Sing Sing Penitentiary opened in 1826 to serve New York City’s growing population and crime rate, and was known in its early days for its stringent code of conduct. In the prison’s early days, warden Elam Lynds invented the lockstep style of moving inmates in closely interlinked lines, as well as the striped inmate uniforms used for easy identification – both of which would come to define the popular view of prison aesthetics for centuries.

Also influential was Sing Sing’s use of the Auburn system, a harsh penal method under which inmates labored as blacksmiths, tanners, bricklayers, etc. so the prison would turn a profit for the state, and were made to keep completely silent so as to be easier to control. The most common punishment for breaking the silence was flogging by the cat o’ nine tails — done in common areas so as to serve as a warning to others. When the reformist Eliza Farnham overturned many of these practices in 1844, she brought a piano into the women’s penitentiary as a symbol of her more social approach, which however still involved severe punishments.

Sing Sing introduced execution by electric chair on July 7th, 1891. Executions typically took place at 11:00 PM on Thursday nights, with the warden, the prison chaplain, seven guards, two doctors, 12 state-appointed witnesses, and the “state electrician” (or executioner) present. Before entering the execution room, the condemned would wait in an ante-room referred to as the Dance Hall, which had a Victrola phonograph. They could request any record they wanted, within reason, to hear before their death. In the execution room, a sign on the wall read “SILENCE,” indicating that none present should speak except the chaplain giving a benediction or the prisoner stating their last words.

“They say the victims of electrocution and the subjects of electroshock therapy, when the power is switched on, do a sort of dance,” wrote Ursula Le Guin.† The silence demanded by Sing Sing’s execution room was the soundtrack to this dance.

We at Fake Music generally consider aestheticized silence to be our purview, and realize that in the case of Sing Sing its implementation sought to deprive inmates of their personhood. But if the prison’s silence was an astringent meant to facilitate discipline and maintain authority, then music was a balm used to ease the pain of these practices, which is equally troubling. Our field aims to understand the many connections between music and the absence of music; here their connection is horrid, and we offer only solemn recognition of their misuse.

We appreciate your support.

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