We were beset by sounds even before we step through the door of Delme synagogue. Amidst the noise of the wind in the trees and the passing traffic, a highly dissonant piece for solo piano drifted out of concealed speakers (the instrumental source, piano Schaefer, was nowhere to be seen). The sound would undoubtedly have pleased the composer Christian Wolff, who instinctively developed his own version of Arnold Schoenberg’s 12-tone system and encouraged his mentor John Cage to play piano with the window open to let the street noise in. The sound is a sonification of a piece by Latifa Echakhch, Resolutions (in progress) (2008), which, on the walls inside, records in charcoal the numbers of every UN resolution on the Israel–Palestine conflict. The numbers seem to expand deliriously, climbing up to the first floor, even intruding into the next level. Like memories, they are also steadily disintegrating, their dust collecting on the floor. But by rendering them musically, otherwise obscure relationships become clear. As in Schoenberg’s 12-tone technique, their dissonances are never resolved.

Upstairs, more conflicts were rendered in sound. Franck Leibovici’s evenings of poetry and other inspiring speeches (2013), specially commissioned for the show, extends his ongoing ‘mini-opera for non-musicians’ with a set of nine music stands, each bearing the distinctive off-white sheets of music manuscripts. The French artist has transcribed the collective music of special forces troops, comments threads and jihadists, all found online, taking care to spare no aforzando, no carefully notated nuance espressivo. In the extensive text beside the installation, Leibovici highlights the parallel between his scores and the so-called fake books of old which ratified the oral tradition of jazz into something objectified, lifeless, commodifiable. But the lack, in these scores, of all the slides, slurs and microtones which you would expect from directly transcribed untrained voices – subtleties which were once excluded by written music – suggests Leibovici has himself reduced the living tradition of written music that he seems to criticize. Today, music
Schafer’s original soundscape project was ultimately a conservative one. He feared the encroachment of the noises of modern life, and the opportunities provided by recording. But once sounds are cut from their sources and objectified as recordings, they can open up a wide variety of new uses, meanings and pleasures. Playhead: A Parallel Anthology (2013), by Open Music Archive (aka Eileen Simpson and Ben White), plays selections from Harry Smith’s legendary Anthology of American Folk Music (1952) along with later recordings and remixes of the same songs. Compiled from recordings made between 1926 and 1933, the original Anthology collected vernacular songs performed by rural singers. I have a great deal of affection for Smith’s Anthology and many of these remixes (particularly those by Leafcutter John and Beatrice Dillon). But Simpson and White accompany their video with a booklet detailing which recordings are currently in the public domain. The leaflet’s heavy black lines, scoring out songs still under copyright, imply that there’s something inherently censorial about authors’ rights. At a time when many of the world’s biggest corporations are doing everything they can to erode them, this aspect of the project seems to do little more than reiterate a now-mainstream techno-libertarian common sense.

‘Schizophonia’ tended to work best when the artists were focusing less on music itself, and more on music as a means of viewing the world. ‘I do not feel that a musician himself makes the music,’ says one of the interviewees in the Otolith Group’s film. ‘The musician is only a filter.’ For Piper, Echakhch and others, music can be just such a filter – one that reveals more than it obscures.