (*Richard Coer de Lyon*, 5547). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest the layering of sounds, particularly maternal sounds, can disrupt and deterritorialize space. In their discussion of the reterritorializing effects of layered song, Deleuze and Guattari provide the strikingly maternal example of Debussy’s *Sirens*, which, they posit, integrates voice with orchestra to make the voices of child and woman inextricable from “the sea and the water molecule” (340). In much the same way in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, the mare’s imbrication of voice over bells seeks to make the dichotomies of the romance—mother and son, east and west, chaos and order, demonic and angelic—implode as the demarcated boundaries between them are dissolved in her cacophonous demonic lullaby.



Daenerys, Created in ArtRage Studio by
Flickr User Happy Snapper 80 ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

While *A Game of Thrones* and its HBO counterpart pick up on the resonances of medieval noise to differentiate between East and West, noise is gendered differently. In *RCL* the threat signaled by the sound of bells is that Richard will be emasculated by his inability to cut ties with the specter of his mother’s influence and disambiguate himself from the Eastern Saracens she represents.

However, in Martin's series, the Dothraki bells, like much of Dothraki culture, exist only to be subsumed under Daenerys' imperial ambitions for an Iron Throne the Dothraki neither care about nor want. Daenerys' bell, affixed to her hair after the death of Drogo and the dissolution of his *khalasar*, becomes a symbol of cultural and racial appropriation Martin stages under the guise of (white) feminism. That is, the issues noise signals have changed from the challenge of excising Christian West from Islamic East (a fear literalized in Richard's cannibalistic consumption of Saracen flesh) to cultural appropriation (the devouring of Dothraki culture for the benefit of white colonialism).

Featured Image: Proceso Khal Drogo by Flickr User [Orgita Sucubita](#), (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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