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Morale as Sonic Force: *Listen to Britain* and Total War

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This is all very snappy—I am afraid: systematized picture of existence pretty difficult. But out of the snaps there seems to be developing a great sweep of human energy and determination like the sound of a plane linking little farmsteads miles apart in a momentary gust.

—Humphrey Jennings to Cicely Jennings, December 3, 1941¹

What constitute the sounds of war? As both Jim Sykes and Gavin Williams have pointed out recently, scholars have tended to imagine them as the sounds of violence, and wartime listening as an “act of survival,” often privileging the battlefield over everyday wartime life, and the experience of men over those of women and children.² This is due partly, Sykes suggests, to “the primacy of non-representational experiences” in some influential studies of wartime sounds; making claims about the nature of sound and its kinship with violence, this scholarship tends to favor the overwhelming sounds of destruction, and to universalize these as the sounds of war.³ But such tendencies are also more deeply rooted in our location of war

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¹ In Kevin Jackson, ed., *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 37.

² Jim Sykes, “Ontologies of Acoustic Endurance: Rethinking Wartime Sound and Listening,” *Sound Studies* 4 (2018): 37. Gavin Williams, ed., *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound the Unmaking of Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xxxi.

³ Sykes, “Ontologies of Acoustic Endurance,” 37. Examples of scholarship highlighted by Sykes include Martin Daughtry, “Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence,” *Social Text* 119 32 (2014): 25-51; Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steve Goodman, *Sonic*

itself in discrete conflict zones, or in palpable violence rather than the actions and structures supporting such violence.⁴ Those limits are challenged in multiple ways by the Second World War as an instance of “total war,” and by the experiences of the British “home front” in particular.⁵ But even in this context, tellingly, contemporary representations of the sounds of war tended to focus on violence. For instance, one of the most important propaganda films about the home front, *London Can Take It!* (1940), represented Londoners’ experience of the Blitz through images of their daily life, but the only sounds included were those of air-raids themselves—sirens, explosions, the hiss of falling bombs, anti-aircraft gunners. This was the “symphony of war,” the narrator observed. However, an intriguingly expansive treatment of the sounds of war can be found in the 1942 documentary film *Listen to Britain*, described at the time as a “Sound Report of a people at war.”⁶ Bringing together a sonic imagination deeply shaped by radio and an expanded understanding of morale in total war, it offers insight into a way of thinking about wartime sound that turns away from violence even as it anticipates current concerns with sonic force and materiality.

Produced by the Ministry of Information and made by the director Humphrey Jennings and editor Stewart McAllister, *Listen to Britain* is a collage of the sounds and images of wartime, tracing the life of the nation from one afternoon to the next. Natural

Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012). On related debates about “ontologies” of sound, prompted in part by Goodman’s work, see Brian Kane, “Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn,” *Sound Studies* 1 (2015): 2-21.

⁴ On a more expansive sense of “wartime” sound, see especially Williams, *Hearing the Crimean War*, xxx-xxxii. Sykes makes a related point about the limited definitions of wartime violence in “Ontologies of Acoustic Endurance,” 36.

⁵ Patrick Deer has used the term “war culture” to refer to the expanded space of this war (especially its mobilization of literature and the arts), and to how artists and writers struggled to both represent it and manage their own participation. Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4-8.

⁶ Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, British Film Institute Reubens Library, Special Collections (BFI). This document appears to be a draft of the core information for the film’s publicity. The published advertising uses the blurb “The music of a people at war” instead (BFI Pressbook Collection: *Listen to Britain*).

sounds mix with urban and industrial noise, planes, trains, radio, overheard speech, and all kinds of music: tunes from a dance hall give way to the clanging of a coal mine, a children's musical game merges with the roar of tanks rolling through a village, Canadian soldiers sing "Home on the Range" over the sounds of a night-time transport train, women at a noisy armaments factory sing along to a dance tune on the radio. Made in 1941 just as women were being required to register for war service—culminating in their conscription in December of that year—the film actively works to include them in its account of Britain at war, in ways that perhaps shape its turn to everyday sound.⁷ Ultimately, though, the film presents the sounds of war as a sort of scrambling of the everyday—as surreal sonic juxtapositions—and as particular modes of circulation and connection. Indeed, it imagines the sounds of "total war" as a sonic force of unification, in what Steve Goodman might call an act of "affective mobilization."⁸ And yet, if Goodman, drawing on the most severely materialist strands of affect theory, sees such forces as "ontologically prior" and opposed to "the preoccupations of cultural theories of representation" (10), *Listen to Britain* is suggestive in its attempt to bring the forces of affect into the field of representation through sound, and to break down oppositions between music (as text and signification) and sonic materiality.⁹ It models how all experience of music might be grounded in a transformed sense of the power of sound

⁷ Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109. Starting in April 1941, women had to be registered for war-related employment, although employment itself was still voluntary. In December 1941, conscription took effect for single women aged 20-30.

⁸ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 3 (and elsewhere). The film might be seen to draw on what Goodman calls the "attractive" (vs the "repulsive") "power of sonic force." He writes, "On the other side, we have a tactical deployment whose objective is that of intensification, the heightening of collective sensation, an attractive, almost magnetic, or vertical force, a force that sucks bodies in toward its source... In this instance, the aim of mobilizing bodies extensively is accompanied and perhaps overridden by the primary objective of the intensive mobilization of affect" (11).

⁹ For a summary of some related debates within musicology and sound studies (including those surrounding the gnostic/drastic divide proposed in Carolyn Abbate, "Music — Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 [2004]: 505-536) in relation to wartime sound, see especially Daughtry, "Thanatosonics," 30-32.

itself, while suggesting how this move might be particularly suited to the purposes of total war.

It is perhaps no accident, then, that *Listen to Britain* has already drawn the attention of theorists more interested in affect as a culturally and socially mediated force. For one such critic, Ben Highmore, the film is about “the sensorial recalibration of the environment during wartime,” at a moment when populations had to learn “feelings and responses that would somehow be adequate to the new circumstances” of aerial bombardment.¹⁰ Specifically, he suggests, it is not so much about sounds as about listening, and about learning new forms of attention, while avoiding or managing introspection.¹¹ In this sense, it does a particular kind of “morale work.” *Listen to Britain*, though, also offers a more radical perspective on the nature of morale and its relationship with sound. It figures the affective force of morale *as* sound. Morale, the cultural geographer Ben Anderson suggests, exemplifies the peculiar relationship between affect and power. Affect is closely associated with an idea of excess—as a force that cannot be contained in individuals or objects, but rather exists in movement, and as something that cannot be assimilated to “systems of signification or narrativization.”¹² On one hand, affect offers a promise of liberation through this quality of excess, this unlocatability. On the other hand, affect is harnessed by forms of power that exploit precisely this quality of excess, in their own aspirations to boundlessness and complete saturation of life (169). The quality of excess shared by affect and power can be especially clearly seen, he argues, in attempts to foster morale in the Second World War, where “an excessive state apparatus...functioned by tracking and synchronizing the excesses of affect” (163). The

¹⁰ Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), 71, 63.

¹¹ Highmore, *Cultural Feelings*, 67.

¹² Ben Anderson, “Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of ‘Total War,’” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), 161-186, here 162. Also see the more recent version of this chapter in Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

spaces of “total war” are spaces of “swirling, resonating affects” (170), but morale is peculiar in the way that it endows the diffuseness of affect with political force. *Listen to Britain* suggests how one set of artists turned to sound in order to imagine and represent this diffuse force of morale in the Second World War, while in the process using this new understanding of morale to think afresh through music’s relationship to feeling and the political.

Binding together the diverse sounds of everyday wartime life, the film works to create an almost seamless sonic web, much like the imaginary web often associated with radio sound itself. It represents and ideally produces particular kinds of collectives, connected by a sonic force both loose and inescapable. But music—especially art music—also poses a challenge to both morale and collectivity in the film by encouraging interiority and reflection. This can be seen in the long climactic sequence of *Listen to Britain*, featuring a performance by Myra Hess at one of her iconic National Gallery concerts. Here, the film makes space for and absorbs such potentially isolating forces, by grounding them in the power of sound itself as a figure of morale. In other words, the film demonstrates how re-imagining music as sonic materiality allows it to be mobilized for the purposes of war, while expanding the affective and social space of war itself.

Feeling Connected

Listen to Britain is a paradox: a film about war that depicts a series of “peaceful moments,” as Jacques Rancière observed, and a propaganda film that refuses any clear messages.¹³ Its foregrounding of music and noise is crucial to these effects of indirectness and ambiguity, and to a powerful sense of emotional resonance. In all these ways, *Listen to Britain* fell somewhat outside the norm, both for the Ministry of Information (MoI) and for the Crown Film Unit (CFU), which was responsible for its more ambitious documentaries. In general,

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 17.

the MoI favored a straightforward and informational approach in its documentary films.¹⁴ But Jennings—a poet, sociologist, surrealist painter, theater designer, and film-maker—was a bit of an outlier: “the unrepentant impressionist of the Crown Film Unit” as one contemporary put it.¹⁵ *Listen to Britain* was typical of his films in its focus on civilians and the “home front” and its attention to culture as an object of defense, but its complete avoidance of voice-over and narrative rendered it especially ambiguous, leading the MoI to add a spoken foreword.¹⁶ A number of critics at the time—especially those most closely engaged with documentary—saw *Listen to Britain* as self-indulgent in its experimentalism, and ineffective as propaganda. The documentary film-maker Edgar Anstey described it as “the rarest piece of fiddling since the days of Nero,” complaining, “it will not encourage anyone to do anything at all.”¹⁷ A 1947 survey of wartime documentaries was almost as dismissive of such “experiments,” favoring more direct films about military efforts.¹⁸ An American trade journal had a similar verdict: “As an essay in modern documentary screencraft it will please the 1942 equivalent of the avant garde. It is clear that the CFU boys thoroughly enjoyed making it; the experimental manipulation of sound-track and picture, the cutting, and the atmosphere of nostalgia are characteristic.” But “as propaganda,” it concluded, it was “obscure and scanty.”¹⁹

¹⁴ On the MoI’s preference for either straightforward exhortation or, increasingly after 1942, factual information, see James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 107-108. The Crown Film Unit was formerly the General Post Office film unit, which came under the auspices of the MoI at the start of the war. The MoI used both it and commercial studios to produce its documentaries, as well as sponsoring feature films made by commercial studios.

¹⁵ Forsyth Hardy, “The British Documentary Film,” in *Twenty Years of British Film 1925-1945* (London: Falcon Press, 1947), 59.

¹⁶ Dai Vaughan, *Portrait of an Invisible Man: The Working Life of Stewart McAllister, Film Editor* (London: BFI Publishing, 1983), 100.

¹⁷ Edgar Anstey, “The Cinema,” *The Spectator*, March 13, 1942, BFI Pressbook Collection: *Listen to Britain*.

¹⁸ Hardy, “The British Documentary Film,” 59.

¹⁹ A.F., *Motion Picture Herald*, March 14, 1942, 554 (Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 20, BFI).

By many accounts, however, audiences were more receptive. Like other MoI shorts, *Listen to Britain* was widely distributed in British cinemas, all of which were required to play MoI films in each program.²⁰ There are listings from around the country of *Listen to Britain* being shown before films like Marlene Dietrich's *Manpower* or the cowboy musical *Down Mexico Way*; in such listings it was often assigned its own time and given a descriptive tag like "the spirit of wartime Britain."²¹ The MoI also had a system of "non-theatrical distribution," presenting programs of shorts in villages and factories (using its own mobile film units) and in cinemas outside of normal showtimes;²² loaning films to schools, women's organizations, youth clubs, and military units (both at home and overseas); and sending them for distribution in neutral and allied countries.²³ (*Listen to Britain* was distributed in the US by the American Office of War Information, having been refused by all American theatrical distributors.²⁴) In the latter "non-theatrical" contexts especially, *Listen to Britain* seemed to

²⁰ Chapman, *The British at War*, 93-94. The MoI started off producing 5-minute shorts, with theatres agreeing to set aside 5-minute slots before features, later moving to 15-minute films that would change monthly (93-108). *Listen to Britain* began as a film in this 5-minute series, "National Gallery 1941," discussed below ("National Gallery 1941" [28 April 1941], Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.) The shift to 15-minute films might help explain its expansion into a longer film, although the new policy didn't technically take effect until after it was made.

²¹ Examples include "Tatler," *Manchester Evening News*, July 7, 1942, 2; *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, July 17, 1942, 2; *Stirling Observer*, August 25, 1942, 6. *Listen to Britain* was distributed commercially by British Lion, which created its own set of publicity materials for the film, featuring the tag "The music of a people at war... the sound of life in Britain, by night and by day," and casting it as "a worthy box-office successor to 'Target For To-night' and 'Ferry Pilot,'" both more informational documentaries about military efforts (BFI Pressbook Collection: *Listen to Britain*).

²² For instance, *Listen to Britain* was shown within a free weekly series of films presented by the MoI in Bristol in summer 1942, in connection with an effort to encourage people to stay home for their holidays ("'Stay-at-Home' Film Shows," *Western Daily Press*, July 25, 1942, 4).

²³ Helen Forman, "The Non-Theatrical Distribution of Films by the Ministry of Information," *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), 223-230; Everett Lawson, "'Half-Crown' Film Unit," *Edinburgh Evening News*, March 19, 1942, 2.

²⁴ "Britain's Film Role in America," *Documentary Newsletter* 4 (February 1943): 173. The MoI categorized films as "O" ("sent overseas"), "O.O" ("primarily for overseas use"), or

resonate with audiences, as indeed did most of Jennings' films. In surveys, Tom Harrison recalled, Jennings "was one of those whose films were most effective public wise,"²⁵ while the head of the CFU, Ian Dalrymple, recalled that "the films with most impact" consistently came from Jennings.²⁶ Roger Manvell, who travelled with the MoI's mobile film unit, reports of Jennings' films: "I can testify personally that they were the ones of all we constantly showed that most immediately stirred emotions not only in the West Country but in the far tougher Northeast of Britain."²⁷ *Listen to Britain* was particularly effective in provoking such an emotional response. Helen Forman, who also worked with the MoI, recalled:

All sorts of audiences felt it to be a distillation and also a magnification of their own experience of the home front. This was especially true of factory audiences. I remember one show in a factory in the Midlands where about 800 workers clapped and stamped approval. Films got very short shrift if they touched any area of people's experience and did not ring true.²⁸

Dalrymple suggested that it was also very successful with military units based overseas, for whom it had a slightly different kind of emotional appeal: "*Listen to Britain* was particularly popular with those serving in Egypt and North Africa, with its nostalgic scenes... and the visual proof that the spirit at home remained high and resolute."²⁹ It is this emotional resonance that especially distinguishes *Listen to Britain* from other documentary propaganda.

"O.O.O." ("exclusively for overseas use"); *Listen to Britain* was categorized as "O" (*Documentary Newsletter* 3 [May 1942]: 74).

²⁵ Tom Harrison, "Films and the Home Front: The Evaluation of their Effectiveness by Mass-Observation," in *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), 235. Harrison is referring to surveys by Mass Observation, an organization he co-founded with Jennings.

²⁶ Ian Dalrymple, "The Crown Film Unit, 1940-43," in *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), 217.

²⁷ Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: Dent, 1974), 159.

²⁸ Forman, "The Non-Theatrical Distribution of Films," 230.

²⁹ Dalrymple, "The Crown Film Unit, 1940-43," 218.

Feeling—and the role of music in capturing feeling—was at the forefront of the original concept of *Listen to Britain*. An early treatment for the film, then entitled *The Music of War*, sums up its themes:

More than ever when men are flying through the night and women are away from their homes and their children, their hearts have need of music. All kinds of music—classical music, popular music, home-made music, the nostalgic music of a particular region and just plain martial music to march and work to. For music in Britain to-day is far from being just another escape: it probes into the emotions of the war itself—love of country, love of liberty, love of living, and the exhilaration of fighting for them.³⁰

Music has a variety of morale-building and functional roles here, but most of all, it has to do with emotions. Indeed, it “probes into” emotion—not just ‘expressing’ it—as if music were a kind of analytical tool. This idea is given added resonance by the fact that Jennings was a founding member of Mass Observation, an organization that attempted to track public feeling through surveys, reports, and diaries. The film is another kind of report, a “sound report,” on the *feeling* of war. Moreover, the “emotions of the war itself” inevitably turn out to be much harder to pin down in *Listen to Britain* than is suggested by this rather pat list—“love of country, love of liberty, love of living, and the exhilaration of fighting for them.” In their kinetic quality, their unrootedness in individual subjects, they might more properly be seen as affects or feelings, rather than emotions.³¹ The film calls on music, then, to tap into—to

³⁰ “The Music of War: Treatment” (23 May 1941), Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.

³¹ This is to draw on an established understanding of emotion vs. affect, seen, for instance, in Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xiv. However, the opposition between affect and emotion has also been extensively problematized. Rei Terada describes how “emotion *appears* inseparable from expression and subjectivity” (emphasis added), while seeking ultimately to debunk that link, arguing that emotion too could be seen as subjectless (*Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the ‘Death of the Subject’* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001], 6). On the “affect/emotion split” and its limits, see also Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge:

access, and perhaps manipulate—the affective environment of total war, in ways that both explain some of the audience responses reported above and recall Anderson’s idea of morale “tracking and synchronizing the excesses of affect” and endowing them with political force.³²

When the film became a more expansive portrait of wartime sound, extending to the noise of transport and industry, some of the affective power attributed to music above seems to have imbued noise itself. The opposition between noise and music is the object of constant play in *Listen to Britain*, as indicated from the start by the opening title’s image of an intersecting cannon and violin; William Guynn goes so far as to suggest that the breakdown of such oppositions is “the film’s symbolic project.”³³ It certainly uses all the editorial powers at its disposal to render noise as continuous with music rather than straightforwardly disruptive, in ways that depart substantially from more conventional discourses on wartime noise, even while perhaps responding to their identification of noise as a pressing problem, especially for morale. James Mansell, treating the film as more reflective of such discourses, has argued that amidst broad concerns about the noise of bombing—and the anxiety of listening for bombs—*Listen to Britain* presents citizens “stoically acclimatizing” to noise while using the sounds of music and nature “as sources of inspiration, restoration, and unification.”³⁴ This reading, however, assumes a “separation” between music and noise—and a selective mode of listening—that the film more often undermines.³⁵ Alternatively, then, we

Harvard University Press, 2005), 25-27. A number of critics, like Ngai, use “feeling” as a more expansive term than either emotion or affect. Ben Highmore, discussed earlier, similarly finds “mood” and “feeling” more effective terms for describing the collective and non-subjective experience of emotion (*Cultural Feelings*, 14, 45-47).

³² Anderson, “Modulating the Excess of Affect,” 163.

³³ William Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 87. Also see his discussion of the opening title on p.78.

³⁴ James Mansell, *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 178, 180.

³⁵ Mansell states, “In keeping with his earlier film on everyday working life, *Spare Time* (1939), Jennings carefully separated noise and music on the sound track of *Listen to Britain*” (Mansell, *The Age of Noise in Britain*, 179). While this is true of *Spare Time*, a film that includes very little industrial noise—its disruptive appearance at the very end of the film

might look to Jennings' own experience of wartime sound, which comes up frequently in his letters; these suggest a sense of the surrealness of wartime soundscapes, as the sounds of violence mixed with those of both music and everyday life.³⁶ He wrote in one 1941 letter:

Queer life. We were recording Handel's Water-music (of all things) the other night at the Queen's Hall with the LPO—and the sound comes out from the loudspeaker in the sound-truck in the street. Near the end of the session there were "chandelier" flares overhead—lighting up the sky—the music echoing down the street: the planes booming and the particular air-raid sound: people kicking broken glass on the pavement.³⁷

If the letter reports a bizarre juxtaposition of the celebratory strains of Handel's *Water Music* and newly recognizable air-raid sounds, the film similarly explores how noise, music, and everyday sounds mix and meld, transforming each other.

In this sense, the film's use of sound builds on the visual effects of collage and montage, its surprising sonic juxtapositions creating a free-flowing set of associations. Keith Beattie writes that "sound in *Listen to Britain* is multiple and multivalent, 'bespeaking' a variety of experiences not constrained by the dominant and domineering function of narration."³⁸ Andrew Higson describes Jennings' treatment of sound as augmenting the visual technique of montage—which he sees as more fundamental to the film's effects—to produce a compelling image of national bonds. Higson writes that disconnected sounds and images

marks the end of the leisure the film documents—*Listen to Britain* is very different, most obviously in its abundant inclusion of industrial and transport noise, but also in how that noise is treated.

³⁶ On this point, also see Jefferson Hunter, *English Filming, English Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 74, 77-78.

³⁷ Humphrey Jennings to Cicely Jennings, Easter Monday 1941, in Jackson, ed., *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 15. Jennings was recording the music for his film *Words for Battle*. The Queen's Hall itself was destroyed in an air raid shortly afterwards, in May 1941. See Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *London's Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War* (London: Constable, 1994), 96-97.

³⁸ Keith Beattie, *Humphrey Jennings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 71.

“are woven into a complex series of counterpoints and oppositions,” producing “a powerful series of associations which override any sense of conflict.” “The image of the nation” that emerges, he argues, is one of “variety and diversity,” while the staging of music-making and particularly singing, in his words, “performs an integrating function.”³⁹ The sound collage is thus like montage in its “ability to deal with the multiple, to establish connections and relations, and make visible systems of interdependence across a broad social fabric.”⁴⁰

But sound also does more than reinforce the effects of montage, and music is more than an integrating social activity in *Listen to Britain* (although it is certainly that). Even within scenes, sounds work more fundamentally to link bodies, spaces, and times, to render immaterial the boundaries between them. Between scenes, sounds are edited to overlap and mix with each other, in ways that seem different from the relatively clear cuts between images. Both Guynn and Dai Vaughan have described some of these editing techniques in detail, Vaughan highlighting the slight dislocation of sound from image that results:

The sound of the drop-hammer in the steelworks continues the outgoing beat of the Marine band’s drum rather than coinciding with the action. When the train stops at a signal, and we hear the Canadians singing, the transition to inside is effected not with a cut but with a mix, the back-laid sound thus being designated—short as it is—as sound-over rather than sound actually heard from the outside of the train.⁴¹

Consistently in the film, sounds tend to overflow images, often being heard before or lingering after the scenes to which they belong; through the use of mixes and dissolves,

³⁹ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 202. Kent Puckett makes a similar point about montage in Jennings’ films as a way to preserve a sense of “democratic particularity,” in a context where “the British were forced to find ways to preserve ideologically the little or the particular or the eccentric as a civilizational value while also accepting the large, totalizing terms of total mobilization” (Kent Puckett, *War Pictures: Cinema, Violence, and Style in Britain, 1939-1945* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017], 13).

⁴⁰ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, 195.

⁴¹ Vaughan, *An Invisible Man*, 91.

acoustic matching (where juxtaposed sounds rhyme or echo each other), asynchronous sound, confusions of sound sources, and effects of disacousmatization, sound is presented as simultaneously all-pervasive and grounded in particular places, bodies, and things.⁴² In other words, while the film almost always reveals a source for a sound (with the exception of radio sound, whose source is implied without necessarily ever being seen), this revelation tends not to fully resolve the mystery of its acousmatic status, suggesting an ultimately invisible force animating all sounds.⁴³ This idea is confirmed at the end of the film, the only moment when a source is never suggested, as an unseen choir sings “Rule Britannia,” as if emerging spontaneously from the landscape itself. The overall effect is not only a powerful sense of sonic connection, but a kind of excess, a sonic plenitude.⁴⁴

The film’s representation of the diffuse and connecting force of sound seems strongly shaped by the consolidating practices of radio listening in the 1930s and 40s, and by radio’s new pervasiveness in wartime. As Patrick Deer has observed of 1940s Britain, radio “shaped the sensory landscape of wartime like no other medium,” providing a crucial sense of aural continuity amidst disruption.”⁴⁵ Radio’s centrality to national life is more obviously thematized in Jennings’ later film, *A Diary for Timothy* (1946), which includes scenes of disparate households listening to the same broadcast, the radio transforming isolated individuals and families into a community. No such conventional scenes of radio listening

⁴² On some of these acoustic effects, see Guynn’s extensive analysis in *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 69-148, especially his discussion of “acoustic matches,” which includes both the type of reflection effects mentioned here and two other effects: misapprehension-correction and acoustic dissolves (120, 147).

⁴³ In this sense, the film reflects Mladen Dolar’s proposition that “there is no such thing as disacousmatization,” not only in the case of the voice; it suggests an ultimate animating source of all sound that cannot be seen. See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 70.

⁴⁴ On sonic plenitude and disjunction in the film, also see Beattie, *Humphrey Jennings*, 74, and Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 93, 103.

⁴⁵ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 132, 134. In this last observation, Deer is drawing on Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 37-48.

occur in *Listen to Britain*, but radio ends up pervading the film, through the sounds of the Greenwich time signal, sober news-reading, the nightly activity of the BBC Overseas service, or even specific programs.⁴⁶ As Vaughan observes, it is partly the representation of radio sound that allows the film to loosen sound from source and image as much as it does.⁴⁷ One slightly baffled critic went so far as to propose that radio was the primary focus of the film: “What the picture presumably seeks to depict is the work of the BBC in disseminating news at home and propaganda abroad, in entertaining the men in uniform and the women at the machine bench.”⁴⁸

But more fundamentally, radio shapes the very conceptualization of sound and listening. It does so partly by reimagining sound through the auditory perspective of the early radio listener. In the 1920s, Susan Douglas suggests, a dominant mode was “exploratory listening, in which people—mostly men—put on headphones to see how far they could listen and what they could pick up.”⁴⁹ In the same way, the film seems to tune into different locations, moving restlessly from one to another, seeing what it can overhear as it listens to the nation. More importantly, perhaps, radio also seems to inform the idea of sound as an invisible web of connection. In a book translated into English in 1936, Rudolf Arnheim declared, “This is the great miracle of wireless. The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation....”⁵⁰ This is very much the “miracle” of sound that *Listen to Britain* attempted to capture. Jeffrey Sconce has similarly discussed (in a US context) how network radio was understood “as a

⁴⁶ Vaughan, *An Invisible Man*, 92.

⁴⁷ Vaughan, *An Invisible Man*, 92.

⁴⁸ A.F., *Motion Picture Herald*, March 14, 1942, 554 (Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, item 20, BFI).

⁴⁹ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 34.

⁵⁰ Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio*, trans. Margaret Ludwig, Herbert Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 14. One of the translators, Herbert Read, was connected with Jennings by way of their mutual involvement in London’s surrealist scene, and specifically the International Surrealist Exhibition, also in 1936.

type of ‘web’ covering the nation,” but also highlights how this was often seen as threatening: for some, it was “a system for binding together a national audience, even against its own will,” invading homes and dissolving the private sphere while forcing “participation in a vast and possibly terrifying public sphere.”⁵¹ The challenge of *Listen to Britain* was to present this dissolution and participation—the very basis of mobilization in total war—in a positive way; it was to find other ways of imagining this web, perhaps more like the ones suggested by Arnheim. While some scenes suggest the coercive and manipulative power of radio (like one in which female factory workers listen to a program called “Music While You Work,” the rhythms coordinating their movements as they sing along⁵²), more often *Listen to Britain* emphasizes the fragility and diffuseness of radio sound as it fades into and out of noise; it also evokes the undemanding friendliness of its content, calling on the “qualities of dailiness, sincerity, and sociability” that were so central to the BBC’s value in wartime.⁵³ Depicting the night-time broadcasts of the BBC Overseas Service, for instance, the film creates a collage of overlapping multi-lingual voices extending beyond the nation, as it fades into darkness—“voices carrying greetings, news and hope to the four corners of the earth by radio,” in the words of one MoI summary.⁵⁴ Here, radio is distinctly nonthreatening; it forms a web of connection, but it is diffuse and all-inclusive, not invasive or forceful. Radio thus forms a basis for the film’s larger vision of sound and music as an ideal form of connection.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 109.

⁵² The program had been recently instituted to help increase productivity, especially among the new female work force. See Christina L. Baade, *Victory Through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12, 60-81.

⁵³ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 134, summarizing Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁵⁴ “The Ministry of Information Presents *Listen to Britain*,” BFI Pressbook Collection: *Listen to Britain*.

The Music of War

Listen to Britain's representation of music is grounded in its broader rethinking of the nature of sound as a connecting force in public life. The film also tends to elide the boundaries between musical and non-musical sound. Nonetheless, it is deeply invested in music, as a manifestation of sound with special properties and powers. Jennings had a long-standing interest in music, not least from his early experience as a designer for productions of theater works by Purcell, Stravinsky, and Honegger.⁵⁵ Many of his documentaries focus especially closely on music, depending on it to provide insight into daily life. His developing concern with music in British life can be seen in the 1939 documentary *Spare Time*, which focused on the leisure activities of industrial workers across Britain. Its most infamous scene presented a rehearsal of "Rule Britannia" by a cotton workers' kazoo band, in ways that prompted criticism of Jennings as a patronizing observer of working-class culture, but could also be seen to epitomize his estranging, surrealist approach to documenting everyday life.⁵⁶ Elsewhere in *Spare Time*, a miners' chorus rehearses Handel, the pianist, arriving late, casually beginning to play while still standing and removing outer layers of clothing. Jennings' favored images of musical solidarity were transient and haphazard moments of sounding and listening. His films, including *Listen to Britain*, were filled with such moments. But if *Spare Time* featured music as leisure, he also cast music as a form of work, most directly in an unfinished film project on the London Symphony Orchestra that documented the everyday activities of the group, constructing music as labor of an often grueling,

⁵⁵ Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004), 5, 68, 72. As a student at Cambridge, Jennings was involved in the first British production of *The Soldier's Tale*, with Michael Redgrave and Lydia Lopokova, and a production of Purcell's *King Arthur*, both in 1928.

⁵⁶ Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings*, 215.

mundane kind.⁵⁷ Jennings was particularly fascinated by the phenomenon of Myra Hess's wartime series of daily lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery and featured them in multiple projects, including a short film, *Myra Hess* (1945), in which she performs the first movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, and the 1946 documentary, *A Diary for Timothy*, re-using the same footage. The concerts were also the subject of an earlier unfinished documentary ("National Gallery, 1941"), which eventually grew into *Listen to Britain*.⁵⁸ The National Gallery concerts, it seems, offered a particularly powerful image of music for Jennings, both as something with power to sustain people and as a cultural inheritance worth fighting to protect.

All of these visions of music—as labor, as leisure, as art—are on display in *Listen to Britain*, as it presents an array of musical activities in everyday wartime life. The film is unusually diverse in its musical choices, representing the sonic nation by way of folksong and music hall, but also music that suggests more diffuse sources and modes of circulation, from Mozart to "Roll out the Barrel" (a Czech polka popularized by a German musician and then proliferating in multiple American versions) and commercial American hits like "Yes, My Darling Daughter" and "Home on the Range," popularized by Bing Crosby in 1933.⁵⁹ This inclusivity of course has limits: the film clearly favors a nostalgic and participatory vision of commercial popular culture, while making no attempt to represent the racial and cultural

⁵⁷ Jennings' notes for this project are published in Jackson, *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 118-156; Also see Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings*, 339.

⁵⁸ See David Rosen, "The Sounds of Music and War: Humphrey Jennings's and Stewart McAllister's *Listen to Britain* (1942)", in "*Coll'astuzia, col giudizio*": *Essays in Honor of Neal Zaslaw*, ed. Cliff Eisen (Ann Arbor: Steglein, 2009), 391, 395-398.

⁵⁹ This was not always Jennings' original intention. Instead of "Home on the Range," the "Music of War" treatment had called for a less commercialized folksong, "She'll be coming 'round the mountain," and while "Beer-Barrel Polka" fits the treatment's description of a "hotted up version of an old dance," it had suggested a song with older British roots ("Loch Lomond" or the George Grossmith song "See me dance the polka"). "The Music of War: Treatment" (23 May 1941), Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.

diversity of wartime Britain.⁶⁰ (Even its one clear representation of colonial participants is of white Canadians.) However, *Listen to Britain* is tellingly different from the postwar projects to produce a “sonic ‘Britain’” described by Tom Western, for instance, which were aimed quite explicitly at selecting and preserving a body of material deemed authentically “British,” and at defining the national borders of radio sound.⁶¹ Its claims, however illusory, are to an all-inclusive embrace of the music that circulates in everyday life, regardless of source. In addition to representing musical diversity, its scenes display the diverse functions of listening and music-making, and the various ways in which they contribute to the war effort: increasing productivity, filling empty time, providing comfort or a restorative reprieve. Underlying all of these functions, though, is one central role: music has a special power to connect individuals to places and to larger groups, including those removed in time and space. It does so, moreover, in a moment of extreme displacement and disruption, and when solidarity is urgently required. Music acts as a kinetic force, coordinating bodies both in work and in play; while rarely expressive in any conventional sense, it creates affective alliances; it conjures distant people, places, and memories; through radio, it connects people around the nation and the world.

Much of *Listen to Britain* features scenes of informal music-making and distracted listening. However, the film culminates in two artfully opposed concert sequences. One is a lunchtime concert at a factory canteen, by the music hall entertainers Flanagan and Allen,⁶² the other is the performance of a Mozart concerto by Myra Hess at the National Gallery. These sequences continue to foreground the idea of sound as a connecting force, but they are

⁶⁰ On this diversity, see especially Wendy Webster, *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶¹ Tom Western, “Securing the Aural Border: Fieldwork and Interference in Post-War BBC Audio Nationalism,” *Sound Studies* 1 (2015): 77-97.

⁶² Rosen identifies this as a performance for a BBC show called Workers’ Playtime, which broadcast lunchtime concerts from factories around Britain starting in May 1941 (“The Sounds of Music and War,” 401).

also highly constructed representations of music and listening, suggesting some of the constraints of—and the dangers that threaten—the particular image of collectivity and morale the film works to build. Indeed, with these sequences, the film seems to court the dangers of atomization, interiority, and melancholy—as well as the dangers of class and cultural hierarchies—only to absorb them into its sonic web of morale.

The performance at the factory canteen puts music's power for building solidarity on display, but that power seems to depend here on a nostalgic and highly idealized vision of popular culture. Flanagan and Allen were a throwback to the pre-war past, and were a little old-fashioned, even at their prime in the 1930s. Jennings chose them precisely for this reason, calling for “the nostalgic entertainment of the working-class Flanagan and Allen.”⁶³ The song they sing here, “Round the Back of the Arches,” is a rewriting of their signature song “Underneath the Arches,” from 1932. But where the Depression-era song dwelled on the image of homeless men sleeping under railway arches (“underneath the arches, we dream our dreams away”), the wartime song is nostalgic for home and old friends, looking forward to a time of being settled and surrounded by those friends once again, “when the storm clouds all roll over.”

In this sequence, the workers—male and female—are at first largely oblivious to the music and absorbed in their own tasks, and only slowly begin to engage with the entertainers on stage. Indeed, the whole sequence is structured to create a sense of cohesion emerging out of apparent atomization, through the force of music. After a set of unrelated exterior shots overlaid by the sound of the performance, we first see scattered individuals and small groups, occupied with the business of lunch, before the camera focuses its attention on the performers. Soon, there are close-up shots of one or two people listening, but still in a slightly distracted way as they smoke or chat, before we finally see a shot of the whole group, now all

⁶³ “The Music of War: Treatment” (23 May 1941), Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.

facing forward, moving and whistling together. It's an image of a dynamic collective, bound together in an affective alliance, one characterized by a kind of melancholy optimism.

The scene then shifts seamlessly to a different lunch-time audience, now at the National Gallery, listening to Hess perform Mozart's Piano Concerto in G Major, K.453 (first movement) with the RAF orchestra, the Queen conspicuously in attendance.⁶⁴ On one hand, there is a clear attempt to create continuity between the two concerts, and between this music and the industrial noise into which it eventually fades. We see this continuity in the Gallery concert's structural parallel with the factory concert—different cities, different workers, but basically the same situation, as emphasized in the many shots of workers in uniform casually eating lunch while the music plays on elsewhere in the Gallery.⁶⁵ This continuity is also reinforced by the striking sound edit that connects the two sequences, in which “Underneath the Arches” seems to join the Mozart concerto already in progress, its final chord melding with the chord that begins the Mozart excerpt. But the very carefulness with which the Mozart is sonically bound to the factory concert that precedes it and the industrial noise that follows suggests some of the precariousness of this scene—the only one in the film featuring art music, and also one that prominently features traces of damage. This is perhaps the most obvious of those “major points of suture” Guynn finds in the film, in which “we discover a traumatic zone where the text expends enormous energy.”⁶⁶ It is a moment when the sonic figure of morale is at both its most potentially powerful and its most fragile. What threatens here is a “break or disruption” in the film's web of sound and affect, and thus in morale itself.

Anderson writes:

⁶⁴ Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) attended to mark Hess's recent award of a MBE, and Hess invited Jennings to film on that day, offering to play the Mozart concerto he had requested: Anthony W. Hodgkinson, Rodney E. Sheratsky, *Humphrey Jennings: More Than a Maker of Films* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1982), 59.

⁶⁵ On other aspects of this parallel, also see Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 124.

⁶⁶ Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 122.

Morale promises...to enable bodies to keep going despite the present, a present in which morale is either targeted directly or threatens to break given the conditions of “total war.” And what threatens is an unpredictable, uncertain, future ‘crisis’ in which morale suddenly breaks or shatters, bodies are exposed to the conditions of the present, and the movement of “total” mobilization fails or ends.⁶⁷

This potential crisis, for Anderson, involves panic. But in the film, it is more modest: a gap in the sonic web, a disconnect of individuals from both each other and larger goals. In the National Gallery sequence, the film both courts such dangers and fends them off, in the process showing the power of a morale imagined in sonic terms.

If the factory sequence showed a clear process of integration through listening, the Gallery sequence shows a greater tendency towards diffuseness and atomization, leaving only the music to provide cohesion. As the sequence begins, the camera itself seems oddly distracted, shifting quickly between shots of people eating and chatting, buying postcards, or looking at paintings, and of the damaged windows and ceiling of the Gallery. Even as it focuses more closely on the seated audience, it moves between that audience and signs of threat—empty frames, sandbags, fire buckets. This audience, meanwhile is less uniform than the factory audience, and rarely seen as a collective whole; there are just two quick shots of the whole audience, from behind. Instead, we see scattered individual and group shots of its diverse audience members: “Here,” Jennings wrote of this scene, “for the purest of all music, the most mixed of all groups.”⁶⁸ Indeed, this is partly why the scene stands at the climax of the film; as Guynn observes, “it brings together within the integrity of a referential space the diversity of the body politic that elsewhere in the film has been created through the ‘artifice’

⁶⁷ Anderson, “Modulating the Excess of Affect,” 173.

⁶⁸ “The Music of War: Treatment” (23 May 1941), Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.

of *montage*.”⁶⁹ If the audience is mixed, so are the modes of listening on display. Some listeners look attentively at a score or a program, others look around or listen with faces covered, while a number of audience members appear to have their minds elsewhere. In a set of clearly staged shots, for instance, a young woman in black stands alone, while the painting behind her suggests her thoughts turning to a soldier in battle; similarly, a middle-aged man in uniform stands near a painting of two little girls.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, despite their independence, the audience is bound together in the act of listening, and enveloped in what one of Jennings’ collaborators called “the warm, friendly sound” of the orchestra.⁷¹

Jennings’ representation of the National Gallery concerts is highly constructed, and participates in a larger discourse that ensconced them as a display of social cohesion, heroic endurance, and communal participation in a transcendent cultural idealism. Hess founded the National Gallery concerts immediately after the outbreak of war in 1939, when the Gallery was emptied of its collection and London’s concert halls closed. Under blackout conditions, they were fundamentally a practical alternative to evening concerts: one 1946 profile observes, “They were just what everybody wanted, for the black-out made it extremely difficult for thousands of London’s suburban residents to go up to town after dark.”⁷² Hess’s was one of a number of such series eventually instituted around London by other pianists, including Hilda Bor’s at the Royal Exchange and Harriet Cohen’s at the Dorchester Hotel

⁶⁹ Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 138.

⁷⁰ These shots bear a close resemblance to ones called for in the “National Gallery 1941” rough shooting script, including “Polish Flyer standing against reproduction of Gainsborough’s *Artist’s Daughters*” (the painting seen in *Listen to Britain* is Gainsborough’s “*The Painter’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*”). The Gallery sequence in *Listen to Britain* also resembles other details in this shooting script, which calls for shots of a “pair of ambulance drivers in uniform (girls from Station 76)” in the audience, as well as “a young girl music student, who is following with a score, a woman air-raid warden and an old man listening by himself with his hand over his eyes,” suggesting that much of the sequence was staged (Jackson, *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 24-25).

⁷¹ Joe Mendoza, quoted in Vaughan, *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, 85.

⁷² Donald Brook, *Masters of the Keyboard* (London, Rockcliff, 1951), 165.

(which she organized in exchange for accommodation after her home was bombed, the Dorchester being well known as one of the safest buildings in London).⁷³

But the National Gallery concerts had a populist image not associated with these other series. This image began to solidify already in 1939, when *Picture Post* described the queue outside the Gallery: “There are men and women, young and old, rich and poor waiting patiently in the cold up the steps of the Gallery and along the pavements...to hear Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin and Schumann.... Strange things happen in wartime.”⁷⁴ This notion of Hess’s audience as a cross-section of British society is surely idealized, as Nick Hayes has suggested, but it persisted throughout the war, and long after.⁷⁵ Hess’s biographer described the audience of the first National Gallery concert almost identically, as “made up of young and old, rich and poor, smart and shabby, Tommies in uniform, their tin hats strapped on, old ladies with ear trumpets, civil servants and office boys carrying gas masks—all come to hear a piano recital built around Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata.’ And what composer could have been more fitting for the sublime nature of the occasion?”⁷⁶

For the director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark (who also briefly headed up the MoI film division), the concerts similarly offered sublimity for everyone. Even at the time, he claimed for them a higher purpose, “that of maintaining through beauty our faith in

⁷³ Harriet Cohen, *A Bundle of Time: The Memoirs of Harriet Cohen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 299. On the Dorchester, see Matthew Sweet, *The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets of London’s Grand Hotels* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), 89-91. The Dorchester was also a center of Zionist activity (Sweet, *West End Front*, 93-94), in which Cohen participated after visiting Palestine in 1939.

⁷⁴ “Music among the Masters,” *Picture Post*, 11 November 1939, quoted in Nick Hayes, “More than ‘Music-While-You-Eat’? Factory and Hostel Concerts, ‘Good Culture’ and the Workers,” in *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War*, ed. Nick Hayes, Jeff Hill (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 211. Hayes also provides a number of other similar examples.

⁷⁵ Hayes, “More than ‘Music-While-You-Eat’?” 211.

⁷⁶ Marian C. McKenna, *Myra Hess: A Portrait* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 127-128, quoted in Rosen, “The Sounds of Music and War,” 405-406.

the greatness of the human spirit.”⁷⁷ Later, he cast Hess herself in an explicitly heroic role, as a “conquering, radiant presence” in an “atmosphere of defeat and gloom.” He described the first National Gallery concert as a transformational experience, as Hess performed her arrangement of Bach’s “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring:”

I stood behind one of the curtains, and looked at the packed audience. They had come with anxious, hungry faces, but as they listened to the music and looked at Myra’s rapt expression, they lost the thought of their private worries. I had never seen faces so transformed, and said to myself “This is how men and women must have looked at the great preachers who gave them back their courage and faith.”⁷⁸

For Clark, then, drawing on some traditional notions of cultural uplift, Hess’s concerts allowed audiences to transcend both the circumstances of war and their own anxious condition.

Jennings’ later film *Diary for Timothy* adheres closely to Clark’s description in its representation of a Hess performance of the “Appassionata.” One critic described the film in terms much like Clark’s, as displaying “the heroic face of Dame Myra Hess playing Beethoven to an ennobled audience steady while the bombs fall.”⁷⁹ Focusing on a single row of listeners rather than the scattered audience of *Listen to Britain*, the camera slowly scans their rapt faces, casting the concert as an exercise in communal transcendence. *Listen to Britain*, though, is strikingly different, focusing instead on the everydayness of the occasion, the “human” sound of Mozart, and the diversity of the audience and the types of listening it

⁷⁷ Kenneth Clark, “From the National Gallery,” in *National Gallery Concerts in Aid of the Musicians Benevolent Fund, 10th October 1939-10th October 1944* (London, 1944), 6.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Clark, “Music in Place of Pictures,” in *Myra Hess by Her Friends*, ed. Denise Lassimonne and Howard Ferguson (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), 57.

⁷⁹ C.A., *New York Post*, December 28, 1946 (Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 3, BFI).

displays.⁸⁰ While it similarly casts Hess as heroic and her audience as ennobled, it does not quite content itself with an idea of music or morale as transcendence.

Clark's description of the concerts resonates closely with how Elaine Scarry describes the workings of morale. She suggests, "the notion of 'morale' still tends to have an aura of the spiritual, to signal some capacity for self-transcendence or form of consciousness different from the physical events."⁸¹ She adds that this aspect of morale allows it to be associated with "benign activities" such as music:

Because morale has connotations of the human spirit, the capacity to live beyond the body, the capacity to dwell in the realm of symbols and substitutes rather than the raw physical events of survival, it is at least as often associated with world-building as with world-destroying, with creating as with killing...

Scarry's point, in part, is that these characteristics make it easy to separate morale from the violent acts that actually drive war. Indeed, Clark's idea of music as spiritually transcendent might seem to divorce it so completely from war that its use even for morale might be limited. Ralph Vaughan Williams (whom Jennings featured in a 1948 documentary, *The Dim Little Island*) suggested as much when he dwelled on the non-utility of *art* music in wartime, even as he made a case—in ways that very much resonate with other scenes in *Listen to Britain*—for amateur music as an everyday source of sustenance and healthy diversion.

It is certainly, to my mind, one of the glories of the art of music that it can be put to no practical use. Poets can be used for propaganda, painters for camouflage, architects for machine-gun posts, but music is purely of the spirit and seems to have no place in the world of alarms and excursions. Would it not indeed be better for music to keep

⁸⁰ Jennings and his collaborators originally considered using a Bach Brandenburg Concerto, but settled on Mozart, on the basis that it was more "human" by one account. See Rosen, "The Sounds of Music and War," 403-404.

⁸¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 105-6.

out of the struggle and reserve for us a place where sanity can again find a home when she returns to her own?⁸²

In *Listen to Britain*, though, Jennings tries to find space for this pure “art of music” as well as music’s more everyday forms. The film attempts to saddle this music “of the spirit” to wartime realities, finding a place for it within “the world of alarms and excursions.” And as the National Gallery scene ends, it seems to go out of its way to connect these ideas of music with the business of war.

Here, as the Mozart concerto continues, the camera moves out of the Gallery, in a quickly changing series of shots that draw the eye upward, before shifting to a high perspective, floating above the city. The camera then focuses on the surrounding heights, bringing into view some potent signs and symbols of war—a barrage balloon, meant to defend from enemy aircraft, and Nelson’s Column, commemorating his unlikely victory in the Battle of Trafalgar—before looking down on the busy streets. The scene ends with another image of a barrage balloon and scenes from a tank-building factory, as the concerto fades away into the sounds of the factory. In planning stages, Jennings described an earlier version of this moment in especially evocative terms:

The Spitfires and Hurricanes in the sun above the clouds and the smoke, are beautiful shining things, flying in a world very like the lyrical world of Mozart. And below them we can now see London, big as it is, as a grey smudge. And yet it is this grey smudge which is the main objective of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain and which the RAF Patrols are protecting. And right down inside it, invisible from this

⁸² Ralph Vaughan Williams, “The Composer in Wartime,” in *Vaughan Williams on Music*, ed. David Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84.

height, is the National Gallery where hundreds of men and women still find time in their lunch-hour to listen to Mozart and to invigorate themselves for the final battle.⁸³ His description casts music as invigorating, but also finds points of contact between the world of Mozart and the tools of war. Music is somehow like fighter planes (here replaced by the less impressive barrage balloon), and is both “above the clouds and the smoke” and at the heart of the “grey smudge” of reality. This idea of contact is brought home sonically as the scene ends, the concerto overlapping and matching with the noise of a tank-building factory.⁸⁴

Mozart is rendered as a particularly powerful sound here, able to transcend immediate realities and to “invigorate” its listeners. But its power also lies in a certain quality of excess that pervades this scene. This is partly the abstract excess of ineffability—of being beyond language or meaning. But it is also excess in a more literal sense. This sound, more than any other in the film, tends to overflow its source. We hear it before seeing the inside of the Gallery, and long before seeing the performance itself. And as the images float away from the Gallery, the music is still there, heard just as closely as it was before, as if omnipresent. If music’s power here lies in its relationship to morale, that power is imagined and represented in terms of sonic excess.

More broadly, the National Gallery scene introduces a potential gap between the art of music and the work of war only to cross it, creating sonic connections between them. It introduces the idea of transcendence and uplift only to suggest a slightly different idea of inclusivity through sound. And it creates a certain space for interiority, exploring a dangerous inwardness, without letting it break the web of morale. What allows the film to do so is precisely its sonic totality, as it extends its listening to all areas of public and private life, and

⁸³ “National Gallery 1941” (28 April 1941), Humphrey Jennings Collection, Box 1, Item 7, BFI.

⁸⁴ On this “matching” effect, see Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, 120, 147

to the whole spectrum of sound, weaving what it hears into a nearly unbroken web. It uses sound to suggest a certain idea of morale itself—unbroken, buoyant, able to absorb even introspection and melancholy in its totalizing force. There is no outside of music here, just as there is no outside of total war; this, finally, is what defines the “music of war.”