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Common Sounds: Music Education for a Shared Society in the Jezreel Valley

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Abstract: Over the years, the Music Center at the Jezreel Valley Center for the Arts has initiated many programs for peace education through music. Developing a child's identity as an artist and a musician requires long term engagement. When children spend time making music together they have the opportunity to build a shared identity. This article presents past programs and analyzes the difficulties that occurred in their implementation. Conclusions include the need for a candid evaluation of success versus failure, and the need to better define the means and methods for each project's implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: co-existence, diversity, funding, asymmetry, evaluation, social change.

The Jezreel Valley Regional Council is located five minutes from Nazareth. The villages in the region are mostly secular and pluralistically oriented, and the Regional Council sponsors a round table of organizations working toward co-existence or shared life. While the region is predominantly Jewish, Arab families from nearby communities often bring their children to the Center to study music. Individuals and communities sponsor many other initiatives – in sports, business, and theatre arts – aiming to bring Arabs and Jews together.

The Music Center has actively initiated several coexistence or shared society projects, all of which were funded by outside (non-governmental) sources. Non-musical initiatives require alternate sources of funding since conservatories receive their funding through student tuition and local and national government offices. To receive governmental funding, each conservatory must meet strict criteria pertaining the number of students it serves, the quality and scope of its musical activities (choirs, ensembles, bands, orchestras) and the number and quality of school music programs it coordinates. We do not know of any regional or national government office in Israel that specifically funds conflict mitigation through music on an ongoing basis.

In one co-existence music project that ran for three school years at the Jezreel Valley Music Center, three elementary schools choirs – Arab, Jewish Secular and Jewish Religious – worked together on a common repertoire. The music teachers who directed the choirs would meet regularly to discuss repertoire and plan joint rehearsals. At the rehearsals, one teacher would lead the combined choir while another accompanied at the

piano. While the children came to look forward to these rehearsals, visiting other schools and performing as a group, we believe the project's success was the result of the relationship that developed among the teachers. Communication was always open, even when discussing one another's beliefs or politics. Since the teachers learned to trust one another, the general atmosphere at rehearsals was relaxed, something outside observers often commented on. The project was discontinued when funding ran out.

Identification-based trust (as opposed to calculus-based trust, which is based on costs and rewards for violating or maintaining trust based on goals and evaluation procedures) must be built over time (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). Time is measured in the number of hours a team spends together, and it takes many more hours to build trust than many co-existence projects are able to budget for.

When children spend time together working on common interests – sports, art, music or dance – they have the opportunity to build a shared identity. Problems of identity are deeply connected to questions of personal and social meaning. In Israel, Arab and Jewish youth study in different school systems, and have very little opportunity to interact. Much of the interaction that does take place within a school setting is pre-scripted. State management of identity and cultural diversity in policy contributes to the insecurity of groups by promoting "singular" visions of identity and denying the multiple identities that individual possess (Hammack, 2008). We seek to develop a child's identity as an artist and a musician, which means long term engagement. Arab and Jewish children singing together in Arabic and Hebrew once a month might be a nice experience and should definitely be encouraged. Singing together in a choir, or playing together in an orchestra, for several hours a week, for several consecutive years, makes a bigger impact one's identity.

Several years ago, a five-year program for excellence in music was established with the aim of bringing Arab and Jewish students together. During the program, tuition for most of the Arab students was heavily subsidized and their numbers at the center increased dramatically. Because most Arab youth are generally less exposed to classical music, the program allocated funds for instrumental music teachers to work in Arab schools. Through these teachers, the Music Center established connections with several schools in Nazareth. Arab students in the program often received preferential treatment in the form of scholarships, or invitations to perform at prestigious events. This may have backfired by reinforcing their feelings of "otherness".

The Shani Girls' Choir at the Jezreel Valley Music Center is an example of an ongoing program actively combining music and co-existence. From 2003, the choir made a pointed effort to recruit Christian and Muslim youth. In 2004 the choir participated in a

series of performances in the U.S. together with a group of Palestinians. The concerts were a huge success and the choir began to identify itself as multicultural, recruiting singers from Arab communities and making an effort to incorporate Arab songs in its repertoire. It has since performed at dozens of venues, in Israel and abroad. While its programs are classically oriented, songs that speak of peace and tolerance get the most applause. The choir's rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine" is usually a showstopper.

Galtung defines cultural violence as" those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence … that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990). There are endless angles from which to discuss what happens when children from an Eastern culture are immersed in a Western culture. Many parents of our Arab students tell us that they welcome the opportunity for their children to hear and speak Hebrew, and that they are actively seeking the Western culture they feel that the conservatory represents. Music studies at a conservatory demand self-discipline and commitment. Some parents see their children's musical education as a means to an end, the end being university studies in engineering, medicine, architecture, or any other subject that promises prestige and prosperity, studies demanding the same self-discipline and commitment developed through learning an instrument. Many of these parents have decided that for their children to compete in a society where they are the underdog, they need to have every educational advantage money can buy. In adopting Western culture, does an Arab student come into conflict with his identity and his community? In promoting Western culture as a basis for inclusion, are we setting the stage for future conflict?

Not all Arabic speaking youth believe that fluency in Hebrew is the ticket to success in Israeli society. We have met youth who prefer to speak English, the language they will presumably need when they inevitably leave Israel to build their lives in a place where they feel less victimized.

The idea of a conservatory as a shared community is very appealing. It brings together idealists who dream of a better world where there are no ethnic divisions. These idealists may team up with sources of funding that share their ideals. However, by creating models of musical symmetry within an asymmetrical political context we may be further institutionalizing power imbalances (Horowitz, 2010).

Asymmetry exists not only in the political context, but also in a musical one. Can a shared community be based on western classical music when this musical culture is far from main-stream in Palestinian society (and less mainstream than ever in Jewish-Israeli society)? Channels of communication that exist between two unequal partners are usually patronizing. The music center operates for the most part on a European model teaching a

European curriculum. Different musical cultures necessitate different models of instruction that are not always available, or understood, in a European conservatory of music.

Many of our Arab students actively seek ways to share their musical heritage, even if they are studying a Western-oriented musical curriculum. Many of our Jewish students are enthusiastic about learning Arab music. We need to find more ways to actively encourage our students to experiment with different musical languages. This means engaging more teachers and artists with the knowledge and experience to facilitate multi-ethnic experimentation.

According to Danesh, prerequisites for effective peace education are a unity-based worldview, and a culture of peace and of healing. "In order to create peace, we need to focus, first and foremost, on creation of unity in the context of diversity" (Danesh, 2006). A conservatory can provide unity, shared goals of excellence in music, and these shared goals can be achieved in a culture of peace and healing. Whether conservatories, whose agenda is musical excellence, should spend time, effort and money on conflict mitigation is an open question. The learning process involved in mastering a musical instrument is traditionally hierarchical, with the teacher in the role of "narrating subject" and the students as "listening subjects" (Darder Et Al., 2003). Whether a conservatory teacher will embrace social justice education (Allsup & Shieh, 2012) reaching beyond the rehearsal room into the larger and more intertwined social, artistic and political world is a personal question each individual teacher must answer for himself.

A conservatory can and should be a community for all of its students. However, even with the best of intentions, students who perceive themselves as part of an "outside" group may remain outsiders within the conservatory. In the case of the string orchestra at our music center, a group of Arab students, all excellent musicians, eventually chose to detach from the ensemble. The reason most gave for leaving was the need to spend more time on individual practice. They did not feel any loyalty to the group once they reached a level where they felt that they were giving more (musically) than they were getting from it. The staff of the center may make every effort to promote a shared community of Arab and Jewish students, however, when the funding for a particular programs ends, so, often, does its shared community. When an Arab student join a Jewish Conservatory, he is aware of the fact that everyone around him is speaking Hebrew. Even if he is the best violinist in the orchestra, he understands that he is different from the Jewish majority.

In the case of the Shani choir, cooperation and loyalty to the group is more pronounced. The choir performs frequently, singing a repertoire in Hebrew and in Arabic that defines it as multicultural. In these performances, the singers perceive themselves as "ambassadors". Nevertheless, the connection often ends with the rehearsal. This may be

due to a natural language barrier (though most of the Arabic speakers also speak excellent Hebrew), but also a conscious choice to belong to one group and not to the other. Differences in attitude may also have to do with the individual teacher. One teacher or leader may inspire more social tolerance than another may. The East-West Divan Orchestra would probably not have reached the levels of success it reached without Daniel Barenboim as its conductor. A charismatic leader can have an impact that is impossible to measure or define.

At times, the end product – a concert, recording, or film – can be more than the sum of its parts. People are inspired when they see young people, Jewish and Arab, performing together a beautiful piece of music. That moment is a phantasm through which one might experience a preferred reality. Nevertheless, the deeper meanings felt by the performers themselves often remain hidden behind the façade on stage. Different listeners might experience different meanings, giving tacit justification for an entire spectrum of political beliefs.

Strategic nonviolence is a direct way of addressing conflict in order to raise awareness, sympathy and increased understanding (Shank & Schirch, 2008). It may not be the way to a shared narrative, but it can be the way to an acceptance of multiple narratives. Creating a piece of music together forms a platform for different groups (in the case of our center, Arabs and Jews) to share something meaningful. We asked ourselves, if the transformative power of music is nonverbal, when should ask our students to discuss with one another their shared experiences? When we put this question to the parents of the girls in the choir, we were surprised to hear that they did not feel the need to "talk about it". Being a part of the choir was enough. Many of them felt that discussing the issue of conflict could possibly be detrimental to the positive experience of singing together.

The "Peace in Music" project our students participated in over the course of several years was coordinated by a Belgian organization. This program brought together young musicians from two different European countries (Belgium and France in 2006, Belgium and Germany in 2008 and 2010) to visit Israel and Palestine. Following their visit, students from our center and music students from Palestine travelled to Europe to participate in a summer workshop together with the Europeans. Discussing the conflict was never part of the program. As one of the program coordinators summarized: "There was a feeling that discussions wouldn't lead anywhere, and would only raise tensions. No one in our group thought we would make peace in the Middle East. The interaction through a non-verbal medium creates the experience. Learning to see that other people are just like you"

Forgoing discussion is not always the best choice. One issue where the need for discussion was painfully apparent was the singing of "HaTikva". National anthems are a

quintessential example of the power of music to unite or divide, depending on where you stake your flag. Whenever the Shani choir performs at an official event, what to do when it comes time to sing the national anthem is a point of contention. For some of the Arab girls, it's just another part of their complicated reality that they prefer (or pretend) to ignore. For others, having to stand for the singing of the national anthem, or sitting while others around them are standing, is a traumatic experience. For some Jewish members of the staff respecting the national anthem (whether one actively sings it or not) is a test of loyalty everyone should be required to pass. For others, the national anthem is a poignant, and even violent, reminder of otherness.

Common Sounds

The "Common Sounds" program, funded by the United States Embassy in Tel Aviv, recruited music teachers who would be willing to implement a project with a neighboring school. The teachers were given a free hand as to what direction the project would take, but were asked to work toward a common performance. Each teaching pair (one teacher from a Jewish school and one from an Arab school) met 5 - 6 times over the course of the year. Projects included an Arab music center where the children studied guitar that paired with a Jewish school where children studied 'oud. Another teaching pair, one at a Bedouin School and another at a Jewish secular school worked together with their choirs on songs in Hebrew and in Arabic. Two young music teachers composed music with their students - guitar students from an Arab school and a mixed group of instrumentalists from a Jewish school. Another teaching pair wrote songs together with their combined choir. As part of this project, the Shani Choir paired up with the Sawa Choir of Shefaram and students from both choir met together for workshops, choir camp, rehearsals on shared repertoire and public performances. The evaluation process for this project included videotaping rehearsals and performances, teacher and participant questionnaires and quarterly reports. One interesting insight gleaned from the student questionnaires was that while the Jewish children felt that they understood the Arab children, and felt themselves to be understood, the Arab children reported that they did not understand the Jewish children, and did not feel that the Jewish children understood them.

In the summer of 2015, we organized a summer camp for some of the students who participated in the "Common Sounds" program. The instructors were from the same group of music teachers that had been working with these students throughout the school year. These teachers felt that the most powerful moments they had experienced came about when the children created something new, and the curriculum they designed for the week-long

camp emphasized creativity. A typical day included singing (learning songs together, mostly short rhythmic African songs),[1] a workshop where each group would compose a piece of music around a common theme (a painting or a story), a creative theater workshop and guest performers from different cultural backgrounds (a darbuka player gave a workshop on rhythm in Arab music, an oud player and composer performed a recital, a jazz vocalist taught scat). While the final performance for the parents at the end of the week sounded avant-garde in a less-than-polished sense of the word, students and staff alike left feeling that the week had been magical. When we later filmed a series of interviews at a school in Yeffia whose students participated in the program, the children excitedly sang for us one of the songs – in Arabic and Hebrew - they had composed together with their group almost a year before.

One teacher who taught creative theatre at the camp found that while the Arab children had a harder time with some of the creative improvisation exercises - doing things "outside of the box" -they were overall much better behaved than the Jewish students. She noted that "at the concert you could tell that sitting quietly was difficult for both groups, but the Arab kids could contain themselves better, and knew how to respect someone who was on the stage…." A recent graduate of the music center worked as a translator at the camp, and made himself available to any of the teachers and students who needed his help. He also noticed that some of the Arab children were having a hard time with the creative work: "It's not something they usually do in school. When I was in school I was told what to do and when to do it. There was very little freedom, not even in art or in literature class." Since most of the activities emphasized creativity, the staff made an extra effort to look out for the children who might not feel comfortable "letting go".

A workshop at the Common Sounds Summer Camp, July 2015

[1] Rhythm has a powerful effect as a connector. See: Wiltermuth, Scott S., and Chip Heath. 2009. "Synchrony and cooperation." *Psychological Science* Vol. 20 (1): 1-5; and: Clayton, Martin, Rebecca Sager, and Udo Will. 2005. "In time with the Music: The concept of entrainment and its significance for ethnomusicology." *European meetings in ethnomusicology*. Vol. 11. Romanian Society for Ethnomusicology.

The Arab teachers were bilingual, but the Jewish teachers needed help with translation. One of the Jewish teachers felt that not being bilingual was a major obstacle: "Not knowing Arabic was a big handicap for me. When the teachers from Yeffia and I worked creatively with the groups, I felt that the groups I worked with were slower, it took me longer to communicate with students who didn't speak Hebrew." The older students were much more open to new social encounters than the younger ones. Most of the teachers felt that this was due to the older Arab students' ability to speak Hebrew.

All of the teachers at the summer camp, and many of the teachers who worked on the project during the school year, adopted a critical pedagogy (Abrahams, 2005): they engaged in a dialogue with their students, and in working with them on creating new music, were able to pose and solve problems together. Through the creative process students were empowered and felt a sense of ownership toward the final product. Many of the teachers found this process to be more effective than sharing one another's music – the "my song, your song" approach. Teachers and students alike were able to change their perceptions by working together.

Composing music together – Shimsheet and Yeffia (March 2015)

Bringing together different groups of people from different cultural backgrounds demands high levels of energy. The energy it takes to raise funds, to ask people to do things that aren't necessarily in their comfort-zone, to organize the logistics of meetings and performances and to prepare follow-up evaluations. These higher-than-usual levels of energy usually cannot be maintained indefinitely. When a project comes to an end, both children and teachers may feel let-down. Teachers often want to continue, but lack of funding, or a change of schedules in one of the schools or of one of the partners, would lead to an inevitable wrap-up of the project, not always with a feeling of closure. We have met teachers who were part of coexistence projects in the past who felt let down by a project's discontinuation and preferred not to get involved in new projects for fear of disappointment. Coordinators and funders alike should take into account the

disappointment that can ensue when a program is discontinued. If a project is limited in scope, participants should be aware of these limitations.

Still, many teachers, musicians and parents welcome the opportunity to be a part of a program that brings people from different cultures together. They expect this type of program to be a positive experience as well it should be. Unfortunately, participants may come out of it with mixed feelings simply because of bad planning. A colleague told me enthusiastically about a joint choir project (Arab and Jewish) she took part in. Regrettably, her school was not behind the project, no one knew who would be paying for the transportation, and there was no post performance follow-up. Another school principal told me he was "done with co-existence projects" after a waiting by a locked gate in the cold with 50 students for more than half an hour while the security guard went to find the teacher who was supposed to be hosting his group. For individuals to continue to believe in one another, a program should to be well thought out and impeccably planned. Partners at all levels need to be committed to the program. Expectations raised need to be met. The devil is in the details.

A successful program should include events that serve as milestones and common goals, and opportunities to reflect on the process. There should be a point person whose responsibility it is to communicate with all of the participants. Children, as well as their teachers should be made to feel safe and secure and know that they can honestly share their feelings. A successful performance can be a memorable ending to an inspiring educational process. It can also be fraught with nervous tension if poorly planned.

One problem in evaluating the effects of education programs is the lack of a larger vision of what a society wants to become and how to get there. What is the purpose of our program: social cohesion? To acknowledge the existence and narratives of others? Fostering shared society? How does our program reinforce these values? Effective education reform and evaluation require consensus on what constitutes the common good (Cole & Barsalou, 2006). As part of the evaluation for "Common Sounds" teachers were interviewed before and after the program about how they understood the program's goals, the type of pedagogy required to implement the program, social values, and approaches to music education. In general, there was a small increase in each teacher's understanding of the program's goals as it progressed. However, from the beginning, all of the teachers involved had shared values, a critical approach to education, and a healthy curiosity about different musical cultures. One said, "It was as if I could imagine the results from the outset. I was in it with all my heart." Interestingly enough, the teaching pair that expressed the least understanding of the program's goals in the pre-program interview is still working together today, four years later, while some of those who were most enthusiastic about its

potential impact have parted ways. This skeptical teaching pair happened to be full time music teachers deeply invested in their individual schools, working with school principals who shared their passion for bringing children together through music, while many of the other teachers were in more transient positions.

Funders often question the impact of arts-- based projects. They need to see a graph that quanitifies change and describes measurable parameters. Music and the way it effects each one of us is difficult (if not impossible) to quantify. We believe that the teachers and students who participated in "Common Sounds" experienced outcomes that were personally transformational. There is a real need for long-term arts based educational programs that promote shared community. Unfortunately, individual initiatives are usually limited in scope, and lack the funding sources to bring about an altered reality, or a disruptive change. Sources of funding in governmental offices may have the best of intentions, but tend to be out of touch with the grass roots. We believe there needs to be an institutional change, a mainstreaming of long-term programs designed to bring teachers and students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds together to create their own music. As John Dewey wrote over 70 years ago: "If a sufficient number of educators devote themselves to striving courageously and with full sincerity to find the answers to the concrete questions which the idea and the aim put to us… the question of the relation of the schools to direction of social change will cease to be a question, and will become a moving answer in action" (Dewey, 1937).

In order for change to happen, educational models need to be developed that include a sound, doable framework for implementation and evaluation. The musical, educational and personal experience of "Common Sounds" and programs like it make an impact on everyone involved in them. It is important for funders and government offices to forge real and long lasting connections with educators and work with them in developing workable models. Theories of change (how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context and what interventions will lead to desired outcomes) can serve as a useful way of mapping out a program's design and evaluation model (Ashton, 2007). Models can be based on an ongoing learning process, but should require us to raise and answer truthfully some of the more difficult questions concerning our values.

There are no correct answers to the question of how to bring different cultures together through music. There are probably as many models for bringing different cultures together as there are people of different cultures. We can only hope to ask the right questions, and work intelligently to meet the challenges that arise from the answers.

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