

Music and Conflict Transformation

Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics

Edited by

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Chapter 8: Unpeaceful Music

George Kent

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, “music leaps across language barriers and unites people of quite different cultural backgrounds. And so, through music, all peoples can come together to make the world a more harmonious place” (Annan 2004). Surely, music does bring people together, sometimes. But we should be wary of music fundamentalists who think music is all good all the time. Have they never heard the booming cannon of the “1812 Overture”? Or Richard Rodgers’ “Victory at Sea”? Some music may help to make some kinds of peace some of the time, but, like many other good things, music has a dark side as well. There is music that celebrates war, viciousness, hate, and humiliation. Music does have the power to heal, but we need to see that it also has the power to hurt. Music can bring us together, and it also can divide us.

Repellent Music

Music is peaceful or unpeaceful not because of the inherent character of the music itself, but because of the way it is used. To illustrate, in England a chain of grocery stores “is experimenting with playing classical music outside its shops, to stop youths from hanging around and intimidating customers” (*The Economist* 2005). According to another report:

To clear out undesirables, opera and classical music have been piped into Canadian parks, Australian railway stations, 7-Eleven parking lots and, most recently, London Underground stops.

(Timberg 2005)

Both accounts say the efforts have been successful. When music is used to repel rather than attract, that use of music is unpeaceful. Other people might think the music is good, but that is irrelevant. Where Homer’s sirens used songs to lure men to their deaths, that too surely was unpeaceful, no matter how beautiful their songs might have been.

Nationalistic Music

A good way to study nationalistic sentiments in music is through national anthems. Why is it that anthems tend to be so highly militaristic? The United States' "The Star-Spangled Banner" begins:

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
 What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
 O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
 And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
 Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.

Pride in the nation's military might is also reflected in France's "La Marseillaise," originally named, "Chant de guerre de l'Armee du Rhin" (Marching Song of the Rhine Army). In English translation, it concludes:

Drive on sacred patriotism
 Support our avenging arms
 Liberty, cherished liberty
 Join the struggle with your defenders
 Under our flags, let victory
 Hurry to your manly tone
 So that in death your enemies
 See your triumph and our glory!

New Zealand's anthem places much less emphasis on military might, and instead implores, even in its title, "God Defend New Zealand":

In the bonds of love we meet,
 Hear our voices, we entreat,
 God defend our free land.
 Guard Pacific's triple star,
 From the shafts of strife and war,
 Make her praises heard afar,
 God defend New Zealand.

New Zealand's militarism is limited to defending itself against direct invasion:

Peace, not war, shall be our boast
 But, should foes assail our coast,
 Make us then a mighty host,
 God defend our free land.

So, New Zealand will defend itself if it is directly attacked, but it is not going to go into anyone else's space to defend itself. There is militarism in these national anthems, but it is not directed at any specific other.

Insurrectionary Music

Much music is simply irrelevant to those in power. Much of it is subservient, and serves power (cf. Said 1991: 64). Music also can have an insurrectionary quality, challenging those in power. The challenge may be delivered in the content of the lyrics that are voiced, but often insurrectionary music challenges through its contrast with the music of those who dominate. Some analysts see jazz, for example, as having been born as insurrectionary music. Jacques Attali speaks of how the exploited "can still use their music to shout their suffering, their dreams of the absolute and freedom" (Attali 1985: 8).

The meaning of music always depends on its context, but that meaning may be uncertain. Daniel Barenboim argues, "a performance of Beethoven, under the Nazis or under any kind of totalitarian regime, whether left or right, suddenly assumes the call for freedom, even becomes a very direct criticism of the policies of the regime . . ." (Barenboim and Said 2002: 44). He seems to feel that Beethoven's music is inherently insurrectionary. Perhaps not. The video, "Great Conductors of the Third Reich: Art in the Service of Evil," suggests that instead of being challenged, those who control the context might turn the music to their own ends:

As a collection of performances by famous German conductors in Nazi Germany, this video provides an unnerving look at both how Nazi Germany tried to exploit culture and at the artists who essentially consented to turn their art into Nazi propaganda. Containing footage of concerts Karajan gave in occupied Paris, as well as Furtwangler conducting before a backdrop of swastikas, this video provides a truly startling and surreal look at classical music in Nazi Germany.

(Synopsis at Rotten Tomatoes 2005)

If Barenboim were correct, how would we account for the fact that, "According to Hitler and Goebbels (Hitler's second in command), the three master composers that represented good German music were Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, and Anton Bruckner" ("Nazi Approved Music" 2005).

Whether or not music is peaceful depends on context, but it also depends on how it is heard. If it is used to glorify evil, it is not peaceful.

Is insurrectionary music unpeaceful music? Insurrectionary music that challenges evil and is on the side of justice is peaceful, so long as it does not advocate violence. Of course music itself cannot tell us which side represents true justice.

Hateful Music

Music that expresses hate for others is not hard to find. In 1864, during the civil war in the United States, the Democratic Party's presidential campaign promoted a "new national anthem" called "Nigger Doodle Dandy" that was – and still is – highly offensive to African Americans (Loewen 1995: 148).

The hatefulness that it represented is not just ancient history. Panzerfaust is a neo-Nazi group with its own record label and streaming audio broadcast on the Internet. Its Project Schoolyard USA targeted its hate music to schoolchildren, and distributed free Panzerfaust compact disks to children. Panzerfaust's decline is described at Anti-Defamation League (2005). Some of its products may be found at Free Your Mind (2005) which features a CD called *Downright Hateful*.

A Canadian band is called "Rahowa," which is short for Racial Holy War. Its tune, "Third Reich," sings:

You kill all the niggers, and you gas all the Jews,
Kill a gypsy and a Commie, too.
You just killed a kike, don't it feel right?
Goodness gracious, Third Reich.

(Herbert 2001)

There is lots of hate music out there. The white supremacist group Stormfront has a Music and Entertainment section (Stormfront 2005). Some of this sort of material has been popularized under the heading of "gangsta rap," ably analyzed at Wikipedia (2005). On 20 October 2005 ABC News did a segment on "Young Singers Spread Racist Hate," as described at ABC News (2005). These singers were described in Buchanan (2005).

Sometimes hateful music is deliberately used to stimulate soldiers to act. In Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, we learn that US Army tanks in Iraq are

equipped to play compact disks for the soldiers as they go into battle. One review quotes some of the film's lines:

"There were a lot of innocent civilians that were killed," admits one soldier, just before the camera cuts to another, who exults, "It's the ultimate rush" when you have a good song playing in the background during a raid.

For one troop, the Bloodhound Gang's "Fire Water Burn" is just such a perfect song, and to illustrate, he spews lyrics: "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire,/We don't need no water let the motherf**ker burn./Burn motherf**ker burn."

(Fuchs 2004)

What makes music peaceful or unpeaceful? I embrace the Galtungian vision that peace is not about the absence of conflict, but about the handling of conflict in mature, productive ways, and not in violent ways (Galtung *et al.* 2002).

Music that is combative in tone may nevertheless be peaceful if it seeks justice and if it uses nonviolent means in that pursuit. When world music is seen not merely as "an ecumenical, border-effacing aesthetic" but as "a counterforce to contemporary *neo*-imperialism" (Shapiro 2004: 71), it is combative but not violent; thus it is peaceful. "Victory at Sea" is unpeaceful because it supports naval violence, not because of the merits or demerits of the cause that violence supports. In Galtung's terms, one must seek peace through peaceful means.

Attali says, "All music, any organization of sounds is . . . a tool for the creation and consolidation of a community, of a totality" (Attali 1985: 6). Thus music, like other forms of communication, is a means for building community, building empathy among people. How can we reconcile this idea with the reality that there is also unpeaceful music and, indeed, unpeaceful communication of all kinds?

In hate music or war music the musicians play primarily to their mates, their friends, their allies. The purpose is to build solidarity, whether among racist politicians, neo-Nazis, or combat soldiers. Soldiers generally are motivated not so much by hate for the enemy as by the need for approval by their peers. Similarly, racists and neo-Nazis also act hatefully mainly to win the approval of their cohorts.

In hateful music, as in any other, there is a kind of reaching out, but it is always a reaching out to friends and allies. The difference between ordinary and hateful music corresponds to the distinction economists make between *cooperation* and *collusion*. In simple cooperation or collaboration, two parties work together in a way that produces some sort of extra benefit for them. In

collusion, however, the cooperation that takes place between the two parties is at the expense of some third party. For example, when two large corporations secretly work to fix prices in their industry, they do so at the expense of consumers. Collusion is similar to conspiracy, a term that implies that there is cooperation, but it is cooperation at someone else's expense.

Hateful music strengthens ties between the collaborators, but at someone else's expense. Thus, a racist ditty sends a message of fellowship to fellow racists. That is more important than the message communicated to the targets of the racism. Similarly, rousing war music like *Victory at Sea* sends its message not to the opponents but to fellow soldiers and allies. If music builds solidarity among some groups by being hurtful to others, it is unpeaceful.

In contrast to nationalistic music, "We Are the World," conveys the message that we are all one, universally. Our merit is based not on invidious comparisons with others, but on joining with others to constitute *us*, together. There is a whole collection of songs about unity at Songfacts (2005), but that is not the concern of this chapter.

Capitalist Music

Exploitation within the music industry is illustrated in the popular film, *The Harder They Come*, which tells about the abuse of a reggae superstar by unscrupulous record producers. There is also the exploitation of the consumers of music – those who pay for it – in various forms.

Modern consumerism is not based simply on an economics of meeting wants and needs. In producing and marketing music recordings:

the industry, at the same time as creating the object of exchange, must also create the conditions for its purchase. It is thus essentially an industry of manipulation and promotion, and repetition entails the development of service activities whose function is to produce the consumer: the essential aspect of the new political economy that this kind of consumption announces is the *production of demand*, not the *production of supply*.

(Attali 1985: 103)

In Attali's view, "the value of the object is not in the work itself, but in the larger whole within which the demand for commodities is constructed."

Like many others, the music industry produces a great deal of income for many people, but its contribution to meeting fundamental needs is meager. The music system, especially that for popular music, reinforces

global inequities, and diverts resources away from where they are most needed.

In this commodification process there is a systematic trivialization of music. In music, as in many other sectors of public life, there is a fundamental social tension between diversity and standardization. In today's music it is standardization of forms that prevails.

Apart from its content, there is a dark side to music in its industrialization and commodification:

Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning.

(Attali 1985: 5)

There is insurrectionary music, but politically it is a minority voice. The globalized music industry serves dominant power:

Even though the modern musician, because he is more abstract, gives the appearance of being more independent of power and money than his predecessors, he is, quite the opposite, more tightly tied in with the institutions of power than ever before . . . he has become the learned minstrel of the multinational apparatus. Hardly profitable economically, he is the producer of a symbolism of power.

(Attali 1985: 116)

Music can contribute to peace, but that contribution is limited so long as it is held captive by those in power. Most music is now a commodity, sold in bulk. But there are openings, free spaces in which music can be used in a way that fulfills its potentials. As Edward Said put it, "a very important part of the practice of music is that music, in some profound way, is perhaps the final resistance to the acculturation and the commodification of everything" (Barenboim and Said 2002: 168). This book demonstrates one path of resistance, the use of music in the cause of peace.

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