Music’s Power to Make Peace

Musicians have long been allies of activists and peacemakers. From the American abolition, union, peace and civil rights movements, to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, to the ‘Singing Revolution’ that led to Estonian independence in 1991, music—whether performed by professionals lending their names and talents to a cause or sung spontaneously by ordinary people demonstrating for their rights—has often played a major role in effecting social change.

In the last decade, two important developments have expanded music’s place in peacemaking. Neurological and other scientists have produced hard evidence of music’s inherent ability to heal trauma, reduce stress levels, and influence behavior. Meanwhile, in a parallel but largely unrelated development, musicians have started taking their skills and talents to places where war has raged and human beings are left damaged and isolated. Using skills and insights learned in the multicultural classrooms, stages and festivals of western European cities, they have experimented with ways of engaging the power of music to connect, reconcile and heal. In war-torn cities, destroyed villages and refugee camps, they confirm on the ground what scientists study and report: that music offers unique possibilities to contribute to healing emotional wounds and building connections between people – the essential prerequisites for interpersonal reconciliation – as well as to creating or restoring intercultural bonds.

THE THEORY

What gives music such special potential? Music’s unique power is that it works on three levels simultaneously – the biological, the psychological and the social. Psychologists and neuroscientists suggest that music’s origins lie deeply planted in our collective biological evolution. It is thought that the human capacity for empathy developed through pre-language, non-verbal systems of sound, communicating states of body and mind to the other, especially between mother and child. As powerfully as music is shaped by culture, there is good evidence that culture is just as powerfully shaped by music. While aspects of this transactional relationship can be traced to our evolution as a species and the development of “human” culture, contemporary experience offers a vast number of examples of music’s capacity to shape social values, mores and behavior.

Body

Music has direct and virtually automatic impact on our heartbeat, respiration rate, blood pressure and levels of excitation or relaxation. Music activates portions of the brain that control these autonomic functions. Music also activates the portions of the brain that control spinal motor systems. Thus, music can be used to energize an athletic team, physically relax and soothe a class of hyperactive teenagers and help people with Parkinson’s disease achieve coordinated movement such as running or even dancing.

Eastern medicine teaches that life energy flows through the body and that disease is often the result of energy blockage caused by physical or emotional wounds. People who have suffered the traumas of conflict and war – physical injury, loss, displacement, exposure to abuse or torture – often exhibit disturbed breathing, upset metabolic function, disrupted hormonal levels and other forms of physical stress and disease. Music – whether listened to or sung or played – has been shown to reduce these symptoms. Several scientists have demonstrated that tones sung by the human voice can disrupt cancer cells, ameliorate the adverse effects of chemo- and x-ray therapies,
and, apparently, increase the probability of remission in some cancer patients. In all, music affects the body and, quite likely, has the power to heal the body in ways we are just beginning to explore.

**Mind and Emotion**

Music engages the areas of the brain that have to do with awareness of space and time, spatial and temporal relations. The ability to distinguish sounds, patterns of sound, rhythm, harmonies and musical structure – all of these cognitive skills are part of the musical experience.

Personal experience tells us that music – whether we sing or play it ourselves or listen to it – can evoke the entire range of human emotion, from joy to despair, from passionate rage to passionate love, from fear to heroism. And it can do so almost instantly, without the intermediation of language. Music therapy works because music helps people express feelings, memories, experiences and dreams that they are unable or unwilling to express in other ways.

Thus, music powerfully activates our intellectual and emotional selves and evokes in us a deeper and more integrated sense of identity in ways that are far more immediate than, and often unavailable through, language.

**Society**

Music is one way in which a group may manifest its identity. A national anthem, a tribal chant, a school alma mater, a military march, a ballad celebrating a cultural hero – through all of these, different groups identify and recognize membership. Musical genres also serve to identify members of different cultural groups – in general, most people who listen to hip-hop are different from most people who listen to classical music. In part this connection of music to group identity reflects the fact that a particular piece of music will evoke the same physical effects, the same emotions and the same ideas in many individuals from the same culture. And in part this reflects the fact that music stimulates recognition among listeners that their feelings and ideas are shared by others.

This recognition of shared feelings and ideas also can transcend group boundaries. At its most fundamental, it represents the opportunity for people to become aware that we are all part of the same group, the human species. In many music projects in many parts of the world, music's evocation of our common humanity serves as the basis for building – or rebuilding – bridges across the divides of political, historical, ethnic and cultural conflict.

Why does music sometimes 'work' where dialogue fails? Where conflict has divided people along group lines—whether ethnic, religious or other group identifiers—individuals are defined by that which divides them from the other and become isolated, not only from the other, but also from much of their own complex selves. Dialogue and reconciliation projects that continue to define participants mainly by these single 'labels', bringing together Serbs and Albanians, Muslims and Christians, etc. may also reinforce this isolation from the complex self. Music speaks to another part of identity and allows the individual to explore his/ her own complexity, while providing a different basis for relating to others. Connection with musicians from other regions can help break through geographic isolation, another frequent stifling result of conflict. Honing musical talents and skills can be a welcome challenge, an invitation to connect with teachers, role
models and peers, an expression of both individuality and commonality and sometimes a key to a future career and the beginning of a path back to ‘normalcy’.

THE PRACTICE

In collaboration with Dutch and international peace organizations, Musicians without Borders has established successful music projects in some of the most intransigent regions, where simple dialogue is still often not possible.

Music School on Wheels

In Eastern Bosnia, at the scene of Europe’s worst genocide since World War II, MwB’s Music Bus Srebrenica brings the joy of music to children in the towns, villages and refugee settlements. The ‘music school on wheels’ travels to children in the now ethnically divided region, working through schools and community centers to delight hundreds of children every year with singing, dancing, drumming, learning to play simple instruments, producing shows and musicals. When a basis of trust among children, teachers and parents has been established, the Music Bus organizes special projects, productions and summer camps in neutral areas, bringing together children from different ethnic backgrounds to meet and work together as percussionists, actors or singers. MwB’s Bosnian staff is now advising and collaborating in establishing a Music Bus for Palestinian children on the West Bank.

Rock Music in Kosovo

The city of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo was once a major center of rock music in the Balkans. Since the Kosovo war in 1999, Mitrovica is a divided city, with Serbs and Albanians living on opposite sides of the river Ibar. The once thriving multicultural youth music scene has been replaced by the nervous electronic beats and aggressive, nationalistic lyrics of so-called ‘turbo-folk’. Musicians without Borders is cooperating with Community Building Mitrovica (CBM), the Dutch Fontys Rock Academy and IKV-Pax Christi to establish the Mitrovica Rock School, offering instrumental, voice and theory lessons and band coaching to young musicians from both sides of the city. The MRS opened two temporary facilities for youth in North and South Mitrovica in October 2008. More than 70 students signed up immediately; there is a long waiting list. While the young musicians are prevented from meeting in their own city, the MRS brings mixed groups out of the city at regular intervals for Summer School programs in neighboring Macedonia and didactic and organizational training for local staff and teachers. Meanwhile, a lively internet exchange keeps the music crossing the divide until the musicians, themselves, are able to.

Singing with women in Bosnia

In 2001 and 2002, Musicians without Borders sent a female vocal ensemble to Bosnia to perform a program of traditional Bosnian songs, as a gesture of solidarity and remembrance for women who had survived the Srebrenica disaster. The reactions were overwhelmingly positive—the Bosnian women who attended the concerts were deeply
moved at hearing their own songs sung by foreign women in honor of their lost loved ones, and in recognition of the beauty of their culture. Some even said that hearing this music had given them the strength to go on with their lives. MwB workshop leaders were able to persuade women who had stopped singing and dancing years ago to create a dance together, expressing their daily lives. And MwB musicians played local tunes so temptingly that 40 women in a remote refugee camp joined in joyful folk dancing for the first time in years. MwB is currently preparing a joint project with women singers and conductors from Sarajevo and Tuzla, establishing regular women’s singing activities in the Srebrenica region. An international team of women singers, dancers and therapists will spearhead the project, gradually turning it over to local musicians and teachers.

Voices of Peace in the Balkans and the Caucasus

The May 24 celebration is the occasion for a new collaboration. MwB and the Women’s Peacemakers Program, with extensive networks in the Balkans, are both beginning to establish connections with women (activists/ musicians) in the Caucasus.

Both the Balkans and the Caucasus have always been crossroads of many cultures. Both regions are marked by a colorful diversity of peoples, languages and art forms. In both regions, folk art, and particularly music are strong, binding factors in everyday life. Music serves a strong social function in community life, bears and transmits the stories and histories of the various cultures from one generation to another, and for many, represents and expresses most strongly their bond to their land and culture. The Balkans and the Caucasus have long traditions of ‘women’s music’ and specific styles of polyphonic singing. And in both regions, local and international geopolitical ambitions have pitted ethnic and religious groups against each other in violent clashes that have left many dead, wounded or displaced.

Women’s Peacemakers Program and Musicians without Borders work through international networks, empowering teachers, trainers, leaders, and/or musicians working for reconciliation and healing in conflict regions. MwB and WPP will now bring women musicians and activists from the two regions together to explore possibilities of learning from each other, and cooperating within our broader networks. For WPP, the project represents a first venture into the use of music for the empowerment of women peacemakers. For Musicians without Borders, the project offers the chance to align the power of music with the strategic empowerment of women in these fascinating, though troubled, regions.

**SOURCES**


Osborne, Nigel, Interviews, Conversations and Lectures 1999 – .