

American Studies, Sound Studies, and Cultural Memory

Woody Van Dyke's *San Francisco* as Sonic Contact Zone

Susanne Leikam

Abstract

Each year on April 18, the city of San Francisco commemorates the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire with a series of elaborate and tightly scripted ceremonies. As one of the key events, the ceremony at Lotta's Fountain features, among others, commemorative speeches, the hanging of a memorial wreath, and the ceremonial wailing of fire sirens, followed by a minute of silence for the victims. The acoustic tension building up between the sirens' piercing warning sounds and the ensuing collective gesture of mournful quietude is subsequently resolved by the communal sing-along of the upbeat theme song "San Francisco" from the eponymous Academy Award-winning 1936 musical film. This performance seems to stand in stark contrast to the other events at the ceremony, which are painstakingly staged to appear historically accurate. Nonetheless, the anachronistic inclusion of the triumphant "San Francisco," written three decades after the earthquake and released in the context of a purely fictional narrative, fits the purpose of memorializing the 1906 earthquake, since it sonically embodies the "new" city's founding myth. *San Francisco*, especially its theme song, this article argues, memorializes the 1906 disaster as a social equalizer and a patriotic affirmation of American resilience by portraying the pre-earthquake city as a loud, decadent, and disorderly soundscape that only the earthquake could unite, refine, and ultimately Americanize.

Suggested Citation: Leikam, Susanne. "American Studies, Sound Studies, and Cultural Memory: Woody Van Dyke's *San Francisco* as Sonic Contact Zone." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 1, no. 2 (2020): 231–244, DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v1i2.56](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v1i2.56).

Keywords: Woody Van Dyke; San Francisco (1936 film); San Francisco; cultural memory

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and an external peer reviewer.

Copyright: © 2020 Susanne Leikam. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which allows for the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

American Studies, Sound Studies, and Cultural Memory

Woody Van Dyke's *San Francisco* as Sonic Contact Zone

Susanne Leikam

Each year on April 18, the city of San Francisco commemorates the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire with a series of elaborate and tightly scripted ceremonies. As one of the key events, the ceremony at Lotta's Fountain includes, among others, commemorative speeches, the hanging of a memorial wreath, and the ceremonial wailing of fire sirens, followed by a minute of silence for the victims.¹ The acoustic tension building up between the sirens' piercing warning sounds and the ensuing collective gesture of mournful quietude is subsequently resolved by the communal sing-along of the upbeat theme song "San Francisco" from the eponymous Academy Award-winning 1936 musical film. This performance seems to stand in stark contrast to the other events at the ceremony, which are painstakingly staged to appear historically accurate. Nonetheless, the anachronistic inclusion of "San Francisco," "a triumphant slice of musical Americana" written three decades after the earthquake and released in the context of a purely fictional narrative,² fits the purpose of authentically memorializing the 1906 earthquake, since it sonically embodies the "new" city's founding myth. *San Francisco*, especially its theme song, this article argues, memorializes the 1906 disaster as a social equalizer and a patriotic affirmation of American resilience by portraying the pre-earthquake city as a loud, decadent, and disorderly soundscape that only the earthquake could unite, refine, and ultimately Americanize.

American Studies, Sound Studies, and Cultural Memory

The engagement with *San Francisco*'s sonic imagining of the Bay Area at the turn of the century participates in the recent global surge of research in the field of sound

studies, which Jonathan Sterne outlines as the “interdisciplinary ferment” that, “by analyzing both sonic practices and discourses and institutions that describe them, . . . redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world.”³ Pioneered by composer R. Murray Schafer’s study *The Tuning of the World* (1977) and expanded by historians such as Emily Thompson and Mark M. Smith, sound studies has since rapidly gained momentum in the humanities,⁴ prompting scholars such as Kara Keeling, Josh Kun, and Petra M. Meyer to proclaim a “sonic” or “acoustic turn.”⁵ In American studies, the shift to considering the “culture, consumption, and politics of sound seriously” provides a much-needed complement to the field’s zealous dedication to American visual culture,⁶ highlighting the interconnectedness of all senses in the production, dissemination, and reception of cultural artifacts.⁷

This article pays particular attention to what Richard Cullen Rath calls soundways—that is, “the paths, trajectories, transformations, mediations, practices and techniques—in short, the ways—that people employ to interpret and express their attitudes and beliefs about sound.”⁸ Accordingly, the focus on soundways exposes the degree to which American popular culture has made use of sound in the first half of the twentieth century in order to geographically and culturally map and, hence, “order” places such as San Francisco, an aspiring city in the far west. It further discloses the integral role that these soundscapes played in the memorialization of historical events such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Through the pervasive destruction of more than one third of the city’s commercial and cultural center and a death toll of more than 3,000 people, the earthquake of 1906 constituted a major caesura in the city’s history.⁹ Understood as “the place and process where past and present interact in instances of individual and communal self-positioning and definition,”¹⁰ the cultural memory of an event is never stable—as Maurice Halbwachs emphasizes in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), a foundational work of memory studies—but changes over time within cultural communities, more often than not framing the past in ways that cast the present situation in a favorable light.¹¹ In the continuous processes of renegotiating American cultural memories, popular, often mass-produced cultural artifacts play an integral role through their pervasive appeal and ability to disseminate their narratives widely. That some memory scholars such as Marita Sturken foreground the visual nature of these “technologies of memory” simultaneously attests to the scholarly neglect of sound in memory studies and the still far-reaching underestimation of the affective appeal of sounds.¹²

The time of *San Francisco*’s release in June 1936 marks the transition from a first generation of eyewitnesses to a second generation of San Franciscans, most of whom had only experienced the 1906 calamity vicariously. As a result, the highly successful and popular MGM production *San Francisco* partook in reviving and pro-

moting cultural narratives that strategically shaped the cultural memory of the disaster so as to fit the historical moment. Without the explicit mention of pressing 1930s social concerns, encompassing, among others, the economic hardship of the Great Depression, the political turmoil of strikes, the continuing transition toward an industrial and urban America, and the rise of nativist sentiments on account of mass immigration, the film nonetheless emerges as a cultural product of its time. Its portrayal of the earthquake as a blessing in disguise that establishes “sonic order” in the city and works as a moral corrective to, and purifier for, San Francisco’s rough frontier past offered an archetypical template for optimism in the face of disaster and an uplifting affirmation of American ideologies, such as progress and resilience in times of hardship.

This sanitized memorialization leaves out the darker chapters of the 1906 calamity. For instance, the city’s high risk of earthquakes and fire damage was well-known at the time, but the city authorities neglected to pass more comprehensive legislation and also skimmed on fire prevention measures. Similar failures took place during the calamity when rich neighborhoods were saved from the fires at the expense of poorer districts, and Mayor Eugene Schmitz (illegally) issued a proclamation that read: “The Federal Troops, the members of the Regular Police Force and all Special Police Officers [i.e., deputized citizens] have been authorized . . . to KILL any and all persons found engaged in Looting or in the Commission of Any Other Crime.”¹³ The long road to full recovery was equally tainted: For example, authorities discriminated heavily against minority groups, especially women, the poor, and the Chinese.¹⁴ By strategically forgetting the many historical failures in the field of disaster prevention, the numerous missteps regarding disaster management, and the countless social injustices enacted during the lengthy recovery process, *San Francisco* demonstrates that “inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence.”¹⁵

Woody Van Dyke’s *San Francisco* as a Sonic Contact Zone

Throughout its 115-minute runtime, Woody Van Dyke’s musical film *San Francisco* uses sound to embody the heterogeneity of, and tensions between, different sonic traditions, which can ultimately only be reconciled by the deafening rumble of the 1906 earthquake.¹⁶ In so doing, it sonically imagines the city’s disaster-induced transition from a small, rugged frontier town to an urbanized American metropolis in the 1930s. *San Francisco* maps the city’s different acoustic spaces and sonic traditions and exposes the ways in which these soundscapes presuppose, mirror, penetrate, and contest one another. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the cultural contact zone, which denotes the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,

such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today,¹⁷ the filmic rendition of San Francisco can be termed a sonic contact zone, highlighting the many ways in which sound enacts, mirrors, and, at times, evades affect, relationships of power, and conceptualizations of the Other.

Right from the very beginning, *San Francisco* renders the pre-earthquake city a clamorous and largely arrhythmic place: Showing the New Year's Eve festivities in the public places all over town, the first scene firmly establishes this sonic memory of turn-of-the-century San Francisco by introducing the viewers to a pandemonium of concurrent sounds such as the rattling of street cars, fire bells, the popping of Champagne bottles, raucous brass band music, rowdy laughter, the shouting of New Year's greetings, and the singing of celebrating San Franciscans. These sounds perform the real-and-imagined social and cultural disorder that, according to Barbara Berglund, has been commonly associated with San Francisco's unconventionally rapid genesis as a Gold Rush settlement, ethnically diverse population, predominantly male residents, and unusually frank acceptance of vice and violence.

Later scenes, especially those taking place on the Barbary Coast, San Francisco's infamous hot spot of vice near the waterfront, continue the impression of sonic disorder, interweaving the loud voices (many of them with European accents) of businessmen and servants, rowdy bar fights, vaudeville music, and election campaign slogans. This sonic representation—emphasizing loudness, irregularity, and disorder—needs to be understood in view of its contemporaneous sonic contexts: In the urban centers of the East and Mid-West, especially New York and Chicago, middle-class Americans started anti-noise campaigns—most prominently among them the American Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise (founded in 1907)—that effected a wide range of ordinances regulating unwanted and unpleasant sounds in public spaces in the time period up to the 1930s. In this context, “noise,” as Mark Smith, Mitchell Snay, and Bruce Smith elaborate, was not so much the “rhythmic, ordered sound of progress,” which many middle-class Americans saw in the industrial and infrastructural hums and thuds, but the “sporadic, unpredictable noise of the frontier” that—in the eyes of many—signified primitiveness and backwardness.¹⁸ In this manner, the anti-noise movements considered the arrhythmic racket of public urban spaces indicative of “a barbarous civilization” and threatening to the American “belief in progress and faith in efficiency.”¹⁹

In *San Francisco*, however, the din of the streetcars, the loud nighttime open-air music, the racket of the intoxicated partiers—in short, everything that somewhere else might have been classified as noise—is not depicted as undesired or devious but, as the laughter of the revelers and their intimate familiarity with the high noise level show, embraced as positive and constitutive of the spirit of the place. The delight

that San Franciscans in the film take in their purportedly uncivilized noisescape sonically marks the city as different from the contemporaneous American norm, reverberating with romanticized pride in San Francisco's exceptionalism with respect to both its virtues and its debaucheries.²⁰ The clamor and arrhythmicity of *San Francisco*'s soundscape is punctuated only in a few instances, as for example, when the dialogue moves from the subject of life in the city to that of the characters' innermost emotions or when places such as the local church or the opera house are depicted as sonic enclaves with radically different musical traditions. In this manner, the film's soundscape represents pre-earthquake San Francisco in general, and the Barbary Coast in particular, as a fast-paced, chaotic environment free from middle-class American conventions and restraints.

This sonic characterization of the spirit of the city provides the backdrop for the film's plot. *San Francisco* tells the story of a love triangle that brings different musical traditions and sound practices into contact. In the film, the classically-trained soprano Mary Blake (Jeanette MacDonald), a clergyman's daughter from rural Colorado, moves to the city with the long-term goal of singing at the prestigious Tivoli Opera House. Upon arrival, she finds her new workplace, the Bristol, burnt to the ground. Desperate for money, she walks into the nearby concert saloon Paradise, the "hottest spot on the Barbary Coast," where she is then hired as a singer by its owner Blackie Norton (Clark Gable), a dyed-in-the-wool San Franciscan who—in the words of the film—was "born on the coast, raised on the coast, lives on the coast, and cares for the coast."²¹ Despite their genuine disagreement on the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of music, it does not take long before the two develop a mutual attraction to one another. Their fledgling relationship is disrupted by Jack Burley (Jack Holt), the affluent and well-connected second-generation Irish owner of the Tivoli Opera, whose musical tastes are akin to Blake's and who seeks not only to hire her permanently but also to marry her.

As the owner of the most notorious, rowdy, and popular music saloon on the Barbary Coast, Blackie Norton epitomizes the American concert-saloon tradition, which constitutes one of the main precursors of large-scale commercial American entertainment formats such as the variety show and vaudeville. Presumably having taken their cue from the British music hall, these combinations of bar and auditorium offered its American patrons the opportunity to enjoy a medley of "light" music and predominantly female dance acts while having drinks, flirting with waitresses, gambling, smoking cigars, and, frequently, engaging in brawls.²² In accordance with this cultural practice, Norton's Paradise unites drunken debauchery and risqué entertainment, sonically performing San Francisco's pre-earthquake reputation for being "the scene of more viciousness and depravity . . . than any other area of vice and iniquity on the American continent."²³

Elaborating on the aesthetics of the performances in concert saloons, Parker Zellers explains that “the early variety show tended to be boisterous and unsophisticated” and “built primarily on the elements of blackface minstrelsy: comic and sentimental songs, jig and buck-and-wing dancing, instrumental solos, and comic skits were the initial ingredients.”²⁴ This ties Norton to a distinctly lowbrow musical tradition, which generally values the presentation of the music more than its aesthetic qualities. *San Francisco* emphasizes, at times even mocks, Norton’s neglect of musical finesse in several scenes as, for example, when he responds to Mary Blake’s inquiry whether the Paradise is in need of singers with the repeated order to see her legs or, when asked whether he likes Puccini, he inquires whether said Puccini ran “a joint down on Dupont Street.”²⁵

While Norton is thus depicted as a musical philistine who privileges popular melodies and commercial motives over “art,” he at the same time represents a musical tradition that highlights communal belonging and solidarity. This emerges, for instance, in the shared conviviality that arises among the audience during musical performances at his Paradise concert saloon and the fact that he, a professed staunch atheist, anonymously donates an organ—the key instrument of sacred musical practices—to Father Mullin’s (Spencer Tracy) church community. This puts him in close proximity to folk music, which, according to Ray Allen, recent scholarly approaches understand “as any music (regardless of style, origin, or age) that is community based and transmitted aurally in small, face-to-face performance settings.”²⁶ Norton’s lack of appreciation for refined music is thus contrasted with his concern for the community and its value systems when he decides to run for the board of supervisors for the purposes of, among others, keeping greedy out-of-town real estate developers at bay and establishing stricter fire and building codes to make San Francisco safer. While good at heart, Norton is too enticed by the glittery decadence of the Barbary Coast and political power to fully commit to putting Blake and her career before his goals. Because of this, Mary Blake (temporarily) enters a relationship with Jack Burley, Norton’s romantic rival.

In contrast to Norton’s position amid the hustle and bustle of the Barbary Coast and his association with popular lowbrow music, *San Francisco* portrays Jack Burley as Norton’s (and thus the Barbary Coast’s) sonic antipode. Characterized first and foremost by his ownership of the grand Tivoli Opera House (located in close proximity to San Francisco’s main artery Market Street), Burley represents the sophisticated sonic tradition of European art music. As a connoisseur of classical music and what has traditionally been referred to as “high culture,” he is the first to recognize Blake’s extraordinary talent and proficiency as an opera singer and, as opposed to Norton, wants to foster her career and, figuratively as well as literally, show her “another side of San Francisco.”²⁷ The viewers get an impression of Burley’s “side of San Francisco”

when Blake enters into a relationship with Burley. In grand style and with much pomp, he features her as the female lead in prestigious European operas at the Tivoli. In order to show how Blake mesmerizes the largely upper-class audiences in San Francisco, the film shows a medley of her singing French arias as Gretchen in Charles Gounod's opera *Faust* (1859) and performing "Sempre Libera" as Violetta in Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853).²⁸

As the son of an Irish immigrant mother who came into wealth during the Gold Rush, Burley's life story as part of San Francisco's nouveaux riches fittingly reverberates with the intricate entanglements of classical music and class in American history. Unraveling these connections, David Monod chronicles the emergence of elite European-style musical culture in the United States, among others, as a reaction to the rise of music as a popular, mass-produced market commodity:

After the Civil War America's gentry swelled as a new business elite emerged and married into it. As this new money shed some of its newness it adopted the social pretensions of the old [elites], building monuments to itself such as New York's Metropolitan Opera (the Met) in 1883. The idea that serious music was different because only the initiated could understand it proved to be attractive to this elite in pursuit of self-definition. Although the rich were not the only people attending concerts, classical-musical life was now capitalized by them, and its popularity shrank to involve few beyond the well-to-do.²⁹

Classical music, according to Monod, was thus used to reestablish order in the American class system. By labeling the Burleys "San Francisco's aristocracy," the film casts Burley not only as adherent to an elitist approach to music, but also puts him in line with a non-democratic and hence inherently un-American tradition, which, in turn, pits him even more harshly against Norton.³⁰

While Burley and Norton represent two very different sonic traditions, they also share pivotal characteristics: As white male proprietors of two successful acoustic spaces in San Francisco, they occupy the very top of the local sonic power hierarchy. Involved exclusively as decision-makers and financiers, they control the musical production processes at their places. Especially at the Paradise, this power divide pits white masculinity against a staff composed largely of women and ethnic minorities, many of them members of the working class. Both Burley and Norton are well-connected to San Francisco's authorities and use their influence to silence—both literally and metaphorically—the other side: Burley successfully bribes the police to shut down Norton's Paradise because of its supposed lack of a proper alcohol license, and Norton plots to enforce his contract with Blake by having her dragged off the stage of the sold-out Tivoli (which he ultimately cannot bring himself to do since he, too, is spellbound by Blake's voice).

In *San Francisco*'s conflict-laden sonic contact zone, Marie Blake plays a crucial role. Through her classical vocal training and her expertise in the cultured European-style music (acquired "from the best teacher in Denver"³¹) as well as her comprehensive knowledge of church music (obtained from her preacher father), she is intimately familiar with Burley's musical tradition. Yet, her previous life in small-town Colorado has further bestowed her with the paradigmatic character traits of the American heartland, such as ambition, kindness, and service to the community, which also connect her to Norton's musical tradition. By analogy with Margaret Connell Szasz's concept of cultural brokerage,³² Blake can thus be regarded as a cultural—or rather sonic—intermediary who is able to move across sonic borders. On the level of sound, this ability to adapt more and more successfully to very different cultural and musical traditions is demonstrated, among others, through her ultimate success with both Norton's working-class audiences and Burley's upper-class opera patrons. It also emerges in her affiliation with church music and her guest appearances in Father Mullin's church choir, which insinuate the breadth of her sonic spectrum, musical expertise, and moral integrity.

What, furthermore, makes Blake integral to *San Francisco*'s sonic contact zone is her starring role in the vast majority of the film's diegetic musical performances. This also ties her closely to the theme song, whose catchy chorus accompanies *San Francisco* from the opening credits to the film's final tones for a total of five performances on the diegetic stage—each involving Mary Blake. In addition, the fact that Blake, previously a "stranger" to the Bay Area, finds a new "home" in the city strongly ties her to the highly memorable chorus lyrics, which praise the Golden City for its mythologized immigrant past:

San Francisco, open your golden gate,
You let no stranger wait outside your door.
San Francisco, here is your wandering one
Saying, "I'll wander no more."³³

Its prominence and frequent repetition make the song, especially its chorus, a leit-motif and keynote sound. In their propensity to "constitute the essence of a place at a particular moment in history" and "help us understand the key values of a given society,"³⁴ keynote sounds enable glimpses into the cultural fabric and the meaning making processes at play.

Reproducing *San Francisco*'s sonic contact zone, the different recitals of "San Francisco" are central to the representation of the sonic disorder and the memorialization of the 1906 earthquake. On the one hand, the song audibly enacts Mary Blake's development from an outsider to an active and integral participant in the San Francisco community. When Blake first sings the theme song in the Paradise,

for instance, she does so very slowly and in a refined manner in her operatic soprano voice, which demonstrates the extent to which she and the musical tradition she represents are out of place on the Barbary Coast. Ordered by Norton to sing faster and adopt a burlesque style, she complies with his wishes and over time mesmerizes the Paradise's audience but still does not seem to belong. When she, by this point an established soprano at the Tivoli, spontaneously presents the song at a Barbary Coast musical contest in order to raise money for the bankrupt Paradise, she begins to reappropriate it to her tastes and visibly and audibly enjoys singing it. By animatedly belting out the melody in her soprano voice, displaying forceful body language, and varying the melody and lyrics at her discretion, she actively takes possession of the song in the Barbary Coast's Lyric Hall. When the entire audience (including Burley and other upper-class patrons) is swept off its feet and starts frantically singing along, Blake—having bridged the two musical traditions—assumes the position of a choir leader. In the shared act of singing together, the performance at Lyric Hall is also crucial because it closely interweaves the film's theme song with a sense of community and cohesion.³⁵

While Blake partly manages to bridge different acoustic traditions, she is unable, however, to unite them. This task is only fulfilled by the sounds of the earthquake, which interrupt the applause for Blake's Lyric Hall performance of "San Francisco." Over the course of three minutes, the film juxtaposes a cacophony of ear-piercing sounds—from the loud, low-pitched rumbling of the ground, collapsing walls and screaming voices to cracking water hydrants—with spectacular visuals of destruction. Literally drowning out the city's sonic disorder, the earthquake's pandemonium of noise is followed by several minutes of silence, only punctuated by the earthquake's resumption, which is, again, followed by silence.³⁶ This seismic noiscape can be read as an extension of the theme song "San Francisco" since it finally realizes what the song promises, namely to unite *all* people in San Francisco and provide a home—a new, more orderly, and modern home—for them. Metonymically denoting the entire city's purging of moral depravity, un-American elitism, and social disorder, the earthquake kills Burley and effects Norton's religious conversion.

At this point in the narrative, the theme song again assumes a key role in the memorialization of the earthquake. When cries of "the fire is out" finally reach the reunited couple, Mary Blake and Blackie Norton, accompanied by the other survivors of the 1906 earthquake and fires, walk from the hills toward San Francisco's devastated city center, merrily chanting the first and fourth stanza of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."³⁷ In this moment, the city's heterogeneous soundscape is finally unified and all sonic disorder has disappeared. In the very last seconds of the film, the camera's gaze lets the smoldering ruins morph into the modern—that is 1930s—cityscape of San Francisco,³⁸ while the final tones of "Glory, glory, hallelujah" merge into

the chorus of “San Francisco.”

The blurring of the joyful collective singing of Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—the preeminent military anthem of the Union cause during the American Civil War that has since morphed into a more generalized patriotic affirmation of resilience, progress, and the “nation’s inevitable triumph over her enemies”—into the tunes of “San Francisco” elevates the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire from a local event into a matter of national import.³⁹ In so doing, the city’s rise from the “wickedest, most corrupt, most godless city in America,” to use Father Mullin’s words in the film, to an “industrious, mature, respectable” seaport, as the epigraph to *San Francisco* puts it, is depicted as a decidedly American success story.⁴⁰ As such, it affirms powerful American ideologies and nation-building mythologies.

The religious diction of the two stanzas of the “Battle Hymn” sung in the film further suggests that the earthquake was a divine blessing that rid America of moral decay, social disorder, and corruption.⁴¹ In the process, it also evokes notions of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. The fact that San Franciscans from all walks of life do not despair but defiantly join together for the “Battle Hymn” is also pivotal to the memorialization of the earthquake: The collective sonic response to disaster alludes to a post-earthquake San Francisco of democracy and social equality, and, more importantly, paradigmatically illustrates American resilience in times of hardship and crisis. In exhibiting the splendidly rebuilt city, the final glimpse into San Francisco’s future confirms viewers’ assumptions that the promises raised by the sonic blending of the “Battle Hymn” with “San Francisco” will ultimately be honored and a new and modern metropolis will rise from the ashes. The musical pairing of the theme song with a national anthem that is emotionally charged with American patriotism and the resolve to overcome all hardships further increases the affective potential of the film.

Conclusion

By uniting heterogeneous sonic traditions into a distinctly “American” music, *San Francisco* memorializes the 1906 earthquake and fires as a blessing in disguise that not only worked as a corrective to San Francisco’s Barbary Coast decadence, but that also brought forth modern American city purged of vice. Promoted vigorously by politicians, the press, and San Francisco’s economic elites in the wake of the 1906 calamity, this narrative was by no means novel in 1936, but it resonated strongly with the zeitgeist. It “offered Depression-weary Americans a portrait of people rescued from calamity through faith in God and their own resourcefulness.”⁴² For this reason, it became a must-see and rose to become the top-grossing movie of the year in the United States upon its release.⁴³ The film’s spectacular earthquake effects,

which earned it the reputation of being the first American disaster blockbuster,⁴⁴ its numerous emotionally rousing musical hits, and its high-caliber production quality further contributed to *San Francisco*'s popularity, resulting in six Academy Award nominations (among others Outstanding Production, Best Director, Best Actor) and the Academy Award for Best Sound Recording.⁴⁵

The film's immense popularity entailed that its keynote sound and leitmotif "San Francisco" was widely disseminated. Over the course of the next couple of decades, the theme song—and with it the fictional sonic myth about the city's refounding—became more and more dissociated from the film. In 1984, it was even adopted as one of San Francisco's two official municipal songs.⁴⁶ As an affect-charged, autonomous cultural text that connotes American resilience and communal spirit, "San Francisco" has frequently been sung collectively at official ceremonies and commemorative events, such as the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake commemorations. With every repetition, the traditional form of the sing-along performatively renews the nexus between "San Francisco," its lyrics and its melody, as well as notions of American resilience, progress, and optimism. In this manner, "San Francisco"—a sentimental fictional tune—has entered into collective memory of American disasters and secured its place as a performative gesture of collective remembrance and American resilience. This not only explains the anachronistic inclusion of the song in the annual commemoration of the 1906 earthquake and fires but also the interplay between historical fact and fiction so indicative of American cultural memory.

Notes

- 1 With very few variations in its key sequences, the quake ceremony program usually specifies the commemorative sound events at Lotta's Fountain as follows: "5:11 am: Announce countdown (start countdown just before 5:12)—5:12 am: Sirens—5:13 am: Minute of silence—5:14 am: Sing-a-long 'San Francisco.'" See Johnny Funcheap, "San Francisco's Annual 1906 Earthquake Ceremony," *FunCheapSF*, April 17, 2016, <https://sf.funcheap.com/city-guide/san-franciscos-annual-1906-earthquake-ceremony/>.
- 2 Edward Turk, *Hollywood Diva: A Biography of Jeanette MacDonald* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 183.
- 3 Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," in *Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.
- 4 Murray R. Schafer, *Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World: The Soundscape* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- 5 Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, "Introduction: Listening to American Studies," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 448, DOI: [10.1353/aq.2011.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2011.0037); Petra M. Meyer, ed., *Acoustic Turn* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2008).

- 6 Keeling and Kun, "Introduction," 446.
- 7 See, for example, W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2008), 55.
- 8 Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2.
- 9 Philip Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Gladys C. Hansen and Emmet Condon, *Denial of Disaster* (San Francisco, CA: Cameron & Co., 1989); Susanne Leikam, *Framing Spaces in Motion: Tracing Visualizations of Earthquakes into Twentieth-Century San Francisco* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015).
- 10 Udo Hebel, "Introduction," in *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Udo Hebel (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2001), x.
- 11 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," in *American Literature, American Culture*, ed. Gordon Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 213–16; Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 12 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 9.
- 13 Quoted in Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake*, 69.
- 14 For more details on San Francisco's failure to prevent and mitigate the pervasive damage from earthquake and fires and the far-reaching injustices committed on the long road to recovery, see: Andrea Rees Davies, *Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake*; Hansen and Condon, *Denial of Disaster*; Leikam, *Framing Spaces*.
- 15 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 4.
- 16 *San Francisco*, dir. Woody Van Dyke (Beverly Hills, CA: MGM, 1936).
- 17 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 34.
- 18 Mark M. Smith, Mitchell Snay, and Bruce R. Smith, "Coda: Talking Sound History," in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 366.
- 19 Raymond W. Smilor, "American Noise, 1900–1930," in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 320–21.
- 20 David Wyatt, *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe, and the Shaping of California* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1997), 54.
- 21 *San Francisco*.
- 22 Parker R. Zellers, "The Cradle of Variety: The Concert Saloon," *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 4 (1968): 578.
- 23 Herbert Asbury, quoted in Barbara Berglund, *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846–1906* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007),

- 60.
- 24 Zellers, "Cradle of Variety," 582.
- 25 *San Francisco*.
- 26 Ray Allen, "Folk Musical Traditions," in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon J. Bonner (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2018), <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=650>.
- 27 *San Francisco*.
- 28 While both operas were staged at the Tivoli in the years preceding the earthquake of 1906 (the *San Francisco Call*, for example, lists both for the coming opera season on January 8, 1905), it is telling that Blake takes on the lead role of two tragic women. In this manner, the intradiegetic operatic narrative foreshadows the failure of her relationship with Burley. Blake's performance of Verdi's "Sempre Libera" takes on an ironic notion since she—trapped in middle-class norms of decency, reliant on Burley's favor in terms of her musical career, and (ultimately) enraptured with Norton—is far from "free."
- 29 David Monod, "Art Music in the European Tradition," in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon J. Bonner (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=201>.
- 30 *San Francisco*.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Margaret Connell Szasz, *Between Indians and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).
- 33 *San Francisco*. MGM specifically commissioned "San Francisco" for this movie production from Walter Jurmann and Bronislaw Kaper (who composed the music together) and Gus Kahn (who wrote the lyrics). While the film mostly depicts the singing of the catchy chorus lines, there are two more stanzas, which continue the exaltation of San Francisco as the best possible place to live. Drawing on the city's self-proclaimed exceptionalism, the second stanza, for example, reads: "Other places only make me love you best / Tell me you're the heart of all the golden west." In addition, it evokes a sense of belonging and rootedness when stating: "San Francisco, welcome me home again. / I'm coming home to go roaming no more."
- 34 Mark M. Smith, "Introduction: Onward to Audible Pasts," in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), xi.
- 35 The increasing association of "San Francisco" with notions of collectivity and dedication to community is already started in the third performance, which—taking place during one of Norton's campaign events—also constitutes a communal sing-along of the song. As at Lyric Hall, Blake vocally leads the chanting crowds through her soprano voice, enforcing the personal bond between her and the theme song.
- 36 Below the earth's surface, seismic waves typically have a frequency between 20 and 20,000 Hertz and therefore lie outside of the audible range of humans. As a result, earthquakes have usually been sonified in films through their low-pitched surface rumble or the cornucopia of sounds triggered by the seismic waves. See Timothy Oleson, "On the Web: Shake, Rattle and Roll: What Does an Earthquake Sound Like?" *Earth: The Science Behind the Headlines*, August 8, 2012, <https://www.earthmagazine.org/article/web-shake-rattle-and-roll-what-does-earthquake-sound>.
- 37 *San Francisco*.

- 38 According to the Internet Movie Database, a shot of the Golden Gate Bridge (at the time still under construction) was added to the last scene after the film's premiere. When the film was re-released in 1948, the Golden Gate Bridge had lost its novelty as a symbol for modernization, which is why subsequent versions no longer include this shot. "San Francisco (1936): Alternate Versions," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028216/alternateversions>.
- 39 John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song That Marches On* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.
- 40 *San Francisco*.
- 41 The first stanza describes how "the Lord" "has trampled out the vintage / where the Grapes of Wrath are stored" and how he "has loosed the fateful lightning / of his terrible, swift sword." The fourth stanza tells of him "sifting out the souls of men / before his judgement-seat."
- 42 Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 184.
- 43 Frank S. Nugent, "'San Francisco,' at the Capitol, Is a Stirring Film of the Barbary Coast," *New York Times*, June 27, 1936, <https://www.nytimes.com/1936/06/27/archives/san-francisco-at-the-capitol-is-a-stirring-film-of-the-barbary.html>; Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 184.
- 44 See William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *The Great Depression in America: A Cultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 509.
- 45 MGM's musical team included, among many others, composers Walter Jurmann and Bronislaw Kaper, lyric writer Gus Kahn, and musical director Herbert P. Stothart. The production crew comprised, for example, director Woody Van Dyke, screen writer Anita Loos, recording director Douglas Shearer, and producer D. W. Griffith, who, according to the IMDb, also directed some scenes without, however, being credited for it. "San Francisco (1936): Full Credits," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028216/fullcredits>.
- 46 San Francisco's other official city song, adopted in October 1969, is "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." See Gladys C. Hansen, "San Francisco's Official Songs," *The Museum of the City of San Francisco*, accessed January 5, 2021, <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/song.html>.

About the Author

Susanne Leikam is an independent scholar who earned her doctorate degree in American studies at the University of Regensburg in Germany. Her research focuses on teaching, visual culture studies, memory studies, disaster studies, and ecocriticism. She is currently working on a project located at the nexus of environmental justice and transnational American studies. Susanne is the author of *Framing Spaces in Motion: Tracing Visualizations of Earthquakes into Twentieth-Century San Francisco* (Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015).