Building Peace Through Music

By Benjamin Bergey | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

_Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God._

Last year in the course of my research, I had the opportunity to listen to Arab and Jewish youth rehearsing music together in an orchestra and a choir in Israel.[1] These young people came from varied backgrounds. They live in a society deeply marked by conflict and carry the effects of that conflict within their identities and worldviews. Yet here they were: playing the same music, struggling with the same tricky violin part, or singing a choral piece together.

In a world filled with conflict, what does it mean to be a peacemaker? How can music fit into the building of God’s kingdom? There are many ways to answer Jesus’s call to make peace, and music can be one of them. But how can we build peace in the relationships around us through music?

**What Is Peacebuilding?**

A few definitions of key concepts will help to clarify what this work entails. In recent years, the term *peacebuilding* has become the common term for the work of making peace. It began to surface in the 1970s through the work of Dr. Johan Galtung, one of the founders of modern peace studies. Peacebuilding refers to an active engagement in making and sustaining peace before, during, and after conflicts. This term is used in contrast to “peacemaking,” which generally refers to diplomatic efforts, such as those undertaken by the United Nations, or “peacekeeping” and “peace enforcement,” which are usually used when military forces are called upon to keep the peace.

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Conflict is, of course, a normal part of human existence and can have both positive and negative results. In general, conflict arises when the goals or needs of one party are not met or are seen as incompatible with those of another. Since conflict is common and can lead to constructive or destructive outcomes, it is important to understand its roots and acquire tools to help it become a force of constructive change.

The term *conflict transformation*, similar to the more widely-used *conflict resolution*, was coined by John Paul Lederach. He defines the goal of conflict transformation as being “to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.”[2]

One major tool in conflict transformation is constructive *dialogue*. True dialogue can happen only when
one values the person more than the argument. In fact, it is not a dialogue if we try to win a debate. We need to listen actively and seek to understand or empathize with the other. Empathy, or the ability to put ourselves into and feel another’s experience, is also crucial to transforming conflict.

The Role of Music

In light of these definitions, the role of music as an effective tool in building peace can become clearer. Music is an art often performed in ensembles. It provides opportunities for people to see humanity in one another, helping them to break down barriers and find common ground. Music provides a vehicle through which they can express emotion and build empathy. The power of music to build empathy was illustrated by a fascinating study in which children were given group games to play that promoted contact, imitation, memory, sharing, and flexibility. The games of one group had a musical component, while those of the control group did not have music. This study showed that the children with the musical component to their interaction had a greater increase in empathy over the children without music. [3]

Making music together, as happens in congregational singing, creates beauty and builds relationships in several ways. In effect, we become one body with many voices. When singing in unison, many voices combine into one. When singing in parts, each voice has its role and range, and together they create a beautiful harmonic tapestry. Whenever we sing with others, whether in unison or in parts, we must listen as we sing. This teaches us not only to make sound, but to hear sound and respond to what we hear. This dialogical foundation also stands at the core of transforming conflict, peacebuilding, and worship itself. It is an essential ingredient in how we bless others with our music.

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The use of music in building peace is hardly new. Music has been used fruitfully in many situations of conflict, including public protests and community gatherings for healing. Freedom songs and anti-apartheid songs have rallied resistance against injustice. Patriotic songs help to bring a nation together. The earliest Anabaptist hymnal, called the Ausbund, was written by believers who were imprisoned for their faith in the sixteenth century. These hymns were used (and are still in use even today) to tell the stories to keep that community together and grounded in the nonviolent teaching of Jesus that is central to the Anabaptist faith.

It is important to realize, however, that although music can unite, it can also be used to divide. It has been used to stoke fear and hatred and to bring one group closer together in hostile opposition to another group. Music is not necessarily a universal language, as is often touted. Although the “alphabet” of music is mostly universal, the syntax, vocabulary, and context can be interpreted very differently by different people. To give a simple example: a song that elicits happiness in one person may sound like a sad song to someone who hears it in a different social, cultural, or personal context. If music were truly a universal language, this same song would “translate” across contexts, generating the same affect and meaning. Music, all by itself, therefore does not make for peace. This is why empathy and practices of nonviolence are always needed to ground the creative work of music in the service of peace.
Simple Techniques

Building peace and transforming conflict are not necessarily easy. Just because people go to church or sing sacred songs does not mean that they are inherently good at it. We need to practice and to develop our skills for building peace through music. Some simple techniques can be used to foster community-building, dissolve barriers, improve empathy, create opportunities for dialogue, and thus work toward building peace through music.

Here are six examples from my own experience. They can be used in workshops, dialogues, retreats, meetings, Sunday School classes, rehearsals, and even in the school classroom. I have used them in all these types of settings.

1. **Sing together!** I cannot overemphasize the importance of singing together. Explain to the gathered group how we collectively breathe the same air to produce this sound. We harmonize, showing that we each play a distinct role in producing this one body of sound. We listen to each other as an act of service and empathy. If the group with which you are working is not accustomed to singing *a cappella*, try some songs that can be sung as a round or ones that are familiar enough to harmonize with. You will be amazed how powerful the experience of singing without instrumental accompaniment can be. Trust your community of singers (no matter the skill level); they can do it!

2. **Teach a song by rote.** This is sometimes called paperless singing as no written music is needed. This form of teaching can be a helpful equalizer for those who are less musically literate. Choose songs or hymns that can be taught by call and response, with repetition, or even with bodily motions. Motions can provide a kinesthetic form of learning which improves memory of the song. The use of repetition or call and response encourages active listening and empathy, both of which are important muscles in building peace.

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Aside from singing, the following techniques can be interactive and effective for building peace when working with small groups:

3. **Go around a circle** to learn names or to check-in to see how each person is doing (emotionally, physically, spiritually, etc.). Each person presents their name, emotion, or an action or sound that describes them. After each person gives their response, all other members respond by repeating it to show acceptance and understanding.

4. **Group breathing exercises** in which the leader encourages the group members to pay attention to their breath can also be effective. During the pause between inhalation and exhalation, ask each member to snap their fingers. The resulting rhythm is an original work by the gathered body. The leader can then ask people to hum or sing a pitch on the exhale, and in this way the group begins to improvise music together. Ask members to feel the sound within themselves as well as listening to those around them.

5. **Drum circles** have been a popular activity to bring people together around music that does not require singing. Drums, other percussion instruments, and even body percussion (stomps, claps, etc.)
can be used. A leader starts out with a general rhythm. Others are encouraged to join in with the exact rhythm, something simpler, or with embellishments. As the rhythm is established, the leader can encourage certain people to play out, give a solo, or even initiate a call and response. This passing around of focus can be done using body language, eye contact, or verbal directions if needed. Encourage members to listen to someone else and play rhythms that complement the other in some way. Leaders should practice or be trained before facilitating a group drum circle.

6. **Encourage creativity through exploration of sound.** One example of this exercise would be an activity called the paper game, in which each person explores different sounds using a piece of paper. One person initiates a sound; then the others observe this sound, imitate it, or initiate another sound. As time goes on, you will find that there are many more ways of making sound with a scrap of paper than you ever would have imagined.

These are a few examples of ways to foster cooperation and empathy and build peace in everyday life at the grassroots level through music. While this will not cause international geopolitical change, by bringing people together through music, finding common ground, improving empathy, and encouraging constructive dialogue, we can all be more active and effective participants in Jesus’s call to be peacemakers. This is important because we know that changes made at grassroots levels can have much larger impacts.

Leonard Bernstein, the centenary of whose birth is being celebrated this year, spoke many times of the power of music and the need to bring peace to a world where conflict often results in destructive deeds. Following John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Bernstein said, “This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” May this be so; blessed are those who build peace.

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[1] This took place at The Polyphony Foundation, a conservatory in Israel whose founder was influenced by what he experienced as a musician in the internationally-acclaimed West Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said in 1999. The Polyphony Foundation follows a model similar to The West Eastern Divan, with an emphasis on education and bringing Arabs and Jews together equitably through music.

