

THE ART OF CONNECTING CULTURES: HOW MUSIC CAN NURTURE MUTUAL RESPECT

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Abstract: *How can we proactively rehearse a collective sense of humanity, and let go of the focus on our cultural differences as an obstacle? The dissimilarity of people has become a popular reason for social exclusion, regularly leading up to hate speech, dehumanization and destruction. This essay demonstrates how community music programs can create a sense of intercultural community, both between musicians as throughout all participants including teachers, family and the audience. Firstly, the relevance of collective music making is discussed along with the ideas of Richard Sennett on music and mutual respect, and of Alicja Gescinska on feeling at home in music. This creates an interdisciplinary framework of political and philosophical theories, which is expanded by psychological research. To maintain respect between people from different cultural and religious backgrounds is not something that tends to be stimulated in the individualistic belief systems of Western commercialisation and competitive education systems. Where do our children and future generations practice teamwork, intercultural communication and a curiosity for cultures that reach beyond their own belief systems? Arts in general, and music in particular, can and should offer fertile grounds for these learnings through working together, active listening and practices in collective resonance. To illustrate these arguments, examples such as the El Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra (SEYO) and Musicians Without Borders will be discussed to show the serious potential of music in the nurturing of mutual respect in an intercultural society. In order to enable such powerful projects, it is essential that governmental institutions, policymakers and academicians support the sustainability and growth of community music programs, to make them widely accessible in areas which could benefit from proactive, creative practices in intercultural and religious dialogue.*

Key words: *mutual respect, listening, intercultural society, democratic groove.*

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Introduction

In the current societal challenge to reach dialogue and cooperation between people from different religions and cultures, many people strand in despair. The fragmentation of ideas, belief systems and cultural underpinnings demand a collective impulse to rearrange our understandings, and more importantly, our capacities, of living from a basis of mutual respect for people with other backgrounds. Migration has never been a new topic, however it does seem to have reached one of its highest social tension points. This happens on the governmental level - resulting for example in the falling of the Dutch cabinet in the summer of 2023 (Boztas, 2023) and the local level, where original inhabitants reject newcomers in their neighborhoods even without having met them.

This paper is a continuation of Kester's (2024) essay on how to practice the art of connecting cultures, in which he states that first and foremost, we are in need of proactive policies. In need of tangible, concrete, local solutions in the form of activities, gatherings and events, to facilitate a common experience between different social groups. Roots of contemporary religious and ethnic conflicts are often watered by segregated lifestyles, school systems and other separated social and economic sectors. This, complemented by class inequalities and other factors causing stress to people's sense of a secure livelihood, can stimulate the fear of others, of the unknown, to freely grow. Especially if this other, foreign group is wrongly designated as the troublemaker of contemporary social issues, such as the housing crisis. People often cling to our differences as the core of defining ourselves in relation to the other, because a familiarity with our shared human factors that transcend our particular differences, has probably not found fertile ground to become part of our daily perspective.

Let us come together and think about practical policies that can teach us from the start what global cultural diversity brings to our planet. In the majority of cases, borders have nowadays just remained tools for the use of violence - their symbolic meaning of defining a nation has long faded already in the cosmopolitan, high-speed information society we are inhabiting today. Traveling and migrating has never been so easy - for some of us, because those who are most forced to leave their homes, can rarely count on support along the way. Yet, in order to understand each other, our relations with strangers, foreigners, newcomers are in need of spending time together, just like we do when getting used to new colleagues, neighbors or family in law. Such relationships rarely exist automatically, and the well-known advice to spend some time together in an informal setting applies to intercultural, tense situations just as well. People are in need of some basis of trust. What policies could host such encounters?

Community music programs, like youth orchestras, intercultural choirs and intercultural music education programs can be a practical, even non-verbal way of bringing people together. This paper is an invitation to observe the effect that music could have in strengthening and reviving multicultural communities in your region. How can community music programs embody a practical instrument in the art of connecting cultures?

1. Why music?

"We think that music stops at the ears. That is a mistake. Vibrations can be felt in all places and at all times, even with the eyes." (Wooten, 2008)

The social power of collective music making has been at the center of my work for the past years. Writing the research *A Musical Practice in Mutual Respect* (Hes, 2021), I encountered a field in which musicians, social workers and academicians join their strengths to organize and research programs that can connect, or even create communities in need of a collective experience, a shared factor in

which working on a joint musical goal is at the heart of its success. This paper uses findings from my earlier research to contextualize arguments, and puts some of its conclusions in a new light.

This new perspective is inspired by the dispersion of opinions in recent migration debates and its consequences - social and cultural misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts. These are oftentimes fuelled by a lacking ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others. To mentally stand next to each other based on our shared humanity. Imagine a society in which we would focus on how we all started in this world as an innocent newborn, on a shared knowledge of what love feels like, on the concerns we have for our children, regardless of the culture. Instead, many tend to focus on different religious books, languages, skin colors and class divides. In earlier research I have identified two underlying mechanisms as forming a barrier to a shared human, democratic experience in the modern, Western individualistic lifestyle (Hes, 2021).

The first mechanism being a “*scarcity of respect*”, in which discrimination and oppression of marginalized groups occur as consequences of scarce respect for our fellow citizens (Sennett, 2004). A large part of this problem exists in our inability to really listen to each other (Coles, 2004). The Polish-Belgian philosopher Gescinska (2018) refers to this as the “*listening deficit*” - the second mechanism. To combat this, education needs creative practices in mutual respect and listening. Qualitative, culturally inclusive music programs can both demand an environment of mutual respect, and encompass a dynamic exercise in listening to one another. In the following sections, this statement will be approached from the political and the psychological spectrum.

1.1. The political perspective

According to Sennett (2004), practically speaking society has always known, and will always be, a world of inequalities. Yet, he adds, in order to see people as full human beings, it is a democratic challenge to build mutual respect across societal differences. For different people, groups and opinions to live together, clashes often root in a “*scarcity of respect*”, a lack of respect that only hardens opposition and division, which is wounding because it causes people not to be felt to be seen as a worthy human being with a significant presence (Sennett, 2004). A natural consequence is that both sides harden their standpoints as soon as they feel threatened to be respected. Where do we ‘learn’ mutual respect, how is it integrated in the education of young children, and what can music potentially have to do with it? One of the ingredients of community music programs is *peer training*. Students both learn from and teach each other, in contrast to individual music lessons. The collective learning process in making music together creates a type of *mutual education* that suits the ideas of Sennett’s (2004) pillars of mutual respect: self-respect, social honor and reciprocity.

The field of social music programs is a rather new one in academia, and particularly in political environments, music is not yet taken seriously in its developmental potential. Many readers, academicians and children will admit that music can affect their mood, perspective and even alter the temper with which they go about life and relate to the people around them. The ingredients in music - rhythm, sound, language, volume, silence, non-verbal communication, etc. carry instruments that we use every day in our relationships to others.

“Music is more a foundation than an ornament to our existence. Music allows us to come home to ourselves.” (Gescinska, 2018).

As Gescinska expresses so accurately, music is fundamental to our cultural existence. In addition, the capacity to develop qualitative and deep listening to our surroundings is a social, but also a musical question. In today’s information society, we experience a continuous stream of data: news outlets and mass media produce a never-ending stream of words and stories, and background music is played wherever we go. Yet, both information streams are thus far increasing that a large share re-

mains unprocessed. Due to the magnitude and variety of these information pulses, we rarely take the effort to practice to actively listen to ourselves and to each other, to other opinions and other sounds. A listening deficit, a lack of practice in and attention to our capacity to really listen (Gescinska, 2018). Collective music making demands an active listening practice. Additionally, the processing of linguistic and musical sounds shares a great neurological overlap, meaning that enhancement of skills in one dimension improves the other (Jaschke, 2019). This is a great benefit for multilingual situations in which different cultural groups are trying to understand each other's communication.

Making music together unites people in their activity, and this process can inspire our democratic relations to function more in a *democratic groove* (Wooten, 2008). Wooten (2008) presents an impressive view on social functioning from a musician's perspective, which inspired Coles and Haro (2019) to theorize about a democratic groove to innovate our ideas of democratic functioning in a more artistic way. Herein, a groove is defined as a resonance between affective energies, which is mostly known in musical terms but also applies to social life (Coles & Haro, 2019). In the context of democratic relations, this translates to an increased attentiveness, responsiveness and receptivity for our fellow citizens, just like it exists in the dynamics of making music together. Receptivity reflects the underlying need for democratic citizens to listen, and to master the art of listening to one another, particularly to different sounds.

With these ideas on the democratic and social aspects in music, let us turn to a few psychological articles that further clarify the human reaction to music.

2. The psychological explanation

Collective music making evokes neurological synchronization processes which play a role in social bonding, cognition, behavior and affect, and particularly cooperative behavior (Mogan et al., 2017). People who engage in synchronized musical behavior find each other more likable. This was confirmed in a simple experiment with toddlers, who showed more signs of altruism towards the experimenter only after they had bounced in synchrony with her. It also applies to groups, in which the mere sharing of music can create a strong sense of synchronization, even with strangers with whom participants were not allowed to talk to, boosted connectedness ratings were reported (Kokal et al., 2011; Phillips-Silver & Trainor, 2005). Another study showed the effects of playing drums together, in which the brain directly started to show signs of synchronization while people were aiming to let their sounds be simultaneous (Trainor & Cirelli, 2014). This shows how making music together can be a musical practice in recognition and empathy for others.

Although not literally stated in the aforementioned research, this does fit the assumption that playing music and listening to each other enhance mutual respect, for which recognition and understanding stand at the core. Making music together directly increases our feelings of empathy for everyone involved in that common activity.

Music students are trained to listen both naturally through collective playing, and with musical ear training, which specifically focuses on understanding and distinguishing between musical elements in different levels, both passive and active. Training the musical ear enhances musical mastery within the functioning of a symphony, but also embodies a democratic practice. As such, making music is a practice of the brain to attend to different sounds and voices simultaneously, which has both musical and social benefits.

Next to the skill of listening to each other, community music projects entail other musical practices in mutual respect. The high amount of hours that students spend making music together creates an ambiance of interconnectedness and collectivity. Since the rehearsals are always held in groups,

each contact hour includes some practice in understanding how different instruments and different children can achieve a collective sound.

3. Music as a common project

3.1. *El Sistema Greece*

El Sistema Greece² is a community music project, with free participation for all children and young people, no matter their origin, nationality or religion. One of the core aims of the program is to provide a platform for intercultural dialogue. The project is based in Athens, and also runs music projects in various refugee camps in Greece. The idea stems from El Sistema as it was born in Venezuela in 1975, founded by José Antonio Abreu to bring children together in a social music program, to support their musical and social education, and to keep the children away from drugs and street crimes.

El Sistema Greece's programs have a broad reach in which next to the children, parents, volunteers and musicians are involved in various ways. Extra attention is given to the social aspects of the program, proactively seeking participation of the families in the project. In the Greek refugees camps, tensions are prone to arise both between the different groups of people within the camps, as with the local island residents. One of the great benefits of these programs is that where children from different backgrounds are connected in the orchestras, the parents meet each other at the concerts. This adds a whole deeper layer of social connection. In the documentary "Reconnecting Symphonies", a few children describe what the music program means to them:

"Most of the participants don't speak any Greek. But this is not a problem! We have a lot in common. We play the same instruments and read from the same score. (...) We might not be able to talk together, but when we play we know what we're saying to each other. We know what message we're trying to give to you, and I will know what message that person is trying to give to me."

3.2. SEYO

SEYO, The Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra, is a European music program that unites over a hundred talented young musicians and teachers every two years. Up until today, SEYO summer camps have been hosted amongst others in Vienna, Milan, Gothenburg, Athens, Birmingham and Madrid. The gatherings bring children from El Sistema inspired orchestra's from all corners of Europe together, for an intense week of rehearsals, musical and social development. The newly formed European youth orchestra works towards a grand concert in one of the biggest music halls in the corresponding cities. The training programs include high level rehearsals in which traditional classical and romantic music is combined with modern symphonies and folk tunes from both European and Latin-American regions, braided together into a colorful repertoire. The last concert in Madrid, 2022, gives a vibrant impression of the SEYO program.³ In that year, 140 young musicians from 17 European countries, aged between 10-18 years old gathered for the summer camp, where they worked towards a final concert in the Auditorio Nacional de Música under the motto "We play to transform the world". (Falcon, 2022).

² This portrait of El Sistema Greece illustrates the project well: "Reconnecting Symphonies" (2017) Documentary | Teaser | <https://youtu.be/Ve1VMtqXywQ?si=qsD2EJHScYxjRkQm>

³ SEYO 2022: "We play to transform the world." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3i9T1doxLqk>

3.3. *Zwaluwkoor*

Het Zwaluwkoor (The swallow choir) is a local initiative based in the suburbs of three Dutch cities - Amsterdam, Utrecht and Haarlem - where people from different cultures, local inhabitants, newcomers, refugees and expats come together to sing in each other's language. The singers don't need any prior experience to join the choirs, and participation is free. Through music, members get to know each other's cultures, build friendships, and develop curiosity for new sounds and stories of people from their neighborhoods through bringing their own songs to the repertoire. One rehearsal the choir members might sing in Turkish, the next in Ukrainian, Chinese, Spanish, Armenian, or even Latin or Frisian. Up to 20 different nationalities have been represented in the choirs.

In the Netherlands, nowadays a large part of its inhabitants have roots in other countries and cultures. Yet, this does not automatically lead to more interaction between the different communities, oftentimes rather the opposite. As individualization only further seems to increase, the choirs seek a response to sing from a basis of solidarity and trust in shared humanity. The rehearsals take place at community centers and libraries that also focus on welcoming and connecting different cultures, like the multicultural living room ("huiskamer") Stichting de Brug, where Zwaluwkoor Amsterdam rehearses in the Nieuw-West neighborhood. Guided by professional conductors, and organized by the Philomela Foundation. The choirs also bring musical contributions to social events addressing inclusion, freedom and migration.

3.4. *Musicians without Borders*

Musicians Without Borders is a leading organization in using music for social change. For over 20 years, they constructed music programs working with communities that have been affected by conflict and displacement all around the world. With a team of music professionals and enthusiastic employees and volunteers, the program works from the principle that music is able to heal, connect, bring relief and comfort, to teach empathy and give hope, counteract violence and create identity, raise unheard voices, protest injustice, cross borders and imagine futures (Musicians without borders, n.d.).

Musicians Without Borders originally arose as a team of socially engaged musicians in the Netherlands, who started to bring music performances, instruments and workshops to refugee camps. Nowadays, they have a range of impressive programs in Central America, East Africa, Europe and the Middle East. For example, they are running a social rock music school in the Balkan area, in which youth from different religious backgrounds are invited to play rock music together, connect, and perform. The program particularly focuses on the shared stage experience, as being transformative for all participants (Hasani, 2023).

3.5. *Discission*

Especially when no other verbal languages are available, music can be a valuable instrument of communication. Important to highlight is the cultural sensitivity of such projects, because for many communities around the world the use and traditions of different musical styles and meanings vary widely.

Firstly, the question as to what kind of music is being chosen to drive community music projects is a delicate question, and always requires considerate discussion. If, for some reason, a piece seems to be hurtful or triggering for some participants, it is essential to listen to these reactions and reshape the repertoire, in order for everyone to feel at home. A musically diverse repertoire is essential to

reflect the different sounds shaping the music group, to both include music that participants feel familiar with, and open doors to new musical genres such as classical music or less-known folk music.

Secondly, critiques have arisen to the disadvantages of the larger scopes that such projects might arrive at. Geoffrey Baker (2014) criticized the El Sistema Venezuela project as a “model of tyranny”, stating it left no space for the individual stories and development of the students, in which he described the director, Jose Antonio Abreu as an autocratic figure, alongside many accusations of power abuse within the organization. In following discussions on these denunciations, an important takeaway is the social, psychological and cultural design of such projects, in which the wellbeing and feeling safe of the participants always remains the first goal before expanding the program quantitatively.

Particularly for intercultural programs, this requires employees from different cultures, speaking the different participating languages. Furthermore, the whole team should work on the basis of a clear, shared set of values and communication principles based on mutual respect and inclusion of all cultures, religions and families, starting from the belief that everyone is able to come to an understanding and acceptance of one another. A special requirement herein is the holistic, intercultural and qualitative formation of the teachers and supervisors.

Conclusion

“Perhaps the cumulative effect of these [musical] skills and abilities could prepare human beings to become more apt to listen and understand several points of view at the same time, to be able to assess their place in society and history, and human beings with more possibilities to capture the similarities between all people, than the differences that separate them.” (Barenboim, 2008)

Cultural conflict often thrives on a scarcity of respect for different perspectives. To develop mutual respect between people from distinct backgrounds, proactive policies are needed (Kester, 2024). In line with the arguments of Sennett and Gescinska, we have seen that a key contributor to the scarcity of respect exists in the absence of really listening to each other. This is a democratic issue both on the personal and the societal level. As Coles (2004) stated, psychological research confirms that collective music making can be an effective creative practice in mutual respect and listening, due to its resemblance with language and the synchronization processes it evokes. This interrelation of disciplines creates an innovative perspective to explore the benefits of music making in practice, as we observed in various examples.

In musical harmony, different voices are needed. Few people know that actually, the instruments with the fewest notes arguably have some of the hardest jobs: to play the right note at the right time. An accomplishment that each musician strives to achieve, to uphold the collective sound. Musicians make sure that each voice is heard, through skillful listening and respectful interplay: recognizing the different role of each instrument to ensure that no one is overplayed, that no one is silenced, that no one is unseen. Either being recognized in a community music orchestra, an intercultural choir, being respected in a political debate, or being listened to by someone with a different opinion: these are all dynamics that benefit from a practice in mutual respect.

The benefits of collective music making have been confirmed in various social science fields, which underlines how music has an important role in public education and social projects, both for the psychological and democratic development of students. For the question on how to connect different cultures and religions into a functioning, respectful society, it is therefore necessary that researchers, social workers and musicians work together to translate the power of music into proactive policies.

In the quest for the art of connecting cultures this paper discussed community music programs as a practice in mutual respect, in response to the need for proactive policies to have practical, in-

tercultural experiences to foster global religious dialogue and cooperation. First and foremost, the reader is invited to support social music education projects. Subsequently, to include intercultural music initiatives in academic work, institutional decision-making and public policy design. And lastly, to see music as a universal language to welcome cultures and religions through the roots of shared emotional, human experience - music.

The First World Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation, hosted in Struga, October 2023, ended on the day that Hamas invaded Israel. After days of colorful and diverse presentations and discussions, the question of practical solutions to the widely researched problems was so painfully emphasized. Indeed, for many populations a society built on religious dialogue and cooperation seems a far-fetched utopia. Yet, simultaneously, scholars, theologians and professors from India to the United States, from Finland to Italy and from North-Macedonia to the Netherlands joined their knowledge, experiences and hope in a shared effort to research intercultural ways forward. A belief in the importance of new initiatives was surely confirmed, and now the question remains how to give practical shape to such intentions. Community music programs can be a great developmental instrument for this challenge.

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