

THE SOUND OF OCCUPATION: Music & The Spectacle of Collective Action

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Prologue

“As the protesters sat at midfield chanting and clapping, players retreated indoors. Then, to the tune of John Denver’s ‘Take Me Home, Country Roads,’ hundreds of fans rushed to join the protesters on the field as it became clear the game would not resume as scheduled.”¹

- Britton O’Daly, *The New York Times*

The date is November 23rd, 2019. For the 136th time, the varsity football teams representing Harvard and Yale are to meet at The Game, held this year on Yale’s home turf in New Haven, Connecticut. Over the course of the day, the storied rivalry will draw into the Yale Bowl some forty-five thousand spectators, from subdued parents and proud alumni to wide-eyed freshmen and innocent unaffiliates. On the away section of the stadium, I drunkenly follow my roommates’ blonde bobs through a sea of crimson, hurdling over row after row of benches until we find our friends near the bottom. We slide in to join the crowd, cheering not so much for the team as at the team. Let’s go, Harvard! Five claps: two long, three short.

The teams prove to be formidable opponents; it’s not until six minutes into the second quarter that Harvard scores the first touchdown of the game. The bodies around me shoot upwards in perfect synchrony, a feat of athleticism in itself. The stands shake with our stamping and hollering as the other side of the stadium falls quiet. By the end of the first half, the scoreboard reads 16-3, and a series of performances featuring bright flags, fight songs, and pom-poms follows. I take a seat, making small talk with the girls behind me until the end of halftime. But when I swivel around again, it’s not the football players emerging onto the turf. Students dressed in crimson and blue alike trickle in from all directions, unfurling a white banner. NOBODY WINS. The letters are rugged, stenciled-in, the kind I imagine you’d see in military insignia. A few of them carry megaphones; the others chant along, fists raised to the sky, as they march toward the fifty-yard line. I hear a ringing sound: what is silence in a stadium that holds tens of thousands of people?

Introduction

Though it remained peaceful, the climate sit-in at Harvard-Yale 2019 generated widespread controversy as it delayed the nationally televised football game by an hour, resulting in the arrest of dozens of students and pushing the game toward dusk. It also called to the fore university administrators’ longstanding inaction on the climate crisis. At the protest’s peak, upwards of 500 students occupied the field, and within hours a number of high-profile figures had taken to social media to voice their support, including then-Democratic presidential hopefuls Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Julián Castro, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, actors Jane Fonda, George Takei, and Mark Ruffalo, filmmaker Darren Aronofsky, linguist Noam Chomsky, and philosopher Cornel West, among others.²

To say that the sit-in went better than anticipated would be an understatement. A senior leader of Divest Harvard, the Cambridge-based group that planned and realized the disruption (jointly with New Haven counterparts Fossil Free Yale and the Yale Endowment Justice Coalition or YEJC), told *The Crimson* that protestors cried out of joy when students sprinted out of the stands to join them on the field.³ Organizers had fully expected stadium security to shepherd away the

¹ O’Daly, Britton. “Climate Change Protesters Disrupt Yale-Harvard Football Game.” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2019.

² For more information, see <https://nobodywins2019.home.blog/>.

³ Gringlas, Sam. “Activists Disrupt Harvard-Yale Rivalry Game To Protest Climate Change.” *National Public Radio*, November 24, 2019.

core group of students within minutes. But as more and more students gathered in solidarity, sheer strength in numbers – numbers that Divest Harvard, Fossil Free Yale, and the YEJC did not have on their own – prolonged the disruption, giving it a legitimate chance to reach a national and even international audience. While divestment did not result (and still has not been achieved at the time of writing), the spectacle sent a clear message to university administrators: hold Harvard and Yale accountable for their investments.



Figure 1. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez applauded student protestors' efforts on Twitter.

In an age of global socio-political campaigns led largely by young people and made possible only by digital media and smartphone technology, the Harvard-Yale sit-in stands out for the energy it galvanized both on and off the field. In this paper, however, I grapple with the site of protest itself. What unusual circumstances, if any, enabled students to overcome the collective action problem that stalls the vast majority of spontaneous political demonstrations? Taking into consideration the blatant incongruency between the sound technologies employed by sound engineers in response to the protest and those available to student protestors, I focus on what I believe to have been the role of sound and music in solidifying student morale. I contend that in combination, extreme volume and the cultural salience of certain popular music – the former corresponding to a materiality of sound, the latter bringing us to the level of the intellect – played a vital part in the turn of events on November 23rd, 2019, subverting the intentions of stadium personnel and exemplifying the ability of music to compel action.

The Collective Action Problem

To contextualize the relationship between the aforementioned collective action problem and a necessarily thick, multidimensional sonic experience, I first turn to the theory attributed to American economist Mancur Olson. According to Olson's theory, individual interests often exist in conflict with collective interests,⁴ and in the case of the Harvard-Yale protest, these individual interests can be summarized as follows. Students wish to minimize potential costs, which in this scenario take two primary forms: social and legal-financial. Numerous spectators

⁴ Olson, Mancur. 1977. *The logic of collective action: public goods and the theory of groups*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

frowned upon the protest as self-serving and attention-seeking, such that students who contemplated joining the protestors were aware they might face audible booing, judgment, and ostracization. One witness aptly conveyed this sentiment in a statement to *The Washington Post*, noting that “it [the protest] goes to show that this generation is all about themselves and not a football game.”⁵ In addition to the social costs, the possibility of mass arrest presented even direr consequences as the number of protestors began to grow. In particular for students with first-generation, low-income, and/or international status, the legal-financial repercussions made participation a non-option.

On the other hand, as for collective interests, it is clear that the more students on the field, the more effective the protest: the louder, the bolder, and the more spectacular. For a disproportionately liberal, Gen Z audience, the appeal of a national platform on which to protest climate injustice cannot be overlooked, as the issue is personal as well as political for many. Regardless of political orientation, though, another kind of reward was to be found within the joyous sense of rebellion that animated the sit-in. To paraphrase what one undergraduate student wrote on social media after the game concluded, “I don’t know why I was on the field...I don’t know, I just got caught up in the zeitgeist.”⁶ Against the protest’s political backdrop, perhaps the desire for belonging, the desire to be *participants* in the goings-on of the world, pervaded students’ collective imagination that day.

Viewing the protest scene as a contest between relevant individual and collective interests, then, note that no more than a handful of students left the safety of the majority to dart onto the field in the protest’s early moments. And this is precisely the collective action problem: the dilemma that results when all individuals would be better off cooperating but fail to do so on the basis of differences between individual and group interests.⁷ Nevertheless, at some point before police officers could take control of the situation, the protestors had managed to mobilize hundreds of students – most of them unaware of plans for the sit-in prior to its realization. In other words, protestors *overcame the collective action problem*. So where was the turning point?

Since the first edition of Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* was published in the 1960s, scholars have proposed numerous solutions to collective action dilemmas.⁸ Among these solutions have been social norms that allow a community to self-organize and the intervention of third parties that require cooperation with the cause.⁹ It is apparent, however, that neither of these proposals squarely explains what happened on November 23rd, 2019; in fact, they are woefully insufficient. As such, in the following sections I seek to fill in some of the blanks by looking to the work done by music and sound. I analyze the sonic dimension of the protest on two levels: first in terms of the materiality of sound, and then in terms of music’s ability to convey shared cultural histories. How might music and sound have tipped the scales such that Divest Harvard, Fossil Free Yale, and the YEJC would overcome the collective action problem?

Interlude

I hear voices around me bubble up one by one at the sight of the protestors, chirping, yelling, hooting, groaning. Just moments ago, we were one Harvard and one Yale; now we reemerge a mass of bodies, a divergence of

⁵ Bogage, Jacob. “Students swarm field at Harvard-Yale football game, chant ‘OK boomer’ in climate change protest.” *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2019.

⁶ As seen by the author on the popular Facebook group for Harvard students, *Overheard at Harvard*.

⁷ Olson, Mancur. 1977. *The logic of collective action*.

⁸ Udéhn, Lars. “Twenty-Five Years with ‘The Logic of Collective Action’.” *Acta Sociologica* 36, no. 3 (1993): 239-61.

⁹ *Ibid.*

messages. For what feels like an eternity, I stand in confusion, sheepishly unable to process the cognitive dissonance between what I expected and what I see before my eyes. Then, as if fumbling to say something, anything, the loudspeakers crackle above, crying out the opening lines to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

It's so ironic, it's funny. The entire student section starts to belt the lyrics, histrionically swaying left and right. Is this supposed to be entertainment? Or pacification? Whatever it was meant to do, it's doing the opposite. As the clock ticks, ten or eleven insubordinates fly by in a blur as they escape the stands to plop down next to the protestors, now sitting cross-legged at centerfield.

Time passes and little changes; five or six more students run onto the field. It looks like the beginning of the end, but as security personnel arrive on the scene, the crowd only roars more. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, the voice of John Denver descends over the stadium like the voice of God. A folk-infused guitar vamp transports us to the imagined simplicity of life before industrialization. It's the ultimate strategic error.

Protest & The Volume of Sound

The notion that music is a practice of vibration is widely attributed to the work of musicologist Nina Eidsheim. As Eidsheim argues in *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, "there are multitudes of material circumstances that contribute to each of its [music's] particular articulations,"¹⁰ hence the transmission and transduction of music through a medium ought to be factored into its analysis. Situated within the Harvard-Yale context, then, Eidsheim would implore us to ask: what factors were at play in the propagation of sound across the field? How did the technological mediation of music work at the advantage or disadvantage of venue staff? And how did the distortions inherent in the use of such high-powered sound technologies shape nearly 45,000¹¹ spectators' experience of the event?

To begin, let us examine the sound produced by spectators during the game. As is typical in any American football game, some cheers and chants picked up momentum, entraining rows of bodies to move in synchrony, while others died away as rapidly as they came – perhaps due to insufficient clarity or volume. Challenging rhythms or pitch sequences rarely compete with simpler ones, and of course, not all voices are physically capable of cutting through a raucous crowd. In any case, Harvard-Yale was no exception to the norm in regard to onlookers' vocal production and involvement in the game.

However, the kind of affective labor involved in team cheers – a labor that is particularly emphasized in young, eager spectators such as the students on either side of the field – cannot be overlooked. To understand this, consider professor Kelley Tatro's work on the role of screaming and growling vocalizations in punk music, which offers a convenient analog to group chanting at sporting events. "The powerful energy and intense distortion...contribute to [music's] affective impact,"¹² Tatro writes. Music, then, becomes "a chance to express personal and collective rage through specific practices, such as screaming along."¹³ For Tatro, who is primarily concerned with the Mexican punk scene, this display of physical exertion is political in nature. It is a demonstration of strain against authority, technology, value systems, poverty, marginality, and the more explicit forms of violence.¹⁴

¹⁰ Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Sign, Storage, Transmission. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

¹¹ ESPN estimates the precise number of attendees at 44,989 (<https://www.espn.com/college-football/game?gameId=401128680>).

¹² Tatro, Kelley. "The Hard Work of Screaming: Physical Exertion and Affective Labor Among Mexico City's Punk Vocalists." *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 431-53.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Translating Tatro into the present matter of discussion, there is no doubt that rage factored into the cheers heard in Yale Bowl on the day of the sit-in, even before it had occurred. Expletives were not uncommon. And drinking being a well-celebrated feature of the festivities surrounding the game, surely inebriation did not quell students' desire to make noise. However, perhaps it was toxic masculinity that best captured the marriage of rage and volume during team cheers. Male students in particular could be seen hunching down with clenched fists and flexed biceps as they contributed to the cheers, a kind of power pose reminiscent of those exhibited in Shia LaBeouf's viral motivational speech.¹⁵

As has been noted, the initial minutes of the protest were a meager effort: protestors were hardly audible even without the interjections of sound engineers over the loudspeakers. Aside from a handful of students who carried megaphones, the protestors' demands were lost to the murmurs of the crowd. However, as the number of students on the field grew, the chants became simpler, more straightforward, and more derisive in tone. The infamous "okay, boomer" even made an appearance. And this is where Tatro's connection of noise and rage to underlying political tensions becomes especially salient. The protestors' collective identity became increasingly distinct from that of spectators as students on the field moved and vocalized in synchrony. Students left in the stands, on the other hand, never quite regrouped for or against the cause. As the spectacle of collective identity became larger than life, it attracted more and more students onto the field. Per Tatro's framework, we might understand this as a form of rebellion, a strain against an existing order in which a powerful few control billions of dollars to the detriment of young people and the environment.

Indeed, the notion of rebellion and its role in this context merits deeper analysis in this discussion, especially given the flagrant power imbalance between student protestors and authorities with access to the stadium's sound system during the event. As anthropologist Georgina Born has noted, "extreme volume inflates somatic, bone- and viscera-shaking sympathetic vibration."¹⁶ Particularly when mediated by amplification technologies, the tactile and physiological experience of sound can overwhelm the senses; it is because of this that notions like sonic torture and sound dominance continue to occupy a place in musicological discourse.¹⁷ In fact, in an arena setting, loudspeakers designed to sound over rainstorms and to be audible across tens of thousands of square feet can actually threaten the structural integrity of *the surface under one's feet*. Engineers renovating the stadium at Texas A&M University reported in 2015 that at one game, extreme volume had provoked up-and-down wavering in the architecture of the stands, sending spectators into a frenzy.¹⁸

Even at its loudest, the volume of the Harvard-Yale protest was unable to match the single voice asking students to clear the field and return to their seats over the stadium's God microphone. If anything, though, this seemed to call protestors to exert even more energy, boosting morale on the field. The booming loudspeakers became further evidence of exploitation, another form of oppression to rally against. Rebellion ruled the day.

Nonetheless, the evidently one-sided battle to be heard proved not to be enough to sustain protestors' efforts by itself. It was as the song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" blasted across the stadium that the protest exploded, just when it had begun to stall. The music interrupted a feedback loop of demonstration and exploitation between students and authorities, arguably even inverting the power imbalance as exponentially more students ran to centerfield. As such,

¹⁵ The one available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXsOAXx_ao0.

¹⁶ Born, Georgina. 2019. "On Nonhuman Sound - Sound as Relation." In *Sound Objects*. Duke University Press.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Zwerneman, Brent. "Kyle Field Reinforcements Swaying Aggies' Concerns." *The Houston Chronicle*, July 4, 2015.

in the next section, I momentarily shift from the material to the cultural dimension of music. Specifically, what was it about this music that made all the difference when combined with the synchronized, albeit then relatively powerless, group noise already on the field?

Protest & Shared Cultural Histories

Since the 1970s, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” has remained a staple of American popular music, a crowd-pleaser akin to Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline.” The proliferation of Internet memes about the song, often featuring a cat wearing a cowboy hat with its head tossed back as though belting the lyrics, has undoubtedly shaped young audiences’ affinity for it. As such, it would be disingenuous to omit the cultural salience of the song as it echoed across the stadium, bringing the protest to its tipping point as the weight of collective interests finally surpassed that of individual ones.

*Country roads, take me home.
To the place I belong*
me: WEST VIRGINIAAA



Figure 2. “Take Me Home, Country Roads” has taken on a second life in meme culture.¹⁹

As Theodor Adorno argues in a 1928 essay entitled “Schubert,” the passage of time necessarily distances us from the emotive content of an original work of music.²⁰ The immediate implication is that it is inaccurate, and possibly even unethical, to retroactively impose one’s understanding of the life of a composer or performer in the interpretation of a piece of work. In this vein, while it is tempting to examine John Denver’s lyrics through the lens of his lifelong commitment to environmental activism, even if most students had been unaware of it – which, indeed, would render the choice of song even more inflammatory in the setting at hand – we must consider the various layers that constitute an experience of the work.

On one level, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” is a song about homesickness. Its references to the natural landscapes of the “Blue Ridge Mountains” and the “Shenandoah River,” where “life is old,” recall ostensibly simpler times. The timbre of the acoustic guitar as it accompanies Denver’s voice brings to the fore associations with bareness, authenticity, and the countryside. And the sudden leap in pitch that brings us to “West Virginia” (that is, in the words “to the place...I belong”) evokes a raw vulnerability. Per the argument from the previous section, it has an entraining effect as the human brain seems to process register in a spatial manner. The

¹⁹ Tracing the original source of this image is near-impossible due to its fair use status.

²⁰ Adorno, Theodor. “Schubert (1928).” *19th-Century Music* 29, no. 1 (2005): 3-14.

spine lengthens, or perhaps the head cranes upwards, or both, in sympathy with the rise in pitch: it naturally pulls us toward the sky.

On another level, and again per the argument of the previous section, we must examine not only the material but also the cultural particularities of the setting in which the song was played. First and foremost, regardless of setting, the acousmatic nature of recorded music when reproduced by sound technology necessarily distances us from its source. When that source is a human voice (as well as, in this case, live instrumentals), it is natural to draw associations with past experiences in order to construct the *who* to which the voice belongs since we cannot see *it*;²¹ and in an arena, this *who* is made godlike by its patent power in space and time. With this in mind, one imagines that Denver's already-iconic vocals were rendered nearly transcendent as they resonated above and across the tens of thousands of bodies gathered at the Yale Bowl.

Secondly, we must consider how the cultural particularities of the moment may have shaped the effect of the song. It has already been mentioned that "Take Me Home, Country Roads" has taken on a second life in meme culture, which has undoubtedly informed many students' relationship with it – hence the ecstatic cries as it came on over the loudspeakers. In addition to this, we must regard the Harvard-Yale protest as embedded in a whole series of climate protests in the 2010s, pioneered by adolescent leaders (and most famously, Greta Thunberg). But importantly, it was not purely a continuation; it was also a departure in that it was the first major televised climate protest led by students at two of the world's elite private colleges. Because of this, the voices of students on and off the field were privileged by an affordance of power not extended to every twenty-something-year-old. And consequently, it is not unbelievable that either in defiance of that privileged positioning, or perhaps as an abuse of it, students exhibited a visceral response to the celebration of the simpleton at the core of "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

Ultimately, it cannot be a coincidence that the line at which the pitch jump occurs – which also happens to be the first line in the song with an explicit reference to belonging – was precisely the catalyst for the protest's explosion. In parallel with the desire for group cohesion in the face of oppression, the lyrics of the song substantially contributed to the music's doing the *opposite* of what it was intended to do. To paraphrase Catherine Clément, the music served as a means of *recruiting listeners to an alliance*, for better or for worse.²² It enlivened students on both sides of the field, if not in solidarity for the cause then at least in appreciation for the music and its cultural relevance – and as such, it enabled protestors, however unintentionally, to overcome the collective action problem as a critical mass of students gathered to prolong the sit-in, enlarging the spectacle more and more.

Conclusion

In a venue without floodlights, the protest that occurred at the 2019 Harvard-Yale football game brought enough students to the field to delay the second half of the game by close to an hour. While it is clear that stadium personnel's attempt to pacify the crowd by blasting music through loudspeakers only reinforced the pull to rebellion, the unexpected battle anthem in "Take Me Home, Country Roads" turned out to be the key to subverting the intentions of authorities in favor of the students' cause. In tandem, the materiality of sound and the cultural relevance of the song enabled protestors to overcome a collective action problem and thereby

²¹ Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Refiguring American Music Ser. 2019.

²² Clément, Catherine, Betsy Wing, and Susan McClary. *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

serve collective interests in the divestment issue and, more superficially but no less notably, the feeling of belonging. Given a song played as light entertainment at many sports events and practicing the same type of vocal production they had once used to cheer on opposing teams, Harvard and Yale students united to protest Harvard and Yale's apparent complicity with the fossil fuel industry.

Epilogue

“Almost heaven, West Virginia...” The ecstasy is palpable. The stands become liquid, uncontainable, arms and legs and torsos stream in from left and right. And when the chorus comes, the wail of that last syllable sends ripples through the crowd. It's watershed.

We decide, together, that where we belong is not here, but there. At the fifty-yard line. I've never had something to scream for, to cry for, to fight for like I do in this moment. I make my run for the field.