Book of Abstracts

Disquiet: Auditory Cultures of the Late Ottoman Empire

22-24 May 2025

University of Cambridge
Faculty of Music

The history of the late Ottoman Empire is a period of dramatic political and cultural change, often framed as a series of "modernizing" reforms. A key site of contestation and index of those changes were the empire's auditory cultures: how inhabitants of the Ottoman lands and their neighbors listened, produced sound and music, and shaped their cultural lives in and through sonic activities and discourses. Many well-known political reforms had significant sonic components, such as the abolition of the Janissary Corps and the attendant transformation of state (and Sufi) music-making, or the Reform Edict of 1856, which, among other reforms, permitted Christian communities to ring bells publicly, a departure from earlier practice.

The challenge of writing such sonic histories has already been taken up in related ways by historians such as Nina (Ergin) Macaraig, in her groundbreaking work on the sonic dimensions of early modern Ottoman mosques and imperial spaces. More recently, Ziad Fahmy (2020), writing about Egypt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has shown how a whole range of societal changes in urban spaces, including infrastructures, technologies, and governmental reforms, continually reshaped the sonic experience of residents of Cairo and Alexandria.

Sound studies raises further questions still: how did practices of medicine and science relating to voice and hearing emerge in this period? How do communication systems of this period (messenger networks, the postal system, telegraphy, early telephony) relate to or rely on sound? How were listening practices transformed in this era, especially in response to changes in social/public spaces? Beyond (in)famous tropes such as howling dogs, what kinds of sonic environments were audible in this period, and how might attending to sound further discussions in environmental history of the region? To what degree are forms of cultural difference (e.g., gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and disability) audible in this period? What forms of sonic performance—including music, theatre, and religious recitation, but also going beyond them to consider reading (aloud), translation/interpretation, debate, and so on—can be observed?

These broad lines of inquiry underpin the ERC/UKRI-funded project, "Ottoman Auralities and the Eastern Mediterranean: Sound, Media, and Power in the Long Nineteenth Century." In conjunction with that project, we are pleased to present *Disquiet: Auditory Cultures of the Late Ottoman Empire,* to be held 22-24 May 2025 at the University of Cambridge. In this conference, we aim to explore the manifold auditory histories of the late Ottoman Empire and surrounding eastern Mediterranean. In doing so, we hope to further elucidate possibilities for sound studies and global music history to engage more substantively with the Ottoman Empire as part of a broader "remapping" impulse (see Steingo and Sykes 2019), and for Ottoman history to deepen its understandings of the sensory and phenomenological experiences of the long nineteenth century, including those official social reforms as well as other shifts in science, medicine, and technology.

Programme

Thursday, May 22

11:00-11:30	Welcome
	Session 1: Voice(s)
11:30-12:15	**Federica Nardella** (King's College London) The Nature of the Singing Voice, the Art of Singing: Debating Voice in Late Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Literature
12:15-13:00	**Moad Musbahi (Princeton University)** Vocal Practices in Libya during the Second Ottoman Period
13:00-14:00	Lunch
	Session 2: 'New Media'
14:00-14:45	**Jacob Olley** (University of Cambridge) Sounding Armeno-Turkish Scriptworlds: Typography, Telegraphy, Notation
14:45-15:30	**Özge Özyılmaz** (Istanbul Kent University) The Absence of Sound as Disquiet: Perceptions of Silence in Early Cinema in Late Ottoman Istanbul
15:30-16:00	Coffee Break
	Session 3: Sound and Disability
16:00-16:45	**Nazan Maksudyan** (Centre Marc Bloch) Body, Ear and Hearing: Sound Devices and Technologies for the Deaf
16:45-17:30	**Irem Yıldız** (University of Oxford) The Sound of Survival: Music Education and the Recitation of the Blind in Late Ottoman Istanbul

Programme

Friday, May 23

	Session 4: Aural Ecologies I
9:30-10:15	**Donna Buchanan** (University of Illinois) Belling the Hillsides, Attuning the Herd: Pastoral Auralities and Interspecies Sonic Ecology in Late Ottoman Bulgaria
10:15-11:00	**Peter McMurray** (University of Cambridge) Rumble: Seismic Aurality in the Late Ottoman Empire
11:00-11:30	Coffee Break
	Session 5: Aural Ecologies II
11:30-12:15	**Demet Karabulut Dede (**Istanbul Bilgi University) Audible Critique: Sound and Animal Imagery in Refik Halid Karay's Political Satire
13:00-14:00	Lunch
	Session 6: Soundscapes I, Circulation
14:00-14:45	**Hasan Baran Fırat** (University of Antwerp) To Beat the Drum for the Rebels: Dellāls and the Struggle for Sonic Control in the Ottoman Public Sphere
14:45-15:30	**Uğur Zekeriya Peçe** (Lehigh University) Raise Your Voice, Pledge Your Money: Forming Sonic Bonds of Solidarity through Donation Drives for the Ottoman Navy
15:30-16:00	Coffee Break
	Session 7: Religion, Sound, Text
16:00-16:45	**Vanessa Paloma Elbaz** (University of Cambridge) Sounding and Unsounding Late Ottoman Multilingual Alphabetic Sephardi Vocalities
16:45-17:30	**Hande Betül Ünal** (University of Cambridge) Lawful Sounds: Exploring the Legal Dimensions of Sound in Ottoman Fatwas

Programme

Saturday, May 24

	Session 8: Soundscapes II, Noise
9:30-10:15	**Sada Payır** (Princeton University) Sonic Transgression: The Urban Soundscape of Entertainment in Late Ottoman Istanbul
10:15-11:00	**Onur Engin** (University of Cambridge) Hubbub, Howls, and Silence(s): Ideas of Noise in Western Accounts of Late Ottoman Istanbul
11:00-11:30	Coffee Break
	Session 9: Sonic Margins
11:30-12:15	**Brian Fairley** (University of Pittsburgh) Living Language on the Caucasian Borderlands: Nikolai Marr and the Sound of Archaeology
12:15-13:00	**Stefan Williamson Fa** (University of Cambridge) Acoustic Ahl al-Baytism: Rethinking Sectarian Boundaries through Sonic Devotional Practices in the Late Ottoman Empire
13:00-14:00	Lunch

The Nature of the Singing Voice, the Art of Singing: Debating Voice in Late Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Literature

The second half of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented increase in şarkı song lyrics publications. Lyrics were also printed in newspapers, indicating an interest in vocal repertoire beyond professional circles (Poulos 2011, 2014, 2017; Nardella 2023). The şarkı benefited from the burgeoning press and publishing industry, enjoyed by performers and readers alike (Fortna 2011). Between 1870-1908, new sound-based reading methods (usûl-ı savtîye, 'oral method'), alongside anatomy books describing human and animal vocal production structures, signalled a similar interest on the part of language pedagogy, medicine and natural sciences. The interweaving of sound practice with nature was emphasised in the 1889 translation of Casimire Colombe's The Effect of Music on Men and Animals, by Mustafa Refik. However, the relationship between sound and naturalness was also at the heart of the language debate that began and continued throughout the Tanzimat (1839-1876). Ziyâ Pâşa (1868) and Ahmet Midhat's (1871) arguments in favour of a more accessible idiom hinged upon the idea that the closer to its spoken variant, the more 'natural' the language would be (Levend 1960; Nardella 2023). This phonocentrism has been identified as a reason for the emergence of Turkish in Ottoman language standardisation (Ertürk 2010). This paper explores how late nineteenth-century reading culture shaped sound practices (singing and speech). Exploring the interest in phonetics of medical publications, language and literary debate discussing sound-making and sounding natural, it also argues that sound was a main actor in shaping late Ottoman ideas around ethnic identity and 'old versus new'.

Federica Nardella completed her AHRC-funded PhD in Ethnomusicology at King's College, London under Prof. Martin Stokes' supervision. She is an MMus Ethnomusicology graduate from SOAS and holds a BA in English Literature & Creative Writing from Royal Holloway. She is a Georg Forster Forum Fellow at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. During her PhD, she researched the late nineteenth-century Ottoman song form sarkı in relation to literacy, linguistics, language pedagogy, the emerging bureaucracy and the press. Her postdoctoral project explores the soundscape ecology of Turkic Central Asia and the use of vocality in constructing partnerships between eagle-hunters and golden eagles in Kyrgyzstan.

Vocal Practices in Libya during the Second Ottoman Period

After the establishment of a new Ottoman governor in Tripoli in 1835, a commission was sent to the Saharan trading town of Ghadames in 1842, to demand taxes from the population. This event was recorded in a series of letters between the Ghadames merchants living in the city, sent to their relatives in Tripoli and Timbuktu. These correspondences were oral performances, read to members of the immediate family, and contained economic, social and political news that would be shared aloud in a single setting.

The Ottoman authorities in the Eyālet of Tripoli introduced the first weekly Ottoman – Arabic newspaper in 1866. Given the title of Trâblus Al-Gârb after the region it served, this broadsheet became an important source of connection with the larger Ottoman world during the 19th century, from even the furthest reaches in the Saharan town of Ghadames. Practices of reading the newspaper in public and collecting it for recitation later were commonplace.

By using these two examples, the Ghadames merchant letters and the Ottoman weekly, I will explore how different relations to the voice and listening in the Libyan Sahara were influenced by an auditory culture that existed between a Turkish elite and mercantile class during the last century before Italian colonization. By focusing on vocal performances, I interrogate how spatial context and community conditions modulated relations to presence and authenticity, and what sonic and social transformations can be learnt in the peripheral space of Libya in the late Ottoman Empire?

Moad Musbahi is currently a visiting doctoral fellow at the University of Algiers II (2025-2026). He is a joint PhD candidate in Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Humanities at Princeton University. His dissertation project interrogates the circulation of value in the central Sahara, showing how the entanglements between bodily ailments, oral performance and financial relations define communal belonging across Algeria, Libya, Niger and Mali. He is a sound artist with recent works shown at Art Jameel, Jeddah; MoMA, New York; Venice Biennale, Venice; and currently co-directs the Taught 2 Travel project with the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin.

Sounding Armeno-Turkish Scriptworlds: Typography, Telegraphy, Notation

Recent decades have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in hybrid languages in the Ottoman Empire such as Armeno-Turkish, especially in relation to the history of literature. This has raised important questions about the relationship between script and communal identity, with several scholars adopting David Damrosch's concept of "scriptworlds" as an interpretative framework. Although the related issue of typography has been discussed mostly in relation to the early Turkish Republic, debates about script reform can be traced back to nineteenth-century Ottoman print culture. Furthermore, existing literature has largely neglected issues of orality/aurality, despite the fact that vocalization is central to historical debates around script and community.

In this paper, I introduce the concept of "soundworlds" as a complement to "scriptworlds" and in order to situate Armeno-Turkish typography within a broader sphere of interrelated media technologies and oral/aural practices. The paper draws on diverse examples including Armeno-Turkish language tutors, a treatise on telegraphy in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish, and printed music produced by Armenian typesetters and publishers. In this way, the paper offers a fresh interdisciplinary perspective on the relationship between sounds, signs, and communities in the late Ottoman Empire.

Jacob Olley is a Research Associate on the ERC/UKRI project Ottoman Auralities and the Eastern Mediterranean: Sound, Media and Power, 1789–1922 at the University of Cambridge. He was previously Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Music at Cambridge, and Research Associate on the DFG project Corpus Musicae Ottomanicae: Critical Editions of Near Eastern Music Mansucripts at the University of Münster. His article "Evliya's Song: Listening to the Early Modern Ottoman Court" (2023) was awarded the American Musicological Society Alfred Einstein Award and the British Forum for Ethnomusicology Early Career Prize.

The Absence of Sound as Disquiet: Perceptions of Silence in Early Cinema in Late Ottoman Istanbul

This paper examines the absence of sound in early cinema screenings in late Ottoman Istanbul, which was perceived as a deficiency by contemporary writers and audiences. Using periodicals and memoirs as primary sources, it investigates critiques of silence as reflections of broader cultural anxieties surrounding modernity, realism, and technological progress. The study argues that these reactions to silence were not merely aesthetic judgments but were deeply embedded in the sociocultural and sensory transformations of the era. By situating these perceptions within the context of emerging auditory and visual technologies, this paper seeks to understand how silence itself became a site of disquiet in the late Ottoman auditory landscape.

Building on Tom Gunning's analysis of the separation and reintegration of the senses in the context of early cinema and phonography, this paper examines how the perceived absence of sound in early film screenings reflects broader anxieties about modernity and sensory fragmentation. Drawing on Gunning's argument that early media technologies not only extended human senses but also revealed their disconnection, this study situates Ottoman writers' critiques of silence within a larger cultural negotiation of technology and realism. By doing so, it highlights how the auditory gaps in early cinema became a site of both disquiet and imaginative reconstruction.

Özge Özyılmaz is an Associate Professor in the Department of Radio, Television, and Cinema at Istanbul Kent University. Her research focuses on the history of cinema, with particular interest in sound practices during the silent film era, the transition to sound, and the history of cinema in Turkey. She has published primarily on these topics in journals such as the Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, the Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television, and Music, Sound, and the Moving Image.

Body, Ear and Hearing: Sound Devices and Technologies for the Deaf

The prolific Ottoman writer and translator Ahmet Rasim (1864-1932) wrote in an 1885 article for the literary journal Şafak (Dawn) that sound can also be seen (sada da görülür) and heard with the eyes (göz ile işitebiliriz). Indeed, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the visibility of sound or the possibility of touching hearing were issues that preoccupied professionals and amateurs interested in the subjects of hearing and deafness. As the media theorist Friedrich Kittler argues, disability approached from the perspective of the history of technology and medicine brings to light important developments in the context of replacing functions (Kittler 1999, 189).

In this paper, I focus on the development of otology (or ear medicine) in the Ottoman Empire by concentrating on certain pioneers - such as Fotis Photeades, Muhiddin, Ziya Nuri and Nikolaos Taptas - and discuss the invention and use of sound devices and technologies closely related to otology and deafness.

Nazan Maksudyan is a Senior Researcher at the Centre Marc Bloch in the ERC project, Ottoman Auralities and a visiting professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on the social and cultural history of the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, with a special interest in children and youth, gender, exile and migration, sound studies, and the history of sciences. Her publications include Ottoman Children & Youth During World War I (2019), Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire (2014), Women and the City, Women in the City (ed. 2014), and Urban Neighborhood Formations (with Hilal Alkan, 2020).

The Sound of Survival: Music Education and the Recitation of the Blind in Late Ottoman Istanbul

This project examines blind individuals in late Ottoman Istanbul by exploring how music education in schools and reciting in mosques offered means of survival and spaces for resilience while displaying their disability. It focuses on the interaction between blind individuals and their sociocultural, legal, and institutional environments in late Ottoman Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1908) and the early Second Constitutional Period (1908–14) by examining education, imperial welfare efforts, alms, and aid.

In the School for the Blind's programme, reading and music lessons were given particular importance. In August 1904, it decided to rebuild the school within the area of Darülacaze, a project ultimately abandoned due to lack of resources. This talk explores how the refounding and relocating of the School for Deaf, Mute, and Blind in Istanbul shifted the confines of the blind from the area of schools to that of poorhouses. In addition to the interaction between blind people and their institutional history, the presence of blind and disabled beggars, primarily from Anatolia, wandering the streets of Istanbul during the month of Muharram, chanting hymns and asking for food, highlights the survival of the blind within an auditory culture in the city.

This research examines how blind survivors utilised their skills to navigate and influence social and cultural contexts, drawing on petitions, diplomatic documents, and newspapers. By focusing on the practices of blind musicians, reciters, and beggars, it challenges ocular-centric narratives and emphasises the significance of auditory experiences in understanding late Ottoman Istanbul society.

Irem Yıldız is a DPhil candidate at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. Her dissertation explores perceptions and experiences of blindness in the late Ottoman Empire (1868–1914). She investigates the history of blindness through three interconnected notions: poverty, disability/medicine, and education. Her research has been supported by several grants and fellowships, including those from ANAMED Koç University in Istanbul and the Middle East Centre at Oxford.

Belling the Hillsides, Attuning the Herd: Pastoral Auralities and Interspecies Sonic Ecology in Late Ottoman Bulgaria

In Bulgarian literature, hillside pastures of the late Ottoman era are often romanticized as idyllic glades in which the spontaneous jangling of animal bells accorded harmoniously with the mellifluous tones of wooden shepherds' flutes (kavals). Drawing upon historical and literary sources (travelogues, ethnographic accounts, novels, photographs, song lyrics, museum collections) and my own interviews with bellmakers, curators, shepherds, and musicians, my paper examines the sonic ecology of pastoral bells and their crucial role in nineteenth-century Bulgarian animal husbandry. I survey the diverse typology of these cast and forged instruments, their Ottoman-era designations, their gendered and anthropomorphic associations, and their implications for land and livestock ownership, wealth, status, and heritage. In agrarian Bulgarian villages, pastoral bells were also key metaphors of musical beauty framed by gendered complementarity; just as women attuned their voices to ring like bells, shepherds belled their flocks to ring like women's singing. Herders recognized their droves through the distinctive timbres of their bells; I thus also address the ethnoaesthetic principles guiding belling practices. Importantly, I argue that a shepherd's life and labor depended fundamentally on sound. In tangible ways, pastoral aurality, or how herders and their animals heard, apprehended, and attuned to their aural environment, was critical to their wellbeing, if not very survival. Here I show that herders wielded both bells and kavals as tools of transspecies communication also extending to sweethearts, cosmic bodies, divinity, and the landscape across temporal and spatial sweeps, implicating these instruments in a larger pastoral cosmology made audible through their voices.

Donna A. Buchanan is professor emerita of Ethnomusicology, Anthropology, and Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. A specialist in musics of the Balkans, Russia, and Eurasia, she is the author of Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition (2006), and the editor of Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene (2007) and Soundscapes from the Americas (2014). Buchanan's scholarly interests include acoustemology, campanology, cosmology, postsocialism, and sound studies. Her current projects include a forthcoming ethnography, The Girl in the Bell: Cosmologies Ensounded in Bulgaria, and research on the music and dance of Bulgarian Armenians.

Rumble: Seismic Aurality in the Late Ottoman Empire

This talk explores auditory histories of earthquakes in the late Ottoman Empire and neighboring regions, focusing roughly on the period 1766 to 1894, years in which Istanbul and surrounding areas experienced major earthquakes. At risk of distorting or unduly aestheticizing such phenomena, I suggest that seismic auditory culture comprises at least three different sonic domains: first and perhaps most obviously are sounds that are heard in response to earthquakes, such as buildings falling or people's responses (including but not limited to forms of lament for those who have been lost); second, the audible sounds of some (but not all) earthquakes during the moment of seismic activity, which can produce soundwaves audible to humans; and finally, if less directly, seismic waves themselves, some of which share a number of key features with sound waves. These different sonic dimensions add up to what I call seismic aurality, in which tremorous sound is a significant, if tragically unpredictable, part of broader Ottoman life. I draw particularly on the work of geologist/historian, Nicholas Ambraseys (including his collaborative work with Caroline Finkel), whose work on "historical seismicity," especially in the eastern Mediterranean, offers both a corpus of historical data/documentation as well as a rough model for thinking about seismic activity historically. Alongside the work of Ambraseys and his collaborators, I also turn to a flurry of treatises and scientific writing, especially in the wake of the 1894 earthquake, by Ottoman science writers such as Halil Edhem (Eldem) and Ali Muzaffer Bey. I conclude with a brief reflection on the ways such seismic auditory culture continues to reverberate (literally and metaphorically) in the past century.

Peter McMurray is associate professor in music at the University of Cambridge and principal investigator of the European Research Council project, "Ottoman Auralities." His work focuses on intersections of sound and culture in the Ottoman Empire, Turkey and its diasporas. He is completing a monograph and audiovisual media project, Pathways to God: The Islamic Acoustics of Turkish Berlin. He has recently co-edited two volumes: Singers and Tales in the Twenty-First Century (with David F. Elmer), on oral poetry and histories of its study; and Acoustics of Empire: Sound, Media, and Power in the Long Nineteenth Century (with Priyasha Mukhopadhyay), on intersections of modern auditory cultures and global/imperial power.

Audible Critique: Sound and Animal Imagery in Refik Halid Karay's Political Satire

Refik Halid Karay emerges as a pivotal figure in early 20th-century Turkish literature and politics. His works, Ago Paşa'nın Hatıratı and Kirpinin Dedikleri, comprising essays and stories written at different times, serve as a testament to his critical perspective on the political milieu of his era, particularly targeting the policies of the Committee of Union and Progress prior to World War I. Karay's adept use of satire and humor in these texts not only underscores his resistance to the prevailing political environment but also elucidates the reasons behind his two exiles.

Karay's writings offer a unique lens through which the social and political dynamics of the late 19th and early 20th-century Ottoman Empire can be examined. His critical stance is intriguingly conveyed through the use of sound and animal imagery. Beyond his masterful employment of language, tone, and rhetorical devices, Karay's choice of a parrot and a mosquito as symbols to critique the political atmosphere of his time is particularly noteworthy.

This paper aims to explore how sound studies and animal studies can be utilized to analyze the later years of the Ottoman Empire, with a specific focus on Karay's aforementioned works, supplemented by references to his other writings. By examining the interplay between sound, animals, and political critique in Karay's literature, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the audible contexts of late Ottoman literature and its socio-political environment.

Demet Karabulut Dede is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at İstanbul Bilgi University. She has previously held postdoctoral fellowships at both Princeton University and the University of Exeter. She has authored numerous articles focusing on Virginia Woolf, the Bloomsbury Group, William Morris, Dorothy Richardson, and modernist literature. She is currently completing two book projects: one edited collection examining the reception of Virginia Woolf in Turkey, and the other exploring representations of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires within a diverse spectrum of modernist texts. She is the founder and facilitator of the Virginia Woolf Society of Turkey and coordinates Woolf Seminars series.

Hasan Baran Fırat

To Beat the Drum for the Rebels: Dellāls and the Struggle for Sonic Control in the Ottoman Public Sphere

Dellāls, or public criers, were pivotal figures in the Ottoman urban soundscape, functioning not merely as messengers but as embodied relays in the empire's broader communicative infrastructure. Originating from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, dellāls were entrusted with announcing social, political, and economic developments, often serving as semi-official intermediaries between state authority and the public. This study reinterprets their role through the intersecting lens of historical soundscapes, cultural history and media theory, positioning dellāls and their voice as material interfaces in a pre-bureaucratic communication system—where power was enacted through voice, presence, and performance. Their dual capacity to circulate official decrees and facilitate private communications made them vital agents of both governance and grassroots mobilization, with the potential to reinforce or subvert dominant narratives. As modernization and postal reforms took root in the 19th century, dellāls increasingly found themselves displaced by mechanized, textual systems, marking a broader shift from oral to print-mediated sovereignty. This research investigates the qualifications, networks, and socio-political navigations that enabled individuals to become dellāls, especially during periods of unrest. By framing dellāls as both infrastructural and cultural figures, the study illuminates their complex role in shaping the rhythms, tensions, and resonances of Ottoman public life.

H. Baran Fırat is a multidisciplinary researcher specializing in Architectural Acoustics, Sensory History, Urban Musicology, and Digital Humanities. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli with a dissertation on reconstructing the historical soundscape of 18th-century Naples, which received the Telestes Award from the Archaeological Institute of America. Currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at the University of Antwerp, he studies early modern urban soundscapes of Naples and Istanbul. He is also the art director of Ensemble Rûm and an editor at Anakronik, a Turkish music criticism e-magazine.

Uğur Peçe

Raise Your Voice, Pledge Your Money: Forming Sonic Bonds of Solidarity through Donation Drives for the Ottoman Navy

Relatively little auditory history has been done on revolutions in general and on the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution in particular. Historians have studied the 1908 revolution largely in terms of nationalism, citizenship, and political representation. My primary goal in this paper is to examine revolution not as an abstract phenomenon but as an auditory event through the experiences of individuals who were caught up in it. In the wake of the Constitutional Revolution, emergent and resurgent venues such as theater, concert hall, political clubs, and the parliament became places where the expanding urban middle classes raised their voices. Streets, on the other hand, turned into resounding sites of popular classes, especially in the context of mass demonstrations staged on various issues.

This paper specifically examines a sonic environment that emerged following the revolution. This new auditory landscape was characterized by grassroots activities, both in Istanbul and the provinces, staged to collect donations for the imperial navy. Ottomans from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds assembled in coffeehouses, theaters, clubs, and streets, holding planned or impromptu auctions to raise money for the navy fund. These widespread gatherings entailed significant sonic components such as bidding contests, speeches, shouts, applause, and festive music. Focusing on such sonic features of popular donation campaigns, this paper demonstrates how sound became an index of a novel kind of civic engagement in the postrevolutionary Ottoman Empire.

Uğur Peçe is an Associate Professor of History at Lehigh University. He received his PhD in History from Stanford University in 2016 and then taught for two years at Bard College and Harvard University. His articles have appeared in Middle Eastern Studies, International Journal of Middle East Studies, and New Perspectives on Turkey. His book, Island and Empire: How Civil War in Crete Mobilized the Ottoman World, came out from Stanford University Press in 2024. His new research project explores soundscapes of the post-revolutionary Ottoman Empire from 1908 to 1918.

Sounding and Unsounding Late Ottoman Multilingual Alphabetic Sephardi Vocalities

The visual inscription—or graphosphere (Franklin, 2019)—of Sephardic languages influenced their sonic and intellectual reception during the end of the Empire. Ottoman Judeo-Spanish employed diverse print technologies, including block, Rashi, Cyrillic, and Roman alphabets. Manuscript writing also had varied scripts, using block, solitreo and cursive. A notable example of these visual/sonic layers is Yaakov Huli's work Meam Loez (1730, Constantinople), which was read for generations in Ladino typeset using Hebrew Rashi script. This raises various questions: Does the visual form alter how the sounds are perceived? Does the visual-sonic processing of Judeo-Spanish shift based on the graphospheric imprint left on the reader's eye?

Building on the concept of sound as a technology for continuity—or "sontinuity" (Elbaz, 2024)—this paper interrogates whether the visual and sonic features of language constitute the foundation of that continuity, beyond the underlying ideas, texts, or thoughts. It asks whether a specifically Sephardi epistemology emerges from the interplay between visual and auditory modes of knowledge transmission. Using examples from late 19th and early 20th century Istanbul and Jerusalem and engaging with Gilroy's theorisation of "same difference," a sounded Sephardi graphosphere begins to appear. Such an inquiry may shed light on the relationship between visual working memory and attention (Werner, Einhäuser and Hortsmann, 2013) offering key insights into multilingual sonic negotiations of the Sephardi ontological self.

Vanessa Paloma Elbaz is Senior Research Associate at Peterhouse and Research Associate at the Faculty of Music at the University of Cambridge. A former Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellow and Senior Fulbright Research Fellow, she chairs the Mediterranean Music Study Group of the ICTMD. Her academic publications focus on issues of voice, diplomacy and gender stemming from the expulsion of the Sephardim after 1492. Dr. Elbaz' particular focus on Sephardi voice interacts with its Mediterranean, African and American diasporas. Her PhD is from the Center for Mediterranean and Middle East Studies of the Sorbonne, and her MM from Indiana University, Bloomington.

Lawful Sounds: Exploring the Legal Dimensions of Sound in Ottoman Fatwas

Fatwa collections—formal yet nonbinding legal opinions issued in response to inquiries on contested matters—constitute a major genre of Islamic legal literature. While not typically associated with the study of sound, these texts offer rich insights into how various sonic phenomena were perceived, discussed, and regulated.

This paper explores how Ottoman fatwa collections can serve as critical sources for examining the legal dimensions of sound. The questions raised in these texts address a wide range of concerns, including the regulation and ethics of Qur'anic recitation, the participation of hearing- and speech-impaired individuals in prayer and legal testimony, complaints about the volume of the call to prayer or church bells, cases involving death caused by sound, and even the legal significance of animal sounds in certain contexts. These rulings demonstrate that sound was not merely a sensory experience, but a vital element of religious practice, social order, and legal reasoning. They reveal how auditory experiences were shaped through legal discourse, influencing ideas about ritual purity, accessibility, and the transmission of knowledge, while also expressing broader concerns about sound's role in delineating communal boundaries and managing public and private space.

By situating these fatwas within the wider context of Ottoman auditory culture, this paper highlights the potential of legal texts to contribute to cultural history and sound studies. More broadly, it challenges the assumption that legal texts are static or narrowly prescriptive, demonstrating their value as dynamic sources for reconstructing historical soundscapes and understanding lived auditory experiences.

Hande Betül Ünal is a PhD student in Music at the University of Cambridge. Her doctoral research focuses on the auditory cultures and sonic experiences of Ottoman writers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, examining the types of sounds prevalent in the Ottoman Empire and how they were perceived, documented, and interpreted across a range of texts. Prior to her PhD, she earned a BA in History from Şehir University and an MA from Sabancı University, where her thesis explored the musical culture in and around the Ottoman court during the reign of Mahmud I (r. 1730–1754).

Sonic Transgression: The Urban Soundscape of Entertainment in Late Ottoman Istanbul

This paper enquires into the world of entertainment in Istanbul in the late Ottoman Empire (1850s–1910s) and examines transgressions with aural aspects that had to do with any type of sound. Such transgressions included music, stage performances (e.g. canto) and song lyrics, cheers, drunken brawls, fights involving fists, knives, stones and gunfire, smashing/jingling tableware, screams and shouts as well as abusive language and unintelligible noise. Entertainment practices under study are linked to prostitution, alcohol consumption, outdoor festivities, live performance venues with music and plays. In the light of primary and secondary sources such as scholarly publications, Ottoman state documents, print media, city guides, and ego documents including travelogues, recollections, diaries and letters, I propose to find out what constituted sonic transgression from the viewpoints of the conceptual parties – that of the state, institutions, and society in large including short-term residents. In addition, I aim to understand how they interpreted transgression based on identity, status and power.

Sada Payır holds a DPhil in History from the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford and is currently the Hannah Seeger Davis Postdoctoral Fellow at the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies, Princeton University. Sada's research, which delves into the understudied social, cultural, and religious practices of the Greek Orthodox Christians in the late Ottoman Empire, aims to provide a much-needed multi-faceted history of this population. It does so by questioning the borders of identity and belonging within the framework of entertainment during an era in which the Ottoman Empire was going through administrative transformations.

Hubbub, Howls, and Silence(s): 'Ideas of Noise' in Western Accounts of Late Ottoman Istanbul

Engaging with Michel Serres' work Parasite (1980), my paper investigates the changing nature and role of noise within Western accounts of late Ottoman Istanbul. With reference to Douglas Kahn's 'ideas of noise,' I focus on the city's multilingual streets, canine calls, and silence(s) to examine underexplored auditory sensibilities and to highlight the dynamic understanding of noise. In doing so, I attempt to move beyond rigid frameworks that classified these narratives as extensions of asymmetrical power relations between Western observers and Ottoman subjects, more toward a fluid, contingent model of sound perception—one that accommodates and reflects temporary contradictions, shifts, misunderstandings, and unexpected reactions. Ultimately, I argue that noise, as an unstable and constantly changing *parasite*, interfered with expectations, fostered negotiations, generated reinterpretations, and led to transformations within the city's cross-cultural settings.

Onur Engin is a Research Associate on the ERC/UKRI project Ottoman Auralities at the University of Cambridge and a member of Cambridge Digital Humanities. He earned his PhD in Art History from Koç University in Istanbul. His book project, Echoes over the Bosphorus: An Auditory History of Late Ottoman Istanbul (1826–1923), focuses on three sound-producing devices—church bells, cannons, and talking machines—to examine the city's modernization and Ottoman policies from the perspectives of sound, hearing, and listening. He also employs computational methodologies to investigate Ottoman discographies and concepts of noise in the Ottoman Empire.

Living Language on the Caucasian Borderlands: Nikolai Marr and the Sound of Archaeology

Nikolai Marr (1865–1934), best known today as the eccentric linguist whose ideas dominated early Soviet academic life, gained much of his early fame through archaeological excavations of the medieval city of Ani, beginning in 1892. Situated on territory annexed by Russia from the Ottoman Empire in the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano, the ruins of Ani inspired Armenian national pride and, for Marr, conjured up the image of a harmonious crossroads between the great cultures of Greece and Persia (McReynolds 2016). In Marr's own telling (2022 [1924]), the archaeological site itself prompted a major turning point in his career: having noticed certain recurring patterns of modification in the excavated buildings, he began thinking about how language itself is "synthetic" and "socially constructed." This revelation, in turn, prompted a shift away from philology, from the classical languages of Georgian and Armenian, to focus instead on dialects and "living unwritten languages." In this paper I consider Marr's rejection of Indo-European linguistics, with its genealogical paradigm of language "families," as a turn to an archaeology, according to which languages retain deposits and vestiges of many stages of development at once. Drawing out questions of sound and material inscription—from cuneiform tablets to Georgian church chants to the phonogram field recordings his students would later make—I show how Marr's investment in a multiethnic, anti-nationalist future for the Caucasus and Eastern Mediterranean informed the way he listened to its past.

Brian Fairley is a postdoctoral fellow in Music and History in the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His research explores the traditional music of Georgia in the Caucasus, the history of multichannel recording technology, and theories of race and evolution in comparative musicology. He received his PhD from New York University, where his dissertation research was funded by the Wenner Gren Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. His articles and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in Ethnomusicology, the Journal of Sonic Studies, and the Journal of the Royal Musical Association.

Acoustic Ahl al-Baytism: Rethinking Sectarian Boundaries through Sonic Devotional Practices in the Late Ottoman Empire

How do the soundscapes of the late Ottoman Empire challenge essentialist notions of strict Sunni-Shi'i sectarian boundaries?

Devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt—the immediate family of the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants—is typically associated with Shi'i Islam, where the Prophet's successors are believed to come from his lineage. It is often depicted as a defining feature of Shi'ism. While the Ottomans are generally characterised as staunch Sunnis, recent scholarship, including Vefa Erginbaş's concept of "Ahl al-Baytism," highlights the widespread presence of devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt among intellectuals and Sufi orders across the Ottoman Empire.

This paper contributes to this research by examining sonic expressions of Ahl al-Bayt devotion in the late Ottoman period. Focusing on the soundscapes of Muharram—the Islamic month marking the martyrdom of al-Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, at Karbala—it analyses genres such as poetic lamentations (mersiye) recited in Sufi lodges and public mourning rituals in Istanbul. These include the practices of goygoycular, who traversed the streets reciting rhymes in honour of al-Husayn and the Prophet's family while collecting alms.

By exploring these auditory practices, this paper argues that Ottoman Sunnism was not a monolithic entity but was shaped by diverse and at times contradictory trends. This study demonstrates how attending to sonic histories provides a richer understanding of sectarian fluidity in Islam and devotional culture in the late Ottoman Empire.

Stefan Williamson Fa is an anthropologist whose work explores the intersection of Islam and the senses—particularly sound/music and taste/food—across Turkey, the Caucasus, Iran, and Europe. He completed his PhD in Social Anthropology at University College London in 2019 and is currently a Research Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. His first major ethnographic project examined the role of sound in Twelver Shi'i Muslim devotional life in Turkey. His forthcoming monograph, Sonic Relations: Devotion and Community in Turkey's Eastern Borderlands, will be published by Indiana University Press in Spring 2026.

Conference

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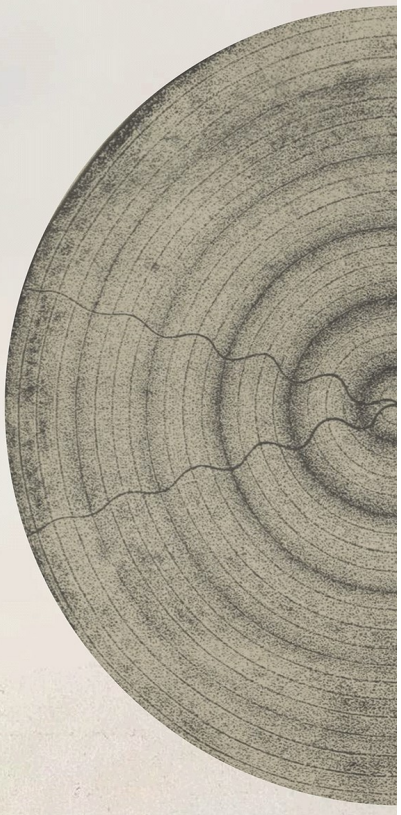
Auditory Cultures of the Late Ottoman Empire



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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
MARC BLOCH
Centre Zentrum Marc Bloch
UKRI
erc

University of Cambridge
Faculty of Music
11 West Road
Cambridge CB3 9DP

Ottoman Auralities Team:
Peter McMurray
Nazan Maksudyan
Vanessa Paloma Elbaz
Onur Engin
Jacob Olley
Hande Betül Ünal

Project Administrator:
Marta Tenconi

Advisory Board:
Ahmet Ersoy
Ziad Fahmy
Kate Fleet
Nina (Ergin) Macaraig
Martin Stokes
Deniz Türker

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