

Ensembles for Peace

Introduction and Background

Music is a powerful tool that can transform emotions, relationships, and social environments. It has the potential to foster empathy, collaboration, heal wounds, build bridges across cultures, and protest, but also has the power to divide. The text *Music and Conflict Transformation* explores these effects. After reviewing essential background information on peace building through music, I am introducing my own project with the purpose of building peace in my own school and local community.

In our study of musical peace building, music has demonstrated its ability to foster empathy and interconnections, build bridges across cultural lines, foster political reconciliation and healing, and call awareness to civil rights, but also be used for unpeaceful purposes. In the act of “musicking,” or participation in a music-making activity, humans can build empathy by building non-hierarchical relationships through identifying commonalities and accepting differences (Laurence 2008). One example of this process occurring is in a colleague’s experience where an African drumming assembly fostered empathy, understanding, and interest of other cultures within her students. This process of empathy is essential in establishing collaboration and relationships across cultures, although not in the method that most people believe it occurs in. Many believe the colloquial saying that “music is a universal language,” but diverse cultural perceptions and musical traditions beg to differ (Cohen 2008). Different cultures, particularly when separated by Western and non-Western, have very different values and functions of music, such as process vs. product, unity vs. diversity, or public vs. private (Boyce-Tillman 2008).

Now, this does not mean that music cannot be used to bridge cultural connections altogether; as a matter of fact, the contrary is quite true. This idea is embodied in the musician Gilad Atzmon, who uses fusion to merge conflicting Palestinian and Israeli Jew musical styles and therefore cultural groups while also communicating his message of resistance against the power of Israel (Abi-Ezzi, 2008). A colleague of mine demonstrated a similar phenomenon in his own school community when he brought together conflicting students of diverse religious backgrounds by including music from all different religious holidays and secular tunes in a holiday singing event. Anne-Marie Gray also argues that understanding each other’s music could be key to resolving conflict between Afrikaans and black South African peoples by resolving the poor understanding of history that currently exists (Gray 2008), plus history has witnessed the unifying and healing effect that music had on the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, such as the songs “We Shall Overcome” or “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (Whitehead, 2008). “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga could be used in a similar fashion to promote self-acceptance and pride in LGBTQ students, as I outlined in the forum. However, it is important to recognize music’s potential to disrupt peace as well, particularly when it is used to repel others, stir insurrection, inspire hate, or facilitate capitalism (Kent 2008).

These explorations and engagements with peacebuilding music has caused me to critically reflect on my own school community, its current conflicts, and how music can transform them. The following outlines my peacebuilding project that accomplishes these goals.

Description of the Project

The purpose of this project is to transform the routine my school's spring concert into an interactive musical event meant to foster peace, collaboration, and mutual understanding within the community. The interactive concert takes place on the front lawn of the high school on a week night in May. The choirs and bands spend the spring semester preparing music for the event, plus attendees (families, friends, school/local community members) have the opportunity to participate in the music making. The student-community interaction embedded in this event is intended to raise awareness and provide healing for common issues that residents face every day, such as poverty and gender identity issues, as well as foster acceptance and mutual understanding both within and between individuals in the community. These efforts have been inspired by peacebuilding writers such as Rik Palieri, who has collected stories of music's power to create peace, such as how the singing of "We Shall Overcome" ended rock throwing and drowned out the PA system of a Ku Klux Klan rally in the early 1970s (Palieri 2008).

This project's guiding principles align with those of the organization Musicians Without Borders, which is to provide the following: safe spaces for participants, experiences of inclusion, opportunities for creativity, equal treatment for all group members, and high-quality music-making.

Spring Concert Program

Time*	Piece of Music/Activity	Description	Purpose
6:30- 6:45 pm	The Human Orchestra	All participants (choirs, bands, attendees) brainstorm vocal or body percussive sounds, organize themselves into subgroups, and follow a conductor to create an improvisatory performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Welcome everyone● Warm up bodies, voices● Establish a leadership role● Establish a safe environment● Initiate collaboration● Break down barriers
6:45- 6:55 pm	We Shall Overcome	After the main tune has been taught to attendees by rote echoing, the choirs present the acrostic poem they wrote to the tune of the song. Lyrics are called out before verses to facilitate audience participation. Bands play along in the voicings and instrumentations they created.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Call awareness to an issue that is important to the students● Inspire hope, solidarity, unity● Create empathy between participants
6:55- 7:05 pm	Born This Way	The choirs present their prepared version of the song, with their arrangement and adjusted lyrics. Different members of the band take turns leading attendees in accompanying body percussion during certain sections of the song.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Call awareness to gender identity concerns of students● Promote acceptance within students, their families, the community● Foster collaboration and mutual understanding

7:20- 7:30 pm	Painting Improv: "Before We Say Goodbye"	The audience (with students dispersed throughout) is shown a painting showing a "goodbye" occurring, and are immediately tasked with improvising vocal, body percussion, or outdoor found sounds to represent the painting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster empathy through shared emotions, interpretations ● Facilitate collaborative creativity ● Create mutual understanding between people
------------------	---	---	--

7:05- 7:20 pm	Hey Jude	The choirs present the song with additional verses they have written. Attendees are invited to sing along and move to the music when the song reaches the coda (da-da-da's). Band also rejoins at this time, playing along on their instruments. Song continues as choir and band members disperse into the crowd.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster empathy between participants ● Provide healing and comfort ● Express emotions and feelings ● Facilitate further collaboration
------------------	----------	--	---

*Although time frames for each activity have been sketched out, they by no means have to be strictly adhered to. Activities/songs can take shorter or longer than planned as the concert does not need to end at a specific time. Transitions are traditional concert transitions: song ends, applause, start the next activity.

The Human Orchestra

This is a Musicians Without Borders activity that functions as described by Dr. Caron Collins:

Gather a small group of students, friends, or family members [in this case, the attendees of the concert]. Each person thinks of a vocal or body percussion sound. The conductor forms two sub-groups: the people with short sounds and the people with long sounds, then gives non-verbal conducting directions such as start, stop, louder, quieter and combines the groups into an improvisatory performance. The conductor can give a specific rhythm to the short sounds group through visual directions. For example, the conductor could motion by pointing one finger at a flattened hand in the rhythm he/she would like them to play. Divide the groups as you like, you could invite solos or duos, etc. by cuing them in/out of the performance. Invite others to be the conductor - this can

open a great conversation about what we need from our leaders and what leaders need for the people we are trying to lead.

For this concert, everyone at the event is encouraged to participate: attendees, the bands, and the choirs alike. Band and choir members can be dispersed throughout the crowd as this is performed.

We Shall Overcome

In the semester leading to this event, the choirs would do the following as described by Dr. Collins:

Acrostic - writing down the theme word vertically and writing "We shall ____."

Provide a social/historical perspective of "We Shall Overcome." Practice singing the original lyrics (or listening to a recording for safe pandemic protocol). It is helpful to have a melodic instrument on hand to accompany the songwriting process and the group learns the melody through

- Humming or inner vocalization
- Slow repetition

[Rote learning of this song can be aided by [this historical recording](#) of the song.]

With the original song comfortably learned, split the [choirs] into smaller teams (pairs or individuals) and assign each with at least one letter of your thematically chosen acrostic word. Provide [creative time] for the participants to write out the fill-in the blank portion with words that match the letters of the acrostic word and work rhythmically with the melody. For example:

PEACE:

P: We shall _____. "We shall **P**ray for peace"

E: We shall _____. "We shall **E**ducate"

A: We shall _____. "We shall **A**ll join hands"

C: We shall _____. "We shall **C**are for all"

E: We shall _____. "We shall **E**nd the hate"

Coming back together, each team (or individual) shares their verses separately then put them together in a song performance along with the chorus, *deep in my heart, we do believe, that we shall overcome some day.*"

I would encourage my own choirs to use a theme that addresses and resists common issues in the community, like "growth" or "prosper." Concurrently, the bands would create student groups of different voicings, instrumentations, and textures that would inspire hope and/or our theme words. At the interactive concert, the attendees would be lectured on the song's history and the student work that have been done, then taught the main tune as described at the beginning of this procedure, and are invited to sing along and band and choir perform. Lyrics are called out before each verse to facilitate participation.

Born This Way

In the semester leading up to this event, the choirs analyze the lyrics to "[Born This Way](#)" by [Lady Gaga](#) and make any changes to make the song more applicable to their own backgrounds and expressions, as was common practice for protest songs in the Civil Rights' Movement. Students also make other decisions regarding the arrangement, such as if/how to create harmonies or polyphonic textures, what instruments they were to be accompanied by, or any choreography or staging to include.

At the performance, the band members take turns leading the attendees in echoing rhythmic body percussion patterns to contribute to the music during the bridge and extended last chorus of the song. Singing along during the last extended chorus is also welcome and encouraged.

Painting Improv: "Before We Say Goodbye"

This is yet another Musicians Without Borders activity, described by Dr. Collins as such:

With two small groups of students, friends, or family members, [in our case, 2 groups of concert participants], give [one image](#) to one group and [the other image](#) to another group. They are not allowed to see the image until the timer is started. Allow 90 seconds for the members of the groups to experiment with individual vocal, [body percussion, or outdoor found sounds] improvisation that they personally feel represents their unique interpretations of the images. They are not to talk during the 90 seconds but only play or hum and vocalize while they look at the painting. The group members can choose to imitate what they hear their group members sing or play, borrow from each other, combine sounds and silence, or perform sequential solo interpretations. At the end of the 90 seconds, each group then enters into a the "small group discussion" and individually share their answers to the [following questions: what ideas did the painting bring to mind? How did you interpret your ideas musically?]"

Hey Jude

In the semester leading up to this event, teach and discuss the origins of "Hey Jude" by the Beatles (formerly a ballad by McCartney to comfort John's son, Julian, during John's marriage upheaval). Ask the students: "think of someone in your life who needs comfort and healing. What are they going through? What do you want to tell them to comfort them?" Give a personal example, then students could share their answers with the class if they are comfortable to. From there, students break into groups and write additional verses to the song, including the messages of comfort the students created to apply to their own situations.

At the performance, share the backstory and why/how we added additional verses to the song with the audience. After, instruct the audience that when we get to the "da-da-da's" at the end of the song (the coda), they are invited to stand up and join in as a way to comfort those around them. They are invited to sing and move their bodies along to the music in the way they feel is right. Then we perform; when the music gets to the coda, the audience participates in the performance, and the bands could walk while playing, exiting the performing area and dispersing through the crowd of attendees, playing/singing the melody. The choirs can do the same: exit the performance area and disperse themselves through the crowd. Repeat it as many times as needed until the music reaches a natural conclusion.

Helpful Hints

This section is intended for other music educators who would like to implement this project in their own school community. Here are some helpful hints to make your version of the project successful:

- Please use the attached links to deeply listen to the repertoire and facilitate rote learning of the music. Although standard notation might be helpful when the performing ensembles are preparing the music in the preceding semester, it is best to avoid it at the interactive concert as it excludes those who do not know how to read it. Use rote learning at the event instead.
- All three songs of the prepared repertoire ("We Shall Overcome," "Born This Way," and "Hey Jude") all include an element of student lyric-writing. Emphasize with your students to focus on issues specific to their own community, families, and themselves. The purpose of the lyric-writing element is to create ownership and relevance to the students' lives to promote mutual understanding, so it is essential that their original lyrics are themed around issues that are important to them.
- Keep in mind the 5 principles of Musicians Without Borders, which is to provide:
 - **Safe spaces for participants.** Remind both students that there are no wrong answers in personal responses and lyric writing, and in improvisation activities, there are no wrong notes.

- **Experiences of inclusion.** Ensure that the choirs, instrumental ensembles, and event attendees all get to have an active role in the music-making.
- **Opportunities for creativity.** If you adapt these activities, ensure that students and attendees still have composition, lyric-writing, and improvisation opportunities.
- **Equal treatment for all group members.** Ensure that every student's voice is heard in the preparation of the repertoire and concert attendees are treated with respect and equity.
- **High quality music-making.** Actively provide feedback to the students and have them regularly engage in self-reflection to continually improve the quality of the music to be performed at the event.

Conclusion

Through these interactive musical performances, I hope to establish awareness, empathy, and mutual understanding among in our school community. This is a small town that has been in constant conflict concerning issues like poverty and gender identity discussions; with the music-making taking place at this event, perhaps those conflicts can be transformed: identities could be accepted, understandings found, and hope inspired.

References

- Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Abi-Ezzi, K. (2008). *Chapter Seven: Music as a discourse of resistance*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 93-103). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.
- Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Boyce-Tillman, J. (2008). *Chapter Three: Music and Value in Cross-Cultural Work*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 40-52). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research
- Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Cohen, C. (2008). *Chapter Two: Music: A Universal Language?* In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 26-39). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research
- Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Gray, A.M. (2008). *Chapter Five: Music as a tool of reconciliation in South Africa*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 63-77). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.

Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Kent, G. (2008). *Chapter Eight: Unpeaceful music*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 104-114). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.

Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Laurence, F. (2008). *Chapter One: Music and Empathy*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 13-25). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.

Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Palieri, R. (2008). *Chapter Thirteen: Working in the Trenches: Surviving Conflicts Through Folk Music and Tales*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 187-200). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research

Urbain, O., Shorter, W., & Whitehead, B. (2008). *Chapter Six: We shall overcome*. In *Music and conflict transformation: Harmonies and dissonances in geopolitics* (pp. 78-92). essay, I.B. Tauris in association with The Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research.