



Call for Papers – International Conference

Listening to Fear: Music, Emotion, and Crisis in Eurasia, 1550–1750

Submissions deadline: 30 November 2025
Confirmation of acceptance: 20 December 2025
Dates: 6–8 May 2026
Location: University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw)
Seilerstätte 26, 1010 Wien, Austria

Organizers

Dr. Linda Pearce, Canada Research Chair in Music, Contact, and Conflict, Mount Allison University
Dr. Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild, Professor of Music, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw)
Dr. Scott L. Edwards, Assistant Professor, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw)

Keynote Speakers

Andreas Bähr, Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder, GER)
Alexander Fisher, University of British Columbia (CAN)
Nina (Ergin) Macaraig, previously Koç University (TUR), independent scholar
Jacob Olley, Durham University (UK)
Bettina Varwig, Cambridge University (UK)

Keywords: Fear, Sound, Music, Plague, War, Witches, Storms, Climate, Human Mobility, Eurasia, Early Modern, History of Emotions, Famine

Description: Researchers in early modern sound and music studies have struggled to integrate insights from the history of emotions into their work. This project aims to bridge this gap by bringing together experts in the histories of emotions, the body, and the senses with scholars in the histories of music and sound to investigate the role of fear in authoritative regimes in Eurasian (e.g., Austrian Habsburg, Bohemian, Hungarian, and Ottoman) spaces from 1550 to 1750.

Narratives of fear in early modern European sources often locate the causes of crises in the East. In the Austrian Habsburg empire, for instance, the Ottomans are blamed for plague, war, apostasy, and other societal ills. Ottoman sources, in turn, counter these assumptions, attributing similar problems to the actions of Europeans to the West or Safavids to the East. Migration, especially the forced displacement of populations during wars and conflicts, played a crucial role in shaping these fears. Yet their mobility also provoked anxiety, whether due to perceived moral

deviance or the disruptive ideas they might bring with them. Fear also plays a central role in early modern plague writings, where it was a key factor in preventing or contracting the disease. Similarly, fear pervades sources that address the threats of witchcraft, sorcery, death, and natural disasters such as earthquakes and storms. Fear that fostered trust and hope in God was actively promoted, whereas fear rooted in punishment, suffering, disease, and death was viewed as a sin that provoked divine anger.

Why was fear so powerful? Early modern Europeans thought that fear caused humors and vital spirits to course through the body and oppress the heart. Indeed, historical knowledge about the body and the senses shaped the emotional experience of early moderns in many ways. Faced with crises (e.g., war, plague, natural disasters, witchcraft, migration, and so on), a welcome fear—the fear of God—meant envisioning God into one’s body as a form of protection. The unwelcome kind—the fear of death, whether from attack, illness, catastrophe, or magic—had negative physical consequences.

Numerous sonic strategies were devised to address such fears. They included the ringing of bells in Christian communities and the recitation of Qur’anic verses in Muslim contexts, both believed to ward off danger and summon divine protection. Across the Eurasian space, music and sound were instrumental in shaping public emotion and ceremonial. Songs and music performed during processions or on the battlefield functioned as sonic declarations of faith and courage, transforming fear into an audible testament of resilience. Stories in multiple traditions about the occult power of music, in which certain melodies could repel evil, calm storms, or heal the afflicted, reinforced the belief that sound itself had metaphysical efficacy.

Comparing these narratives, and the ways in which fears materialized through sonic and musical practices, reveals shared strategies for responding to crisis across cultural and religious boundaries. Framing fears through the lenses of music and sound studies thus has the potential to uncover cultural commonalities that challenge engrained discourses of difference, many of which continue to shape our world today.

This call is for an interdisciplinary symposium and workshop that will explore these ideas. To foster cross- and interdisciplinary conversation, we invite scholars from all relevant fields of research to propose papers for a three-day symposium/workshop in Vienna (Austria). All activities will take place in person at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw). Accommodations for virtual delivery will be made on a case-by-case basis.

Please send a title, a short bio (maximum 100 words), and an abstract (maximum of 300 words) for a 20-minute paper to listeningtofear2025@gmail.com no later than **30 November 2025**. The language of the conference is English. *We have limited funding to support the travel costs of selected PhD Students and Early Career Scholars. If you require such support, please indicate this need in your proposal.

Papers are sought that consider **sound and/or music** and their intersection **with fear in Eurasia 1550–1750** from a theoretical and/or historical case-study perspective. Papers may engage with a range of crises, including but not limited to:

- plague, illness, disease
- war and conflict (over land or sea)
- witchcraft, witch hunts, and persecution
- storms, earthquakes, climate
- human mobilities, cultural encounters and complexity
- economic instability, famine

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