

Bell of Silence for ALSCW

Nathan Davis and Jennifer Davis Michael

This work was commissioned by Paul Vasile for the Sanctuary Choir of The Park Avenue Christian Church, NYC, for the 2013 Christmas Gala. The poem, by Jennifer Davis Michael, was set to music by Nathan Davis.

Bells are a powerful symbol: in their many forms, they call us to prayer, to work, to celebrate, to mourn, to answer our phone. Jennifer's poem explores the bell as a sanctuary of space: "to enter silence / is to go inside a bell / that has poured forth its sound." The silence exists only after the various sounds have been emptied out, as the bell transfers its energy to the air around it. In setting the text for SATB choir and handbells, Nathan portrays the rush of sound created and the stillness thereby revealed: certain passages are meditations in which each singer chants independently, choosing their entrances, while other sections align the choir, ringing in full voice.

Before reading forward, the authors invite you to listen to the premiere performance of the work at <https://soundcloud.com/nathan-davis-music/bell-of-silence>

Introducing our work

Although we are brother and sister, this is our first artistic collaboration. Jennifer's poetry, as well as her scholarship, is invested in the relationship between words and silence. Her article from 2009 in the *Sewanee Theological Review*, "Silence and 'Wounded Speech' in George Herbert's Poetry," was the first foray into what is now a book project, "Poetry at the Edge of Silence." Her own poems, such as "[Dry Season](#)", explore this paradox as well. Having

previously published two chapbooks, she is currently at work on a full-length volume of poems, tentatively titled “Bodies at Rest.”

The sounds and meanings of bells are a recurring theme in Nathan’s music. His 2017 work “Bellarmonic” for Christ Church in Philadelphia uses its eleven historic bells, purchased by Benjamin Franklin in 1754. And Lincoln Center presented the premiere of “Bells”, a site-specific work for ensemble, multi-channel audio, and live broadcast to audience members’ mobile phones. Nathan’s other settings of text include his opera *Hagoromo* (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 2015) and an adaptation of Archimedes’ *The Sand Reckoner* (Tanglewood, 2017).

On the title

The poem’s title is a deliberate paradox. A bell “of silence” could be made of silence, could itself be silent. In the poem, silence occurs only after the bell “has poured forth its sound,” creating a space where silence becomes active, ringing and vibrating in its own way. Before getting to that silence, the poem embodies, particularly through onomatopoeic words such as *clang*, *chime*, *ping*, *gong*, the production of sound from the bell, which is both an expression and an evacuation, an emptying. In keeping with the piece’s performance at a church during the winter solstice, the poem’s conclusion alludes to the “holy silence” that waits. Here, the bell becomes a kind of shelter for divine presence.

On silence

The relationship between language and silence has been explored since ancient times in both Eastern and Western cultures. In the West, this connection is deeply intertwined with Christian mysticism and the apophatic tradition in which the nature of the divine cannot be fully

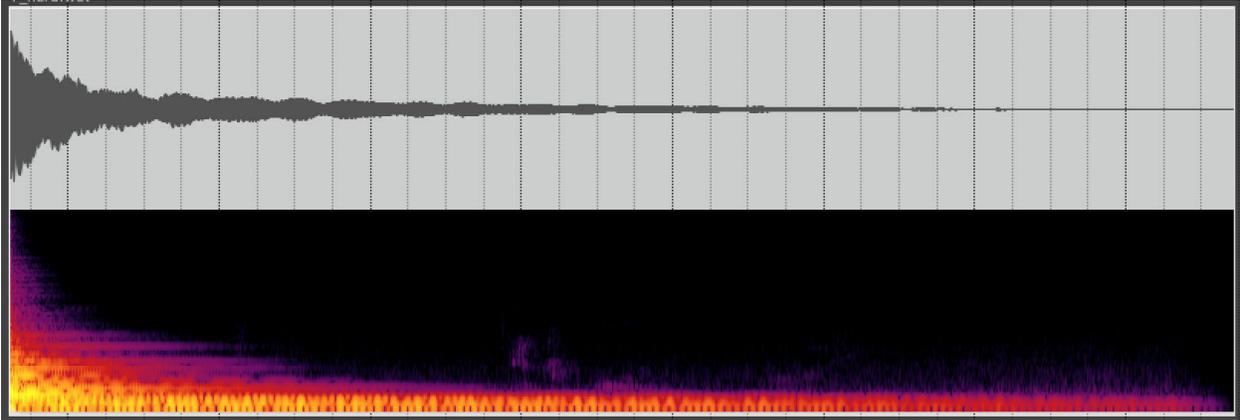
known. Or, as the Tao Te Ching puts it, “The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” While God’s creation is represented in the Bible as an act of speech, even poetry (the Greek words for “poet” and “maker” being the same), medieval Catholic teachers such as Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler speak of the need for silence as a self-emptying so that the Word can be born in us. Postmodern theory has not left these notions behind, especially in the realm of phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Louis Chrétien, among others, have explored the interdependence of silence and speech, such that one is not just the absence of the other but that they bring one another into being. Gaston Bachelard asserts, “Poetry then is truly the first manifestation of silence. It lets the attentive silence, beneath the images, remain alive.”

The paradox is further complicated in our case because we have a poem about silence and music that is itself set to music.

Bells and their associations

The sound of a bell begins with an explosion of noise that quickly resolves into a sustained collection of overtones, that then decay quasi-linearly into silence. Unlike a pair of stones or a flute, bells can continue to ring (some for quite a long time) without continued human intervention such as bowing a string, or blowing a trumpet. This sustain is nearly unique to objects fashioned from metal, and it is vanishingly rare amongst objects found in nature.

Ex 1: waveform and spectrogram of a church bell (Whitechapel, 1754) showing dynamic envelope and decay of overtones



Even though we can take this quality of sound for granted, it remains super-natural and subtly mysterious. Listening for the point at which the sound becomes imperceptible provides a magical moment of heightened awareness of silence and negative space. In this way, a bell can define its own absence.

This quality has perhaps set these sounds apart for many cultures for purposes of individual spiritual practice (like the prayer bell or cup gong in Buddhist and Hindu practice) and for calling a community together with a large bell (both Henry David Thoreau and R. Murray Schafer have written poetically about the radius of a bell's sound as aurally defining the boundaries of a community in the West).

Bell sounds have been freighted with other meanings, such as warning or celebration, or more recently as a phone call or a new arrival to our inbox. Our perception of bells depends on a more conscious parsing of signal and noise, music and meaning. Is the bell a signal that requires attention? A warning perhaps, a celebration, a call to gather, a simple declamation of time? Do we appreciate this ringing as music, or on its own sonic terms? Or is it something to be tuned out or ignored, due to repetition, irrelevance, or familiarity? Bells are also common and familiar -

nearly everyone has had the experience of ringing a bell of some kind and size, which gives a tactile familiarity to the object.

When used in music, bells bring all of these associations and qualities together with them.

In setting Jennifer's text, Nathan wanted to explore these attributes in several specific ways:

1. The relationship of spoken language to the sound of a bell, i.e. words that begin with a plosive consonant (such as *t* or *p*) and sustain with an open vowel (such as *ah* or *oo*).
2. The associations of bells with individual spiritual practice, especially meditation. For instance "Om", most associated with Hinduism, sustains *awe*, moves to *oo*, closes with a hummed *mm*, and is concluded with a silent syllable. A version of this approach is the focus of the first section of the piece.
3. Musical and cultural associations with bells, such as the use of church bells to demarcate time. The line "With a clang, a chime, A ping, a gong" provides familiar onomatopoeias for bell sounds, delightful and readymade for such treatment.
4. Bells as instrument-objects. The sounding containers described in the text are used both as bells and as singing instruments, as are the voices. Also, some harmonies in the piece are derived from the overtone structures of Western bells.

The music

“Bell of Silence” is written for SATB choir (4-part mixed) and 20 handbells, which may be played by choir members or additional handbell ringers. Upon reading Jennifer’s poem, Nathan immediately felt it was a text to be said out loud, not only read to oneself: it already contained the sounds of bells.

Intro: The opening line “To enter silence” is set as a multi-articulated version of the bell decay envelope described earlier, each with successively less noise: four stressed consonants, each with bell-like attacks, each of diminishing phonetic hardness (with the *t* of “enter” being softened by fact of following *en* without a break), leading to four different sustained vowels and sonorities.

Ex. 2: measures 1-3

Still, ♩ = 72
mf

SOPRANO
oo__ en - ter__ si - lence_

ALTO
oo__ en - ter__ si - lence_

TENOR
oo__ en - ter__ si - lence_

BASS
To

Section A sets only the first two lines of the haiku paradox that opens the poem. Simple chant-like declarations are introduced by individual singers, then repeated by others in their section independently. Like the quiet chanting of many private mantras, neither the entrances nor the speed of the gestures need to be the same.

“Singing bell” technique is used to sustain the bells throughout the section by continuously rubbing a dowel around the edge of the bells (and without striking them) - much as one would do to create a sustained note by rubbing the rim of a wine glass. More pitches are added gradually over 3 minutes, building up a large chord of overtones.

Ex. 3: measure 13 - Boxed gestures are for all members of a section to declaim at their own pace. The Bell staff shows the accumulation of bells already singing, and adds another mid-system.

The musical score for measures 13-15 is as follows:

- Measure 13:**
 - Soprano (S.):** *mp* to en - ter si - lence is
 - Alto (A.):** (Silent)
 - Tenor (T.):** (Silent)
 - Bass (B.):** tutti, unis.: is
 - Bells:** (Silent)
- Measure 14:**
 - Soprano (S.):** (Silent)
 - Alto (A.):** (Silent)
 - Tenor (T.):** (Silent)
 - Bass (B.):** tutti, independent: to en - ter si - lence is
 - Bells:** (Silent)
- Measure 15:**
 - Soprano (S.):** (Silent)
 - Alto (A.):** *mf* to go in - side a bell
 - Tenor (T.):** (Silent)
 - Bass (B.):** (Silent)
 - Bells:** *n* *p*

A conductor gives numbered cues to pace the entries and the introduction of new pitches and chant melodies, but does not beat time to align the ensemble until Section B. This short section completes the first stanza and introduces regularly metered structures that continue for the rest of the piece.

Section C sets the onomatopoeias for bells with an energetic quotation of Westminster Chimes.

Ex. 4: measures 28-30

28

S. clang with a ping with a clang a ping a chime a ping

A. with a chime with a gong a chime a gong a clang a gong

T. chime gong chime gong clang ping gong

B. ping clang ping chime Or a

Bells

The text that follows focuses on the letter “p”, offering many plosives to begin words, set to harmonies that evoke church bell overtones. Repetition of “push” in the poem itself echoes the repetition used by Poe in “The Bells”. This invites musical repetition, together with an upward expansion of vocal range and increased harmonic tension which is purposefully left unresolved at the end of the stanza, decaying into a brief recapitulation of the opening motive.

Section D uses text painting to illustrate the expanding and contracting vibrations described in the text. Jennifer’s consonants become softer here, featuring “sh” and “s” sounds that vanish into white noise.

Ex. 5: measures 58-60

58

S. *mp* to the sea *p*

A. *mp* to the sea *p*

T. *mp* to the sea *p*

B. *mp* wa - shes back *p* wa - shes back to the sea. *div.* (to the sea)

Section E brings a brief recapitulation of Westminster Chimes and sets up a final push toward a climax on “ringing in the pulse of each vibration”. Section F uses the softest syllables of all, and sets up the clearest alternation of sound and silence (following “cupped space” and “metal”) and provides metaphoric decay or release of tension across semantic, harmonic, and dynamic parameters.

Section G returns to a slower voicing of the opening motives, as a bookend, to set the closing haiku. Here the sopranos, altos, and tenors sustain the more noisy *s* of “breathes” rather than the vowel *ee* – much as an awareness of environmental noise gradually returns as the resonance of a bell disappears from our hearing.

The complete score can be viewed at

https://issuu.com/nathandaviscomposer/docs/bell_of_silence_score

Conclusion

How to conclude a discussion of music and silence? Rather than a hard closure, perhaps we might think of those ripples of sound that gradually fade from awareness, not unlike the vibrations of thought that linger after a conference session is over. We look forward to the conversation, to listening as well as speaking.

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