

**Playing with the Enemy:
Investigating the Impact of Musical Peacebuilding**

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Abstract

Musical performances are frequently used in peacebuilding initiatives. Can performing music together indeed change interpersonal and intergroup perceptions of the other as the enemy? Using contact theory for our theoretical framework, we hypothesize that the specific mechanism of listening during active music making helps to establish the positive effects of intergroup contact. Additionally, we explore to what extent participants become peace facilitators when returning to their home environments. In two small-scale studies we find preliminary support for active listening as a mechanism of trust-enhancing contact. However, this effect mainly surfaces in unstructured encounters within the larger organized structure, like late-night chamber music jam sessions. Repeated participation builds the necessary trust for a new common ingroup. Because participation is mostly driven by career and performance motivations, we argue that peacebuilding through musical performances may help overcome the common selection bias in research on contact theory.

Keywords: arts-based peacebuilding, music, contact theory, prosocial behavior

Playing with the Enemy: Investigating the Impact of Musical Peacebuilding

Performing music together has become a popular instrument to stimulate peaceful relations between young people from countries in conflict (e.g., Pruitt, 2011). Prominent examples include the World Orchestra for Peace, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Musicians Without Borders, and the Iraqi National Youth Orchestra.¹ Such peace initiatives mostly rely on the idea that playing together reduces intergroup bias when young musicians from countries in conflict overcome perceptions of the other as the enemy while working together towards a joint musical performance. Participants may subsequently become peace facilitators when returning to their original social environment.

We propose that, within arts-based peacebuilding (Mitchell et al., 2020), music should be especially effective because playing music together requires listening to each other beyond normal daily levels. For example, tempo, rhythm, phrasing, articulation (i.e., the sound of individual notes and how they are connected to neighboring notes) and mere intonation (“playing in tune”) need to be coordinated on the spot, and differences in musical interpretation need to be worked out to come to a good performance. This *enhanced listening* distinguishes musical performances from other shared artistic or cultural activities; if used systematically, it could be functional in reducing intergroup bias.

We use contact theory for our theoretical framework. Contact theory stipulates that positive intergroup encounters can reduce intergroup prejudices under specific circumstances (e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). By getting to know an outgroup member through joint activities with a common goal, individuals can ultimately overcome the ingroup-outgroup division and revise their negative outgroup bias (Dovidio et al., 1993; Hammack et al., 2014; Stoeckel, 2016).

¹ See, respectively, <http://www.worldorchestraforpeace.com>; <https://www.west-eastern-divan.org>; <https://www.musicianswithoutborders.org>; <https://www.facebook.com/nyo.iraq>

How can making music together enhance contact between (groups of) people? A general argument is that making music might increase empathy (Rabinowitch et al., 2013) and promote helping behavior (e.g., Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010). However, the mechanism to explain these effects is not clear. Moving in synchrony may be part of the explanation, in combination with having a shared goal (Buren et al., 2019). But making music together goes further: It adds immediate and careful listening to one's co-musicians for tempo, phrasing, articulation, intonation, and rhythmic coordination. Such enhanced listening is not only other-directed, but also involves the self; self- and other-interest are necessarily aligned, with trust in positive cooperation regarding the goal as crucial binding agent.

We hypothesize that listening during active music making can enhance intergroup understanding by changing mutual perceptions and building trust. In two small case studies of different ensembles with young musicians from conflicting countries ($N = 42$), we investigate this active listening in practice. We explore two main questions: (1) how does participation in musical peacebuilding activities impact mutual perceptions of young musicians from countries in conflict (i.e. contact-by-listening), and (2) to what extent do participating musicians become peace facilitators?

Ideally, one would conduct an experiment with one or more control conditions (no intervention and/or alternative contact-based interventions) and random group assignment, followed up with post-hoc measures. In practice, this is impossible – if only for ethical considerations. Studies like ours are limited to existing musical peacebuilding initiatives, and have to work within their parameters. This also means that investigations depend on the cooperation of those initiatives and the consent from participating musicians. Strict research protocols are not always a priority in the program. For this project we indeed approached several initiatives who could not accommodate us. Within this limitation, our current work aims to provide initial but critical information for future research to build on.

The project was approved by the Leiden University Psychology Research Ethics Committee (CEP). All participants in Study 1 consented to the use of their anonymized data; data for Study 2 were derived from a publicly available, previously published source.

Study 1: The Colluvio Chamber Music Academy

The Colluvio Chamber Music Academy is a small-scale annual summer school. Since 2010 it invites nine to twelve talented young musicians studying piano, violin, viola, or cello at conservatory level to study and perform pieces of classical chamber music together. The musicians are selected for their musical ability and their region of origin; they can audition several times, and some return several years in a row. From 2010—2017, the musicians mainly came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia. In 2018 and 2019 special attention was given to Russia and Ukraine. This allowed us to study musicians from countries in conflict where the conflict had either ended or was ongoing at the time of participation.

For the whole festival, participants stay divided over three ensembles of three to five players, with which they study one complete composition to be performed in a series of concerts, supervised by interchanging teachers from Austria, Germany, or the musicians' respective home countries. The students are housed in one building with various shared bedrooms, a large kitchen, and rehearsal spaces. The location is rather remote in the south of Austria and only reachable by car. A daily communal lunch is included; dinner is prepared independently by the participants together. At the end of the master class, a concert tour is organized in which the musicians get to travel to and perform the works in their respective home countries.

Method

First, we emailed a questionnaire to all past participants from 2010–2018 ($N = 32$), and received finished responses from 12 individuals (three male, seven female, one preferred

not to say, one missing) between 19 and 34 years old, $M_{\text{age}} = 25.55$, $SD = 4.74$. Next, we sent out a pre-event and a post-event questionnaire to the 2019 participants ($N = 11$). On the pre-event questionnaire, we received six finished responses (two male, two female, two preferred not to say), $M_{\text{age}} = 22.33$, $SD = 1.51$. On the post-event questionnaire, we received four finished responses (two female, one preferred not to say, one missing), $M_{\text{age}} = 21.33$, $SD = 0.58$ ($N = 3$). Responses on the pre- and post-event questionnaires were not necessarily from the same individuals.

Furthermore, we attended several consecutive rehearsals of all three ensembles during the Colluvio Festival of 2019 (11 musicians total) to observe interpersonal interactions. We focused on if and how verbal and nonverbal communications would change in tone and kind in the course of the process. We also interviewed most of the participants individually and/or in groups. Given the limited number of responses and observations, we only provide content analyses. Participant quotes are derived from our notes and/or the questionnaires, and remain anonymous.

Results

The most reported motivation to apply to the program was to get more experience in playing chamber music. Many also indicated to be interested because of the reputation of the teachers. Therefore, the musical activity rather than peacebuilding seemed the primary reason to join the contact activity. The majority of the participants reported to have developed a friendlier attitude towards the other students at the end, and had developed an increased understanding of each other's perspectives. Half of the participants of previous festivals indicated that they are still in contact with each other even one year after the end of the activity. Intriguing to see is that this change in trust, attitude, and understanding during the activity only occasionally involved talking about the conflict. Instead, the musical activity remained the main form of interaction. Apart from the scheduled ensemble sessions with

teachers, spontaneous jam sessions until late at night were reportedly important, both in the interviews and the questionnaire responses. Here, several participants engaged spontaneously with musicians of the conflicting outgroup on a regular basis.

Participants also were likely to carry their positive experiences back into their home environments. Almost half of the survey participants responded that they shared their perceptions of playing with members of the outgroup with friends and family; only one respondent argued that s/he did not share these experiences because “everyone should have their own opinions.” This indicates that – even without talking much about the conflict and conflict-related topics – some of the musicians indeed became active peace facilitators when returning to their home environments, at least in the context of their immediate personal environment. Moreover, the majority of the participants extended their perceptions of the musicians they encountered to other members of the outgroup. The majority reports that they also felt closer to other members of the outgroup after the activity.

Most importantly, our observations and interview data suggest that the hypothesized listening mechanism did emerge, but only in specific settings. Closely listening to others will add to the interaction in spontaneous jam sessions, but less so in structured and prepared rehearsals. While the interpersonal listening effect is not entirely absent in structured settings, close listening happens substantially more in unguided rehearsals without the presence of a teacher (or conductor); thus, without hierarchical relations in place.

Study 2: The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was founded in 1998 by Daniel Barenboim (conductor) and Edward Said to get young musicians together from the Middle East. It started as a summer workshop in Weimar, Germany, in 1999, and has developed into a professional-level orchestra of symphony size. To be selected, musicians have to pass an audition that is held annually, with new musicians joining the existing group every year. The orchestra meets

outside the Middle East, initially in Germany, later on in Spain and once also in the United States, followed by a concert tour, with some performances in the Middle East throughout the years.

Method

We used narratives, which have become important in qualitative political science and psychology research (e.g., Vassilieva, 2016), as our primary data source. Narratives of 22 musicians were collected and published by a former member of the orchestra (Cheah, 2009). These accounts are particularly helpful to assess potential long-term effects of the participation. We focus on changes in mutual perceptions and trust, as well as indicators for participants becoming peace facilitators when returning to their home environments.

We derived the narratives directly from Cheah (2009). The author reports interviews, observations, and stories about participants in a mix of description and direct participant quotes. Page numbers in the book are provided within parentheses, e.g.: when the orchestra entered the airplane, “everyone cheered” (p. 320). Square brackets indicate descriptive author quotes *about* a participant, e.g., “He joined the program early” [John] (p. 524). Curly brackets indicate direct quotes *from* a participant, e.g., “I joined the program somewhat later “{Suzan} (p. 525).

Results

Follow the Music

Establishing intergroup contact through the arts seems to circumvent the potentially problematic self-selection bias among participants to peace-building initiatives. Similar to the Colluvio-participants (Study 1), the majority of the participants to the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was purely motivated by the musical character of the project and the high reputation of Barenboim as a conductor; most were not interested in, or were actively ignoring the specific political conflict that the peacebuilding activity was trying to address:

“I admit that I first came to the Divan only because I wanted to play with Daniel Barenboim and because [of] the repertoire. I was determined not to change any of my opinions and wasn’t interested in the discussion part of the orchestra at all” {Yuval Shapiro} (p. 120). “I went to the Divan not because I wanted peace but because I had heard from colleagues at home that it was a good musical experience, and because I wanted to play with Daniel Barenboim” {Talib Zaki} (p. 223). “I knew that the Divan was a very good orchestra; [...] I was excited about the cities we were going to see on the concert tour [...]. I don’t remember knowing that there would be Israelis there” {Nabih Bulos} (p. 264).

Enhanced Listening

Several narratives suggest that our hypothesized listening mechanism is indeed at work. Cheah herself noted from her experience with playing in the orchestra that “the musical miracle was the acute sensitivity of the musicians – a way of listening, understanding, and responding that I have never encountered in any other orchestra” (p. 270). When the project was initiated, the majority of musicians had never played in an orchestra before, and some found the listening experience rather overwhelming: “[...] sitting in the orchestra listening to the harmonies going through me, I get sometimes so overwhelmed from pleasure that I cannot play anymore!” {Nassib Al Ahmadiéh} (p. 97). In addition to the orchestra and section rehearsals, the workshop included coached chamber music sessions (p. 56). Participants often got together in small jam sessions themselves (p. 155).

Trust and Friendship

The narratives clearly show changes in participants’ mutual perceptions and trust. A key factor seems to be repeated participation. Almost all narratives indicate that, after initially experiencing mistrust and a tense atmosphere in the early contact, returning participants had built a new ingroup that is characterized by trust. Their shared experiences contributed to the

formation of a common identity that went beyond their respective national identities, and distinguished the veteran group from “newcomers” who had not built this kind of trust yet. Participants report that they have not only “got used to each other” (p. 253), but also developed a way of “mature communication” throughout painful discussions about politics and the conflict:

“Today there is a core group of musicians who know each other and have been returning every year for many years, and there is a certain basic trust that allows us to discuss things maturely” {Daniel Cohen} (p. 11). “It was comforting [...] that the orchestra was more or less the same group of people every year, with a handful of new people each time. They had a common history now, which made it easier to communicate, especially with the people who had been at the film discussion in 2004 and really wanted to understand each other” [Sharon Cohen] (p. 78). “Many of the same people kept coming back year after year. Those who did so became more and more open-minded, and began to learn how to speak to each other with more sensitivity and respect” [Alberto and Pablo Martos] (p. 156).

This newly built trust relied heavily on the recognition of each other as musicians playing together:

“Before going to the Divan, Sharon had really not thought of Syrians as human beings. She had only ever heard them spoken of as killers. [...] to her, it was much more of a surprise to discover they could have so much in common, and even become friends” [Sharon Cohen] (p. 76). “Underneath the outer shell we are all alike, we are all equal and we are all just as important as any other. This is the level on which we communicate when we make music together” {Meirav Kadichevski} (p. 174). “Her first year in the Divan was difficult, but she quickly realized that she had to rethink the ideas she had had about Israelis. They were not monsters, people to be put

indiscriminately in the category of “enemy”; they were human beings, and they even had many things in common with her” [Reham Moataz] (p. 188). “You have to talk to each other because you play together, sometimes even in small groups, and you have to discuss a lot of things musically” {Nassib Al Ahmadih} (p. 100).

Through this joint experience, many participants developed various and mixed friendships that motivated them to return in later years:

“Each year it’s easier, though, because you start to have really nice friends. You only meet your friends” {Yasmin} (p. 259). “For the last three years now, it has become a tradition for me and my closest friends from the Divan to call each other in order to make sure that we are all coming” {Asaf Maoz} (p. 216).

These ties proved rather strong even when confronted with pressure from their respective environments:

“A little story about Facebook [...] might show you how strong our friendship is. [...] I added two friends of mine, Israeli girls from the Divan who live in Berlin, to my friends list. [...] you could see on my profile that I had two friends from the Israel network. You can’t imagine how many people came to me and said, “how could this happen?” [...] it was uncomfortable, so I had to remove them from my friend list on the website. A few months later, both of them sent me a new friend request on Facebook, and they had both left the Israel network” {Talib Zaki} (p. 224).

Peace Facilitators

Several participants became peace facilitators when returning to their home environment. This effect ranged from the feeling of responsibility regarding the peacebuilding process to a conscious choice of increased contact with further members of the outgroup or, ultimately, changed relations with members of the ingroup. In the latter case, however, the

narratives also tell how participants encountered considerable difficulties when returning to their home environments:

“The worst part about the Divan is when you go home after the workshop and people there hear little bits about the things we did [...]. They say, “You’ve been brainwashed” {Yuval Shapiro} (p. 135). “Some of my friends in Ramallah have criticized the fact that I am friendly with Israelis – not to the extent that they would verbally attack me, but we have had a few arguments” {Tyme Khleifi} (p. 149).

Notwithstanding individual efforts to engage as facilitators for peace, the societal and political circumstances in ongoing conflicts are greatly limiting their effect. In asymmetrical conflicts, peacebuilding activities might even have detrimental effects for the weaker party in the conflict. One participant recognized this danger: “I refuse, however, to go and patronize people [...] and expect them to understand what I’m doing in the Divan workshop and the values of coexistence. [...] If you’re living under occupation, you’re not going to want to go and work with your oppressors” {Amir} (p. 222).

Discussion

In two small-scale studies we find preliminary evidence for active musical listening as a mechanism for trust-enhancing intergroup contact, especially in unregulated occasions in which musicians spontaneously come together to perform unplanned and unprepared music (jam sessions). Returning participants are important to build general trust within a new overarching ingroup, increasing the chance of a project’s overall success. Furthermore, several participants report sharing their changed outgroup perceptions with friends and families afterwards, which makes them potential peace facilitators – although this does not always happen without conflict or difficulties. We additionally find that musical peacebuilding is not sensitive to the selection bias often reported in contact theory research;

participants are mainly attracted by the aspect of high-level music making and initially seem indifferent to the conflict-related aspects of the activity.

Altogether we suggest that close listening at one level (music) may indeed transfer to closer listening at another level (politics), but aspiring professional musicians may be too focused on performing their previously rehearsed parts to make such a transition in the organized sessions of scheduled (and prepared) rehearsals. They will be preoccupied with the technical requirements of performing music in general. However, this may change entirely in the spontaneous jam sessions that happen at night, where people venture into repertoire that is not rehearsed previously or has not been studied extensively, unguided and undistracted by teachers, other evaluators, or preparation. There, as some of the participants indicated, the expected benefit of intense musical listening may surface. As one participant in Study 1 reported, the improvisational aspect forces one to really listen carefully: “You hear from the other’s bowing, phrasing, or intonation where they want the music to go” – a conversation likely to be transferred to other levels.

The support for our contact-through-listening hypothesis is hopeful indeed, but can only be seen as preliminary information to be taken up by further research. For example, the cognitive and behavioral effects of enhanced listening during music making could be investigated in controlled laboratory experiments. And however challenging, studies of existing interventions could include surveys and semi-structured interviews, using qualitative techniques, and ideally are complemented by quantitative experimental studies. These studies may be designed to analyze not only the level of structured encounters, but also – and especially – investigate social interactions one level below the organized surface.

In conclusion, our investigations suggest that the contact-through-listening mechanism has the strongest effect in unguided music making; the intervention structure thus is important. Musical peacebuilding initiatives could accommodate unstructured encounters

within a structured setting. It is a balancing act between guided rehearsals to guarantee successful performances (the “common goal”) and allowing enough free time for spontaneous playing in small chamber music jam sessions. Repeated participation seems to be an important element regardless the structure of the intervention. Returning participants create a new ingroup of individuals who jointly experienced previous tensions and thus form a common identity vis-à-vis “newcomers” that goes beyond pre-existing ingroup-outgroup divisions. Given the overall financial limitations of the arts, more institutional efforts are required to provide long-term resources to arts-based peacebuilding, for example through international organizations or multi-year bilateral aid programs. Because, small as it may be, well-organized musical initiatives provide affordances for actual peacebuilding.

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