

Finding the words: Found Text in Political Songs

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Abstract

Shortly after its online release in September 2022, Shervin Hajipour's song 'Baraye' gained tens of millions of views and was sung in protests around the world. One of the song's many strengths lies in its source of text: the lyrics are composed of messages posted online by activists. Every line opens with the word 'Baraye' (Persian for "because" or "for") and expresses a reason for which real people are risking their freedoms and their lives. Hajipour is not alone in composing found, non-artistic, texts to create emotional and political impact. This practice-led research paper will explore the motives and implications of composing found-text in political music. It will examine examples across genres, locations and political contexts. Alongside 'Baraye', I will look at Frederic Rzewski's 1971 *Coming Together* (setting Sam Melville's last prison letter), Elaine Mitchener's 2017 cross-disciplinary music theatre piece *SWEET TOOTH* (in which she sings the prices that slaves were sold for in the sugar trade). I will also look at my own composition of the Israeli Absentee Property Law [1950] in the installation piece *Absentee means* (2020), as well as the use of a phrase engraved on the Rosetta Stone in a song I composed for a protest at the British Museum in 2022.

The texts in these works are not verbatim; they have not been uttered. Rather these are words written for an unvoiced reading and an unembodied echo. This paper asks how musicing such texts shape their meaning and impact, and what is afforded to a piece of art by non-artistic origins. These musical settings, ironic and critical, or sympathetic and empowering, provide a powerful tool for musical activism, and for political expression online, in the street, and on stage. A tool which, I argue, is still under-theorised and under-explored.

Bio

Uri Agnon is a Jerusalemite composer, activist and researcher, currently based in London. A PhD student at the University of Southampton, under the supervision of Prof. Matthew Shlomowitz and Dr. Valentina Cardo, his research focuses on the cross relations between political activism and music composition. His works include the chamber opera *Word Problems* which is composed entirely of Israeli school textbooks and was performed at sold out venues around Israel/Palestine; the oratorio *Custodian*, staged as a direct action on the doorsteps of the Jewish National Fund opposing their takeover of a home in East Jerusalem; many chamber pieces and music for theatre, dance and film. A member of several political movements, Uri has composed music for protests, artistic interventions, and direct actions. He has published in the academic journal *Tempo* as well as in newspapers and magazines such as *Haaretz* and *The Forward*.

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