Singing on Solid Ground: Music Education in Post-Earthquake Haiti

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Abstract

The sonic aftershocks of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti continue to reverberate throughout the cultural landscape, particularly within the relatively small but long-standing *mizik klasik* community. In this article, I analyse the sometimes divergent performances of a composition that commemorates that tragedy. Haitian-American composer Sydney Guillaume wrote 'N'ap Debat' ('We're Hangin' On') from Los Angeles shortly after the earthquake. One performance of this work takes place far from the site of ruin, voiced by distant observers. The other performance happens in Haiti, sung by its survivors. Both performances transform rubble into ruin.

One bright Sunday afternoon, in the midst of the annual summer music camp held by l'École de Musique Sainte Trinité (EMST), a group of choristers clad in jeans and matching T-shirts sang of Haiti from its heartland. We were high in the mountains, on the campus of Zanmi Lasanté (Partners in Health), where the school rented teaching and living facilities in 2014.[1] EMST is based in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, but their annual camp is often held in the rural space of the Central Plateau, providing many children from the city with a vastly different living experience for the three weeks of camp. It was here, in this sunbleached chapel, that children sang of death and destruction, then something after. Not quite a rebirth, nor a renaissance, but a type of enduring memory – a ruin.

The song that they sang, 'N'ap Debat' ('We're Hangin' On') by Sydney Guillaume, can be heard both within and outside of the context of ruin. The composition narrates the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that shook Haiti. I have heard 'N'ap Debat' sung within the context of rubble, by the aforementioned Sainte Trinité choral group Les Petits Chanteurs. I have also heard it reverberate through the echo chamber of YouTube, as performed by the Michigan School Vocal Music Association (MSVMA) Men's Honor Choir. Guillaume, a Haitian-American composer living in Los Angeles at the time of the earthquake, wrote 'N'ap Debat' a few months after this disaster, which decimated Port-au-Prince and surrounding villages. Commissioned by the MSVMA Men's Honor Choir, it was premiered by that group on 22 January 2011, just over a year after the earthquake.

The coincidence of these two ensembles – one in Haiti and one in the United States – performing the same repertoire raises many questions for me, some of which are related to the

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1 Additional information about the programming of l'Ecole de Musique Sainte Trinité can be found via the Building Leaders Using Music Education website at blumehaiti.org/emst (accessed 19 November 2021).

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central concerns of this forum on rubble and ruins. There is the fundamental unfairness of the Haitian ensemble's precarity, particularly when cast against the organization that commissioned the work. That issue is intertwined with the situation (by which I mean, how the genre is situated) of choral art music in Haiti. Choral art music and *mizik klasik* (Haitian classical music) are often more broadly described as not representative of Haitian identity, especially when compared to other genres such as *rara*.[2] Finally, there is an analysis of the music itself, a composition that pulls the rough material, the rubble, and the debris of a devastating event into a carefully considered ruin.

To explain the resonances of 'N'ap Debat', it is useful to know about the ensemble for whom it was written. The MSVMA is a non-profit organisation of music educators in the state of Michigan, and as such, might seem an unlikely consumer of this kind of repertoire. The group regularly programmes festivals and honors choirs that engage sixth- to twelfth-grade youth across the state. A clue to their usual musical orientation can be found via their website: audition pieces for 2019 to 2022 are all motets.[3] However, groups like this power an economy of choral art/world music.[4] Through their commissions and programming, these pedagogical associations signal to both their students and broader publics about which sounds they believe are worthy of concerted study. The appeal of this type of piece to such a group stems from Guillaume's elegant use of the Kreyòl language and Haitian rhythmic idioms alongside its technical difficulty. If you were to listen to the MSVMA Men's Honor Choir perform this song while following along with the score, you might be struck by how crisp and confident they sound in their articulation of Haitian Kreyòl. The choir's excellent diction in the language is attributable to a service that Guillaume himself provides. He often serves as a choral workshop clinician, travelling to ensembles around the world to coach them through his music.[5]

In 2013, Guillaume returned to Haiti for the first time in nearly two decades to serve as a clinician at the St Trinité music camp. He brought his own compositions, written in Kreyòl and featuring Haitian rhythms for the students to rehearse, and was warmly received. This arrival was a unique opportunity for Haitian students, accustomed to a canon of long-deceased foreigners with the occasional deceased Haitian, to learn new music from a living composer who resembled them, correcting, encouraging, and scolding them in their own language. The following year, he brought 'N'ap Debat'. The 2014 performance that I witnessed was the inaugural Haitian run, an oft-solemn, but at times jubilant rendering of a piece that is part requiem, part praise song.

2 Further writing on this subject is forthcoming in my in-progress monograph. Also see my conference presentation, 'Whose Mizik Klasik? Classical Music and the Boundaries of Genre in Haiti', delivered at the 66th Society for Ethnomusicology annual conference, virtual, 28–31 October 2021.

3 More information about the MSVMA is available on their website: www.msvma.org (accessed 19 November 2021).

4 I have adapted Howard Becker's description of 'art worlds' to describe the groundswell of interest in building global repertoires within choral communities. See Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

5 While his YouTube account mostly features performance videos, Guillaume's Instagram account has detailed records of his coaching collaborations with various ensembles around the world.

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That choral group, Les Petits Chanteurs, is one of Haiti's premier choral ensembles. They have toured internationally for nearly fifty years. They are a core part of EMST, and favoured among the school's ensembles for public performance and travel opportunities.[6] However, when I compare the YouTube recording of MSVMA to my memory and field records, I am compelled to state the obvious: Les Petits Chanteurs are not equally resourced in comparison to the MSVMA Men's Honour Choir. It is a challenge to consider this combination of a Haitian American composer, a Haitian tragedy, and an American commission. Some of the teenagers singing that sunny day in Cange had experienced the events depicted in the song. They had survived the trauma that provides the aesthetic force of Guillaume's composition. The tremolo placed on 'tranble' ('to shake') was not an abstraction, but logical, as the performers were both native speakers and had lived through the tremors. In comparison, some of the teenagers singing in Michigan likely raised funds for earthquake relief, a noble cause, but a decidedly different reality.

What laid the conditions for such a disparity? What catastrophe precipitated these ruins? Is it the 2010 earthquake, to which 'N'ap Debat' responds? Or is it the reverberation of colonialism, which 'N'ap Debat' also charges – in bar 106 the lyric that states 'legetè toupatou mande: "Kouman ou ye?"' Translated in the poetic as 'rubberneckers from everywhere ask: "How's it going?"', it describes the peculiar awareness of being in the global spotlight, the subject of curiosity and pity. Both the immediate natural disaster and the gradual manmade disasters contribute to the situation so exactingly narrated in this composition.

When I hear 'N'ap Debat', I simultaneously consider both the situation narrated within the composition and the varying contexts in which the composition is performed. First, consider the Cange performance. Summer music camp in Haiti is a regular occurrence that still surprises some musicologists with whom I interact. When the mainstream frame for imagining Haiti is set to disaster optics, such as earthquakes, protests, and tenuous elections, a focus on quotidian elements and mundane rituals such summer music camp becomes more difficult to achieve.[7] Because it holds connotations of upper middle class status-making in a US context, the classical music pedagogy of summer music camp is less legible in other contexts. In other contexts, classical music pedagogy is rarely narrativized for 'music's sake' – it becomes a citizen maker in Asian America and a tool for poverty eradication in Venezuela.[8] This lack of legibility leads to queries about the relevance of music to precarious Haitian lives.

6 For additional information on this ensemble, and the manner in which they have come to represent Haiti internationally, see the following press release by the Embassy of Haiti: www.haiti.org/les-petits-chanteurs-and-the-chamber-ensemble-of-holy-trinity-music-school-port-au-prince-haiti/ (accessed 19 November 2021). EMST has other ensembles, such as l'Orchestre Philarmonique de Sainte-Trinité, a string ensemble, and a guitar group, but Les Petits Chanteurs are likely favoured for international travel because they are singers, in additional to their skill. They are capable of traveling in small units without a lot of musical equipment.

7 For more on the discourse on Haitian exceptionalism, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); and Gina Athena Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

8 See Geoffrey Baker, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Mina Yang, *Planet Beethoven: Classical Music at the Turn of the Millenium* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

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In response to these types of queries, which carry the subtext 'surely everyone involved in these scenes of music making should have something more important to do', I would caution that such a question strips the agency from everyone involved. It calls into question the wisdom of those students who decide to make their way to summer camp, a robust site for learning and exploration beyond the conventional curriculum. It challenges the impulses of the volunteers who travel to Haiti each summer to share their expertise. It critiques the efforts of the Haitian administrators who steward the programmes year after year. Moreover, one could also ask 'when is life in Haiti not precarious?' To evade the trope of exceptionalism that Michel-Rolph Trouillot decries, and pose the rebuttal to include all of us – when is life in general not precarious? Surely it is precarious during a pandemic. It is precarious during political crisis. Throughout 2020 and 2021, both Haitian and US citizens have endured these precarities in tandem. Though not identical in application or scale, the following events filled the news in both countries: the storming of a Capitol, the assassination of a president, and rising COVID cases unchecked by policy intervention.

In spite of these challenges, a recurring prideful boast is voiced in response – camp must continue. It has continued through dictatorship, *dechoukaj*, and the aftermath of natural disaster. This boast can be heard from the lips of teachers and administrators, and read in the text of the newsletters that they send to supporters around the globe.[9] The boast claims that music is necessary for sustenance. Food is essential, but so much more constitutes a citizen, whether that citizen be of Haiti, or of the world. Haitians have spoken of, written of, sounded out an enduring quest to be cosmopolitans, citizens of the world on equal footing with people from other places, and the music performed during summer camp, indeed the practice of summer camp itself, is central to that assertion.

This claim to global citizenship also requires a concomitant rejection of trauma porn.[10] When tragedy strikes, and Haiti is thrust into a global media glare, the repetition of familiar frames with racist roots shapes a range of responses, from the individual affective to the policies of other nations. Additionally, the repetition of images across media platforms stresses a mainstream imaging/imagining.[11] These ruin images, following the work of Dora Apel, proscribe the reception and treatment of Haiti and Haitians globally.[12] Take, for example,

9 For example, a newsletter from February 2021 enumerated difficulties including COVID-19, the presidential assassination, and ongoing kidnappings. The school director, however, was careful to introduce these challenges in the context of the many challenges countries around the world are facing. He goes on to write that 'these three things have created an atmosphere of fear and for the past two weeks schools stopped again . . . We have worked hard since January 4 . . . but for the past few weeks, schools have been stopped. We will not stop: Our plan is 1) to dedicate our Easter Concert to our Maestro Julio Racine in April 11, 2021, 2) to have regular individual and group lessons when possible, 3) to continue the Ecole Ste Trinité class lessons when schools are in session, 4) to continue to use and develop the "Zoom" home lessons and 5) to continue Recitals for the parents, again – when possible.'

10 The phrase 'trauma porn' has etymological and ideological roots in the 'torture porn' and 'war porn' of the early 2000s, but has most recently entered the lexicon of Black Lives Matter discussants concerned with rapidly proliferating images of black death.

11 Consider the possible ramifications of a news media story with a provocative header image being posted and shared throughout social mediascapes – as has happened with the 2010 and 2021 earthquakes.

12 See Dora Apel, *Beautiful, Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

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the Biden administration's response to the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse. The familiar frame of a paternalistic US posture towards Haiti guides the media's presentation of the facts and informs the administration's policy decisions. The challenge of being hamstrung by history is nothing new: though separated by twenty years, Haitian-American anthropologists Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Gina Ulysse both sounded the alarm of caution about easy acceptance of these frames.[13] These authors describe the aspect of self-fulfilling prophecy that constant negative news about Haiti engenders. Haiti becomes 'the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere' through a constant restatement of that tag line.

With the struggle over narrative power in mind, the composition sung about ruin accrues new meanings. 'N'ap Debat' can roughly translate to 'we are fighting', though the translation by the text's author Gabriel Guillaume offered on the composer's website settles on 'we're hangin' on'.[14] Throughout the score, there are multiple phrases that could be understood in a few different ways. These phrases serve differing interpretations of content and intent, and I am challenged by comparing what this piece might mean to an ensemble and audience with little-to-no experience with Haitian Kreyòl and its multiple significations, as well as what the performing experience of a Haitian ensemble might be. The multiple possible interpretations that attend this piece's lyrics are but one type of representation of the struggle for narrating rights. The footage of the MSVMA performance lives on via Guillaume's YouTube channel, along with several other performances of the composer's material in various countries. As you follow the link to the MSVMA performance provided in the footnote, consider the potential contrasts between the lyric interpretations and performer subjectivities.[15]

The Haitian cultural embrace of the folkloric is readily apparent in performances of the composition 'N'ap Debat'. The song is a cautious response to the 2010 earthquake, a key moment in the definition of Haitianness for both internal and external reviewers. There are several layers of meaning to listen out for within this performance. The exclamation 'woy', used throughout Haiti's *départements* and dialects, is mobilized here as sonic background and linguistic relief. It is the first word sung in the piece, and appears as both a brief tenuto and a longer series of notes tied over bars. This is remarkably similar to its deployment in speech: woy can be used as a short exclamation (Yikes!) or something much more drawn out (Yiiiiiiiiikes. . .). Other patterns in the music mimic life events – 'twazièm son fenk sonnen' (b. 9, 0:31) or 'the third bell rang' has a staggered entry, similar to the echo or reverberation of an actual church bell. The following phrase 'solèy kouche lontan' (b. 13, 0:38) or 'the sun set long ago' breaks the entry further into three parts, as an animated sunset might be illustrated. 'Doulè a rèdo. Lanati dechennen met tout moun anba kòd' (b. 16, 0:45) or 'What unbearable pain, Nature derailed, and put everyone under stress' is the first simultaneously sung phrase in the composition.

Unison can also be an informative technique – the unison arrival of vocal forces in bar 60 (1:38) on the tonic gains significance as a sonicization of the earthquake, which happened 'sanzatann', or

13 See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; and Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*.

14 Sydney Guillaume website: https://sydneyguillaume.com/compositions/nap-debat-text.pdf.

15 The MSVMA's performance of the work is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc6naehV838 (accessed 19 November 2021).

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all of the sudden, or without waiting/without warning. Moreover, not every moment in the composition requires translation. The chorus of plaintive 'amwe' or 'help' (b. 68, 1:56) seems to draw on the sympathies of audiences regardless of familiarity with the Kreyòl language. The 'dies irae' statement at bar 90 (2:56) is also arguably familiar to a US based choral audience.

There are, however, several signifiers that lie beyond the grasp of non-Haitian audiences. The statement 'nan pwen bouch pou pale' (b. 80, 2:22) is translated in a score guide as 'I am at a loss for words', but for those acquainted with common significatory practice within the Kreyòl language specifically and the African diaspora more broadly, this might also register as the more literal 'there were no mouths to speak'. The descriptions of Haiti rendered in the second half of the score wax proverbial, and may sound familiar to students of these enigmatic phrases: 'Ayiti, ou se yon fanm vanyan' or 'Haiti, you're a valiant woman.' The distillation of large cultural concepts into short phrases should render an idea of how culturally competent a listener or performer might need to be in order to engage with this composition at the most informed level. For example, the entire (musical) phrase is 'Ayiti, Ayiti, ou se yon fanm vanyan, kenbe la, pa lage.' Directly translated by the composer's chosen translator, this reads, 'Haiti, you're a valiant woman, hold on, don't let go.' Besides the nuances of a loaded nationalistic 'valiant woman' discourse, other possible translations for 'pa lage' include 'don't throw it away', 'don't throw yourself away', 'don't discount yourself' or 'don't throw Haiti (the valiant woman) away'. Because the object is not directly invoked in this phrase, the phrase is open to a number of meanings that may be simultaneously true. In performing this work, groups such as MSVMA and their audiences rely on a single, official translation, whereas Les Petits Chanteurs, and potentially other groups with Kreyòl speakers are privy to a host of additional meanings and possibilities.

The voice parts come closer and closer near the ending, as the song declares 'Ayiti p'ap peri', that Haiti is not perishing, not dying. It is a refusal of the 'failed state' moniker and a rebuttal to those who might say that the nation has met its demise. After some sequences, the voices resolve by step in a move reminiscent of African choral practices that are familiar to the Western ear. They then offer a verbal dissent – 'mm-mmm' or 'no'. The audience in Cange registers a raucous approval. When the conductor signals the cut, children and adults cheer, as if to affirm that indeed, Haiti is not dying. They are the evidence of its continued vibrancy. They approve this message.

'N'ap Debat' is a compelling narration of an unbroken Haitian spirit. In composing it, the Haitian-American Guillaume enters a mainstream US discourse to tell a story of Haitian responses to a natural disaster, ascribing dignity to those who experienced it. In performing it, Les Petits Chanteurs – some of whose members have related acute memories of surviving – reinscribe this dignity. Through their ecstatic reception, audience members in Cange, Mirebalais on 27 July 2014 confirmed their desire for what Haitian American anthropologist Gina Ulysse terms 'new narratives'. These new narratives can be sounded, and in this composition, Guillaume skilfully interpolates Kreyòl text with Western art music motifs in standard Western notation in response to a commission by a United States-based choral group. The composition's very origin is thus politically eclectic. Performances of it are bound up with the machinations of race, power, and difference.

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Rubble accumulates quickly in the wake of a disaster. Ruins, on the other hand, are established through story. Products of narrative, they become legend through the words used to describe them. Narrative is often used by those in power to tell stories about the disempowered, but marginalized people have the ability to tell stories and shape narratives too. In singing of ruin, Les Petits Chanteurs continued to clear the rubble in anticipation of building something new.

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Listening to Radioactive Rubble: Vocal Decay, Gender, and Nuclear Ruination in the Marshall Islands

JESSICA A. SCHWARTZ

Abstract

This article explores how Marshallese radiation songs, written during and after the nuclear testing period as nuclear survivors tried to make sense of their sufferings, yield insight into processes of imperial ruination, rupture, and fragmentation by resounding the powerful impress of radioactive decay in Marshallese lives. In assessing the parameters through which radiation becomes sensible, how, and to whom, it becomes all the clearer how the US nuclear project can be considered in terms of 'imperial ruination'. US geopolitical accrual has depended on the structural dispossession of Marshallese from their Indigenous agency rooted in and routed through their matrilineal culture. Focusing on women's performances from the Rongelapese community, the presence of radiation – lyrically and affectively – can be traced through vocalized moments of decay that intimate how rubble is embodied and shared in the aftermath of nuclear destruction.

In 2011 Cornell University in New York City hosted an exhibition, 'Nuke York, New York: Nuclear Holocaust in the American Imagination from Hiroshima to 9/11'.[1] The curators' description read: 'depictions of a nuclear attack on New York City are as emblematic of the atomic age in the United States as is the mushroom cloud. Nuke York, New York encourages visitors to experience and interpret this recurring imagery from the Cold War and beyond'.[2] Images of a nuclear apocalypse with modern metropoles reduced to piles of twisted

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1 'Nuke York, New York' [Exhibition], *Cornell AAP*, https://aap.cornell.edu/news-events/nuke-york-new-york.

2 'Nuke York, New York'.

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