



Research Online at Trinity Laban

“Introduction” to special issue “Music, Sound, and Maternity.”

Johnson-Williams, E. & Meinhart, M.

Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture Volume 26



PROJECT MUSE®

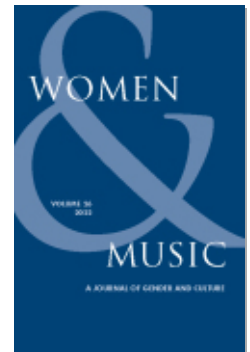
Introduction

Erin Johnson-Williams, Michelle Meinhart

Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture, Volume 26, 2022,
pp. 68-73 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2022.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/866853>

Introduction

Erin Johnson-Williams and Michelle Meinhart

Childbirth, like war, is loud. Writing this introduction in early 2022, with our minds on the intersections between music, sound, and maternity, we cannot help but be affected by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We read daily news reports of women going into labor and giving birth in Soviet-era bunkers and crumbling basements amid the sonic backdrop of missiles, air raid sirens, and the voices and cries of others taking cover.¹ A magnified heartbeat through a stethoscope; medical staff giving instructions; a mother’s screams; a baby’s first cry—these sounds people have experienced worldwide across the centuries, and are imminently associated with cyclical reproduction. As Gavin Steingo notes, “Sound participates in constituting, generating, and producing new entities—including life itself.”² But alongside these *reproductive* sounds of new life emerging in Ukraine today exist *destructive* soundscapes that silence maternal experience more broadly.

Experiences of maternal reproduction and birth have long “cried out” for their own sonic spaces. During pregnancy, the sound of a heartbeat, as mediated through a stethoscope or sonogram, can define the relationship between the fu-

¹ See Li Cohen, “We Are Living in Real Hell: Ukrainian Women Describe Giving Birth in the Middle of Russian Invasion,” *CBS News*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-women-giving-birth-in-the-middle-of-russian-invasion/>; As Told to Jem Bartholomew, “Giving Birth in a Bunker in Kiev: I Said to Him You’re a New Ukrainian,” *Guardian*, March 2, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/giving-birth-in-a-bunker-in-kyiv-new-ukrainian?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other; Louise Callaghan, “Born to the Sound of Bombs: The Ukrainian Babies Bringing Hope Amidst the Despair of War,” *Times*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/born-to-the-sound-of-bombs-the-ukrainian-babies-bringing-hope-amid-the-despair-of-war-nxmdnps2z>.

² Gavin Steingo, “Listening as Life: Sounding Fetal Personhood in South Africa,” *Sound Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): 157. See also Jairo Moreno, “Antenatal Aurality in Pacific Afro-Colombian Midwifery,” in *Remapping Sound Studies*, ed. Gavin Steingo and Jim Skyes (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 109–34.

ture baby and mother, even many weeks before the mother feels fetal movement.³ Birth practitioners and music therapists have widely recognized the significance of sound to the experience of maternity and birth, but cultural historians of music and sound have yet to engage with this topic in a sustained way.⁴ In putting this special issue together, we hope to identify a disciplinary silencing of the significance of sound to maternal experience, and to encourage space for such gaps to be heard across the various interdisciplinary branches of music and sound studies.

In the Anglo-American world, there is a growing public interest in pregnancy, birth, and maternity. Popular culture has progressively embraced open discussions of motherhood, as the plethora of contemporary books, podcasts, magazine articles, and social media networking on this topic demonstrates.⁵ As Amy Westervelt writes in *The Guardian*, “The topic of motherhood is having a bit of a moment. . . . Most surprising to me, as someone told by women’s magazine

3 See Rayna Rapp, “Real-Time Fetus: The Role of the Sonogram in the Age of Monitored Reproduction,” in *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*, ed. Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 608–22; Jonathan Sterne, “Mediate Auscultation, the Stethoscope, and the ‘Autopsy of the Living’: Medicine’s Acoustic Culture,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2001): 115–36; Janelle S. Taylor, *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram: Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

4 See, for example, Lucy Newmark Sammons, “The Use of Music by Women during Childbirth,” *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* 29, no. 4 (1984): 266–70; Philip Hepp et al., “Effects of Music Intervention during Caesarean Delivery on Anxiety and Stress of the Mother: A Controlled, Randomised Study,” *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 18, no. 1 (2018): 435; Kristin Marie Bivens, “A Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) Soundscape: Physiological Monitors, Rhetorical Ventriloquism, and Earwitnessing,” *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine* 2, no. 1 (2019): 1–32; Mehran Farzaneh et al., “Comparative Effect of Nature-Based Sounds Intervention and Headphones Intervention on Pain Severity after Cesarean Section: A Prospective Double-Blind Randomized Trial,” *Anesthesia and Pain Medicine* 9, no. 2 (April 2019): <https://doi.org/10.5812/aapm.67835>; Serap Simavli et al., “Effect of Music on Labor Pain Relief, Anxiety Level and Postpartum Analgesic Requirement: A Randomized Controlled Clinical Trial,” *Gynecologic and Obstetric Investigation* 78, no. 4 (Nov. 2014): 244–50; Caryl Ann Browning, “Music Therapy in Childbirth: Research in Practice,” *Music Therapy Perspectives* 19, no. 2 (2001): 74–81; Taz Tagore, “Why Music Matters in Childbirth,” *Midwifery Today* (Spring 2009): 33–68; Triona McCaffrey et al., “The Role and Outcomes of Music Listening for Women in Childbirth: An Integrative Review,” *Midwifery* 83 (2020): 102–67.

5 Examples of recent books and/or memoirs are Angela Garbes, *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change* (New York: Harper Wave, 2022); Angela Garbes, *Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey through the Science of Culture and Pregnancy* (New York: Harper Wave, 2018); Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Vintage, 2019); Milli Hill, *Give Birth Like a Feminist: Your Body, Your Baby, Your Choices* (London: HQ, 2019); Giovanna Fletcher, *Letters on Motherhood* (London: Michael Joseph, 2020); Giovanna Fletcher, *Happy Mum, Happy Baby: My Adventures into Motherhood* (London: Coronet, 2017). In addition to the CBeebies program *The Baby Club*, Giovanna Fletcher also hosts the podcast *Happy Mum, Happy Baby*, in which she mainly interviews prominent celebrities, politicians, authors, business owners, and other public figures about their pregnancies, birth stories, and experiences of motherhood. See <https://www.happymumhappybaby.com/podcast/>. There are a number of other podcasts as well as Instagram accounts that bring attention to the realities of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, highlighting both the highs and the lows. See, for example, Scummy Mummies, <https://www.instagram.com/scummymummies/>; *Scummy Mummies*, <http://www.scummymummies.com/podcast>; My Expert Midwife, https://www.instagram.com/my_expertmidwife/; Unspoken Stories, <https://unspokenstories.org/>. There has also been a rising increase in representations of maternity and mothering in television series such as *The Letdown* (2016–19), *Workin’ Moms* (2017–22), and *Motherland* (2017–22), as well as the films *Mother!* (2017) and *The Lost Daughter* (2021). For a critique of the media’s representation of maternity and motherhood, see Bethany Johnson and Margaret M. Quinlan, *You’re Doing It Wrong! Mothering, Media, and Medical Expertise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

editors for years, ‘we don’t cover motherhood,’ is the fact that publications like *Elle* and *Marie Claire* appear to have lifted their long-standing ban on motherhood.⁶ Indeed, as Pragwa Agarwal notes, society has become obsessed with women’s bodies and fertility.⁷ In the even more recent context of the US Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*, issues around silencing women’s maternal bodies will continue to become all the more pressing.

This newfound interest in pregnancy, maternity, and parenthood is possibly due to recent attempts to untangle pregnancy and birth from male-dominated medicalized discourses in which the voices of pregnant people have long been suppressed.⁸ Beyond mainstream media aimed toward cis, heterosexual “mothers,” the social sciences have largely dominated intersectional cultural and economic understandings of birth and maternity.⁹ Feminist studies has, for decades, wrestled with these topics in relation to issues around freedom of choice, establishing motherhood as a structuring category, with clear distinctions between biological and social motherhood.¹⁰ More recently, with advances in commercially available assisted reproductive technologies, feminist discourse has also pointed to ways in which new forms of social control are continually (re)established over female reproduction.¹¹ With a few exceptions, however, the humanities have largely ignored maternity, reinforcing a structural silencing of conversations around reproduction, birth, and motherhood in general.¹²

6 Amy Westervelt, “Is Motherhood the Unfinished Work of Feminism?” *Guardian*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/is-motherhood-the-unfinished-work-of-feminism>.

7 Pragwa Agarwal, (*M)otherhood: On the Choices of Being a Woman* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021).

8 We use the term “pregnant people” here to acknowledge that not all individuals who go through the experience of pregnancy identify as women or, indeed, as mothers. In citing the pressures of society and social media, we are, however, acutely aware that most mainstream discourses still presume to associate the state of pregnancy with womanhood and motherhood. For further reading, see Ann Oakley, *Woman Confined: Toward a Sociology of Childbirth* (New York: Schocken, 1980); Clare Davison, “Feminism, Midwifery and the Medicalisation of Birth,” *British Journal of Midwifery* 28, no. 12 (December 2020), <https://www.britishtjournalofmidwifery.com/content/other/feminism-midwifery-and-the-medicalisation-of-birth>.

9 Amy Mullin, *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience, and Reproductive Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

10 The 1990s “Third Wave Feminism” brought many reconceptions of the sociality of motherhood and women’s agency. See Nancy Chodorow and Susan Conraito, “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother,” in *The Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, rev. ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boson: Beacon, 1989); Sara Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth,” in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 29–45; Mary Thompson, “Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Motherhood,” *Gender* 43 (2006), <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=anon-53dcd2cd&cid=GALE|A179660937&v=2.1&cit=r&sid=googleScholar&asid=bb4fac5c>. For a summary of the history of feminist thought on motherhood up to the late twentieth century, see Emma Gross, “Motherhood in Feminist Theory,” *Affilia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 269–72.

11 Gerda Neye and Laura Bernardi, “Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction,” *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 2 (2011): 162–76.

12 Exceptions include Julie Kipp, *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007); Katrina Irving, *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890–1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Sarah Kay, “Versions of the Natural,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2019): 445–56; Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representa-*

When we first envisioned this special issue we were new mothers ourselves, navigating the challenges of pregnancy, birth, and parenting during the early days of COVID-19 lockdowns, and questioning how sound has long been used as a way to mediate maternal and reproductive agency. As our training and experience lies in Anglo-American historical musicology, we were acutely aware of the substantial lack of perspectives on maternity from music historiography: echoing Susan McClary, Western culture in general and musicology in particular have long “avoided dealing with the dynamic moment of birth.”¹³ As such, there is enormous scope for cultural musicology to create room for the idea of sonic maternity and reproduction as a recognized subfield: one that contributes to the existing fields of feminist sound studies; sound technology; sound in medical environments; music and trauma; and music and childhood, among others.¹⁴

Our desire to promote music, sound, and maternity as a disciplinary subfield taps into work that is already starting to happen. There is a growing body of recent research that embraces sonic maternal ideas from the vantage point of musicology, such as Emily Wilbourne’s linking of breastfeeding and the “politics of the indecent” to operatic history, Sarah Boak’s examination of the maternal body in the work of Tori Amos, and Elizabeth Lindau’s exploration of maternity and creativity in the work of Yoko Ono.¹⁵ Anija Doktor’s 2018 PhD dissertation, on the interconnections between antique metallurgy, social and material reproduction, and the concept of “vulvar vocality” from Bronze Age Mesopotamians to early modern Europeans, provides a compelling case for how women’s bodies have been constructed through patriarchal hierarchies to be “natural”—and inherently sonic—reproductive resources, for millennia.¹⁶

Beyond historical musicology, recent research by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz on

tions of Sexuality and Maternity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and the essays in Susan C. Staub, ed., *The Literary Mother: Essays on Representations of Maternity and Childcare* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

¹³ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 116.

¹⁴ There is a vast literature on music, sound, and trauma, as is explored in the article by Michelle Meinhart in this special issue. For studies of trauma and maternity specifically, see Megan R. Gerber, “Trauma-Informed Maternity Care,” in *Trauma-Informed Healthcare Approaches: A Guide for Primary Care*, ed. Megan R. Gerber (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 145–55; Kristy Watson, “Women’s Experiences of Birth Trauma: A Scoping Review,” *Women and Birth* 34, no. 5 (2021): 417–24. On assaulting sound, and sound in medical environments, see Thomas D. Rice, *Hearing and the Hospital: Sound, Listening, Knowledge and Experience* (Hereford, UK: Sean Kingston, 2013); William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016). On music, culture, and childhood, see the essays in Susan Boynton and Roe-Min Kok, eds., *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Press, 2008). Lullabies have also been considered from a variety of disciplinary angles, as outlined in Eric Drott and Marie Thompson’s article in this issue.

¹⁵ See Emily Wilbourne, “Breastmilk, Exposed Bodies, and the Politics of the Indecent,” *ECHO: A Music-Centered Journal* 14, no. 1 (2016), <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/volume-14-1-2016/article-breastmilk-exposed-bodies-politics-indecent/>; Elizabeth Lindau, “Mother Superior?: Maternity and Creativity in the Work of Yoko Ono,” *Women and Music* 20 (2016): 57–76; Sarah Boak, “Mother Revolution: Representations of the Maternal Body in the Work of Tori Amos,” *Popular Music* 34, no. 2 (2015): 296–311.

¹⁶ Anija Doktor, “Listening to Birth: Metallurgy, Maternity, and Vocality in the Reproduction of the Patriarchal State” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2018).

Jewish music in northern Morocco also highlights the importance of fieldwork in examining the role of communal songs, such as lullabies, in building sonic identity boundaries.¹⁷ Studies such as the 2019 article by Jacqueline Pangas further showcase the significance of ethnographic research into maternal experience more broadly.¹⁸ In terms of sound studies, work on the idea of sonic reproduction by Marie Thompson has also sparked considerations of how sound as a form of material and social reproduction has been embedded within Western sonic structures, with implications for prenatal technological consumption.¹⁹ Taking this growing body of literature onboard, we recommend a more sustained exploration of the place of maternity in music and sound studies, questioning why maternal experiences have been so silenced, despite their associations with sound.

The four articles in this special issue attempt to reclaim maternal voices, through diverse case studies ranging from nineteenth-century France to colonial-era South Africa and Uganda, to contemporary corporate initiatives in North America, to COVID-19 lockdown hospitals in the UK. Drawing on trauma theory and nineteenth-century ideas about maternity and gender, Molly C. Doran argues that, historically, stagings of Gounod's *Faust* have erased the significance of maternity and infanticide in the opera's plot, and she considers how contemporary stagings can reimagine traumatic portrayals of maternity on the operatic stage. Erin Johnson-Williams examines the gendered soundscapes associated with surgical births in colonial Uganda and South Africa. Drawing on two case studies of the (white) "imperial record," she explores a silenced history of Indigenous medical knowledge around surgical births. Eric Drott and Marie Thompson, providing a critical and alternative perspective on music and pregnancy's imbrication within capitalist social relations, outline two case studies of reproductive sonic technologies in relation to the post-Fordist organization of social reproduction, racial histories of pregnancy and maternity, and the cultural economy of music. Finally, employing autoethnography and a feminist reading of Foucault's and Deleuze's disciplinary and modulatory power structures, Michelle Meinhart explores how new mothers during the time of COVID-19, alongside herself, have harnessed sound technologies to mitigate and re-exert control over the traumatic and isolated soundscapes of UK lockdown delivery and maternity wards.

Together, our articles draw on musicology, trauma, gender, and sound studies to propose an interdisciplinary framework through which to privilege the sounds that accompany maternity, birth, and motherhood. We propose that such multidis-

17 See Vanessa Paloma Elbaz, "Jewish Music in Northern Morocco and the Building of Sonic Identity Boundaries," *Journal of North African Studies* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1884855>.

18 Jacqueline Pangas, "Refugee Women's Experiences Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity Care in a New Country: A Meta-Ethnographic Review," *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 20 (2019): 31–45; see also Elina Ali, "Understanding the Culture of the Single Room Maternity Care Unit: Ethnographic Study" (master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2015).

19 See Marie Thompson, "Your Womb, the Perfect Classroom: Prenatal Sound Systems and Uterine Audiophilia," *Feminist Review* 127, no. 1 (2021): 73–89. Thompson also explored related themes about sonic reproduction in her keynote address to the 2020 Royal Musical Association, titled "Music in the Post-Mom Economy."

ciplinary, intersectional approaches will pave the way for the female reproductive body to be “sounded,” and “listened to,” in academic discourses and beyond.

ERIN JOHNSON-WILLIAMS (she/her) is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Music at Durham University. Her publications include the edited volume *Intersectional Encounters in the Nineteenth-Century Archive: New Essays on Power and Discourse* (Bloomsbury, 2022), articles in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* and *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, and chapters in several edited volumes. She is currently coediting *The Oxford Handbook of Music Colonialism* (OUP, 2024), and *Hymns and Constructions of Race* (Routledge, 2024), and working on a larger research project on music, religion, and incarceration in colonial concentration camps.

MICHELLE MEINHART (she/her) is a Senior Teaching Fellow at Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London and holds a Senior Fellowship of the UK Higher Education Academy. She also teaches with Dartmouth College's and Rhodes College's international programs in London. Her research focuses on sound, memory, narrative, and trauma in Great Britain from the nineteenth century through today. Her publications include the edited volume *A Great Divide? Music, Britain and the First World War* (2023); articles in the *Journal of Musicological Research*, the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, and *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*; and chapters in several edited collections. Her research has been funded by the US-UK Fulbright Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of University Women, and the *Music and Letters* Trust. She is currently coediting *The Oxford Handbook of Music, Sound, and Trauma* and completing a monograph on music, memory, and trauma in spaces of healing in England during World War I.