

# Music, Dialogue, and Empathy: Theories of Peacebuilding in Choral Education and Beyond

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Studying abroad in Egypt, Israel, Palestine, and Greece in 2010 sparked an interest in the intersection of music and peacebuilding. During this time, I conducted research on the utilization of music within protest movements. Although modest in scope, this exploration laid the foundation for a doctoral dissertation focusing on the nexus of music and peacebuilding. This research specifically investigated the activities of two nonprofit music organizations—The Jerusalem Youth Chorus and The Polyphony Foundation—which facilitate collaboration between Arab and Jewish youth through musical engagement and professionally facilitated dialogue sessions. Motivated by a desire to contribute to the literature of music’s role in conflict transformation, this investigation aimed to fill a gap in existing scholarship by examining the methodologies employed by these organizations, which had received no attention in academic literature.

The specific field of music and peacebuilding or conflict transformation has been expanding. Many peacebuilders already know that the arts can be a useful tool in peacebuilding, and they use the arts in different ways through their work.<sup>1</sup> Many musicians and ensemble directors work to bring musicians together and create beauty but not necessarily using these theories to describe what they do. Through research, discussion, teaching, and training, it is possible to build momentum toward more collaborations between the music community and the peacebuilding community.

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Choral educators should not only impart musical knowledge; they are also responsible for fostering an environment where students learn to collaborate, communicate, and emote through music and with one another. Conflict, though inevitable, need not disrupt the harmony of a choral ensemble. Instead, it can serve as a catalyst for growth and transformation.

This article will examine the intersection of music and peacebuilding, exploring how choral educators can use this framework and the common-ground-building nature of music making to constructively resolve conflicts. Additionally, readers will learn practical strategies, hands-on exercises, and additional resources for implementing these concepts in their rehearsals.

## Theoretical Framework

Before discussing the overarching goals of this intersection, two keywords and framework definitions are needed.

### *Peacebuilding*

The term peacebuilding was coined in the 1970s by Dr. Johan Galtung, one of the founders of modern peace studies.<sup>2</sup> Peacebuilding refers to an active engagement of making and sustaining peace before, during, and after conflict. This term is used in contrast to “peacemaking,” which generally refers to diplomatic efforts, such as with the United Nations, and in contrast to “peacekeeping,” or the even more forceful “peace enforcement,” which is usually used when military forces are utilized to enforce states of peace.<sup>3</sup>

### *Conflict Transformation*

The field of conflict transformation is a subsection of peacebuilding. John Paul Lederach, one of its founders, notes that the framework of conflict transformation sees the immediate situation, looks toward the “deeper patterns of relationship,” and creates a “conceptual framework.” He formally defines it as such:

Conflict transformation is 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 relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Using the framework of conflict transformation, four overarching goals of how music and peacebuilding interact could be summarized as follows:

#### *1. Create common ground*

This is done through shared experiences, music making (or musicking as Christopher Small says<sup>5</sup>), storytelling, and extensive time together. It takes time to build social capital, which is needed to be able to transform conflict.

#### *2. Build empathy*

Empathy is possible once common ground is experienced, such as through musicking. Sharing an experience allows us to recognize the self of another. More on the definition and types of empathy are discussed below.

#### *3. Create conditions for constructive dialogue*

Dialogue is necessary to deal with conflict, and therefore for conflict transformation. It requires listening to understand, not to debate or wait until the other is done talking to say one’s piece. Building empathy means the chance to find commonalities, or at least an ability to listen. What is at the root/heart of what they are saying? Where are their needs not being met? Dialogue will be further discussed below as well.

#### *4. Meet needs and break cycles of oppression*

Through dialogue and understanding each other’s needs, a space is created where people can come together in a place of safety to share experiences, stories, and make music together. Making music, and especially singing, is a vulnerable act, so it is crucial for one’s needs to be met and that those needs are not hindered by another. This is, by definition, the essence of nonviolence and can break cycles of oppression. When needs are withheld or hindered by others, that is a form of violence.<sup>6</sup>

As noted above, dialogue and empathy lie at the heart of conflict transformation. To better understand these four pillars, we will look further at these two critical elements. *Dialogue* enables individuals to articulate

their perspectives, actively listen to others, and seek common ground. *Empathy*, on the other hand, allows us to understand and resonate with the emotions and experiences of others, fostering compassion and connection. In choral ensembles, where listening is paramount, students are already equipped with the foundational skills necessary for empathic communication. By nurturing these skills through purposeful exercises and activities, choir directors can create an environment conducive to constructive dialogue and empathic engagement.

### Empathy

There are two sides of empathy: emotional contagion and intellectual understanding.<sup>7</sup> Emotional contagion is feeling-based, where one can perceive the emotions of another. Intellectual empathy is putting oneself in another's situation intellectually to attempt to understand another's experience without judgment, recognizing each other's shared humanity.

Building empathy is done in many ways, starting with building self-awareness, sharing narrative experiences of others to understand their contexts, validating others, and in music making. Studies show making music together helps to overcome perceptions of dissimilarity and to accept others' differences. It builds common ground. It is at the heart of many of the activities below, and it is also about building anti-oppressive competency to be aware of each other's identities and privileges.

There is also the specific subcategory of musical empathy, where the understanding of the affective and cognitive components to empathy are perceived through the sonic and contextual qualities of the music itself. This is the feature of music where a participant might interpret music through emotional responses such as happy, sad, defeated, or triumphant. Lyrics may describe something that allows us to intellectually connect with the emotions of the music. It is particularly powerful when the sonic emotional contagion complements the intellectual and contextual components. Music can tap into parts of the brain and mirror many emotions, even releasing dopamine. Music offers a potential capacity to strengthen and use the empathic response, an important tool within peacebuilding.

In the words of Johan Galtung, Norwegian sociologist and founder of modern peace and conflict studies:

Good art is like good peace: always challenging. Art and peace are both located in the tension between emotions and intellect. A false dichotomy...art, like peace, has to overcome such false dichotomies by speaking both to the heart and to the brain, to the compassion of the heart and constructions of the brain. Maybe that is where art and peace really find each other and interconnect most deeply: they both address both human faculties.<sup>8</sup>

### Dialogue

Conflict is normal to human existence. The inability to dialogue constructively is one cause of conflict. Peace and reconciliation require truth, listening, and understanding.<sup>9</sup> Dialogue builds wide-reaching relationships, allows people to share experiences and perceptions, and provides the opportunity for all to have a voice. It requires active and empathic listening, as well as honest and productive expression and assertion. Dialogue encourages the ability to understand diverse perspectives, which is critical when faced with difference or disagreement and is, therefore, central to the framework of conflict transformation.<sup>10</sup>

The French word *ensemble* translates to English as "together," which is apropos because ensemble music provides an opportunity to bring people together and practice the skill of listening. Musically speaking, players in ensembles are taught to listen to all that is going on around them as much as possible. They are trained to identify who has the melody, who has the rhythmic activity, which instruments are being played together or separately, and how each passage fits into the larger whole. Thus, the ability to listen critically is essential to quality ensemble music. Given the listening skills already ameliorated in music making, ensembles can be a musical avenue for dialogue to be taught, facilitated, and utilized to build empathy, improve relationships, and transform conflict.<sup>11</sup> These skills need to be intentionally practiced with an aim toward transferring into other parts of life. The exercises below are geared toward building empathy, collaboration, and creativity.

## Practical Strategies for Conflict Transformation

As choral educators, the following hands-on exercises may offer actionable ways to integrate conflict transformation principles into choral rehearsals or the music classroom. These activities may not only enhance students' musical abilities but also have the potential to cultivate essential life skills such as communication, collaboration, mindfulness, and empathy. Note: framing and facilitating is key to the success of these activities. How we frame experiences can either foster creativity and safety or hamper it. Likewise, facilitation can create a brave environment to try new things, or it can make it feel hostile toward participation.

### 1. *Breathing and Snapping*

Invite students to notice their natural breathing. In between the inhale and exhale, have them snap their fingers or give a light tap on their knee. Following each inhale, they can snap before they exhale. Invite them to close their eyes if that is better. What occurs is a beautiful rhythmic composition, representing each person and their breath. This exercise may be used as a prelude to rehearsal, allowing students to center themselves and establish a communal mindset. Their ability to focus may increase, as well as their awareness of connection within a group.

### 2. *Positive Visualization*

Guide students through visualization exercises where they imagine themselves successfully singing together or achieving some type of goal. Encourage students to share their visualizations and experience with one another, promoting empathy and understanding. Alternatively, lead them through a specific visualization—such as walking onstage before choral assessments—so they are prepared and know they can succeed, working toward a common goal.

### 3. *Initiate, Imitate, Observe*

The basis of this activity is to facilitate a group of students around one rule: they either initiate a sound, imitate a sound someone else initiated, or observe what others are doing. Those are the three categories of actions; otherwise, there are no other rules. This facilitation technique can be used in many creative ways, one

of which being a paper game where each person is given a piece of paper. The idea is to encourage them to find the breadth of noises one can make with a piece of paper. Crumpling, tearing, rubbing it together, blowing on it, shaking it, hitting it, etc. Students find there is an amazing amount one can do with a sheet of paper.

These three components—initiate, imitate, or observe—are actually an intentional facilitation technique, as students are encouraged to make something up or do something they saw someone else doing. By framing it as initiate, observe, or imitate, it helps the participants to conceptualize what they do as a part of the whole, even though it's an individual thing. That way, as they are making up a sound with the paper or something else, they are also thinking about it as a way to lead others to make that sound, and they are more aware of what others are doing around them.

### 4. *Group Improvisation and Drum Circles*

Improvisation can be practiced vocally, instrumentally, and in drum circles. There are many ways this can be led and encouraged, so here are just two strategies for use with voices and/or instruments. The group can be divided into smaller groups and given different simple motives. Encourage them to start to deviate or embellish, no longer needing to replicate the given motive. Alternatively, you can invite one student to come up with a simple ostinato (such as a bass line) to repeat continuously. As students hear that main line, they can start to add another line or complementary phrases. This way, all phrases and motives are developed organically. Neutral syllables are typically used. This can take time for students to feel comfortable and empowered to sing in this type of way. Group improvisation fosters creativity, communication, and adaptability, empowering students to explore new musical possibilities together.

Drum circles are one of the most effective, accessible, and popular ways to encourage group improvisation. Give each student a percussion instrument—or let them choose one—and sit in a circle. Start the group with a simple rhythm. Invite students to model that rhythm, and then start to add other complementing rhythms as they become comfortable. Encourage students to listen to one another and respond creatively. Pass the focal point around by encouraging individuals

or groups to play louder (like a solo or soli) while others play quieter, and then pass that around. You can even do call-and-response patterns, passing around the opportunity to give the “call.” This also encourages creativity, free play, listening, and improvisation.

A good leader allows people of all levels to engage and participate in the ways they are comfortable. Drum circles can be a cathartic experience open to all experience levels, and it is so effective in building common ground and removing barriers. It is important to note that good facilitation takes practice, and it is recommended to experience good drum circle leading before attempting on one’s own. There are also many wonderful resources that can aid in this learning.<sup>12</sup>

### 5. Group Songwriting

Finally, taking improvisation one step further, group songwriting can be a powerful experience. It need not have lofty expectations of being performed in front of people; it can be as simple as an activity to make a silly song. Similar to group improvisation, there are various ways this can be led. For example, start by choosing a topic; students can then provide short phrases or ideas related to that topic. Write them on a board or projected Word document and start to group them in relation to each other. Ask students to suggest moving text around to start to make verses or a chorus. Once short sentences and verses are constructed, invite students to think about how a phrase might sound to improvise a melody. Ensure from the outset that all voices are welcome in this space, and for students to be mindful of how often they are offering suggestions. Alternatively, one could start with a chosen chord progression, have students improvise a melody over it, and let a simple, shorter text come organically that way. As students hear texts around them, they can replicate and supplement what they are hearing. Group songwriting promotes self-expression, teamwork, and empathy, allowing students to share their ideas and connect with one another through music.

### Resources for Further Exploration

Beyond the confines of rehearsal rooms and concert halls, the principles of dialogue and empathy hold profound implications for students’ everyday lives. Conflict

resolution, effective communication, and relationship-building are skills that transcend musical contexts, shaping individuals’ interactions with peers, family, and society at large. By integrating these principles into choral education, educators empower students to navigate conflicts constructively and cultivate empathy in diverse settings. The books and journal articles referenced in the endnotes provide a sampling for further exploration. There are also other organizations and resources for further learning; below are just a few ideas for those interested.

Community-based initiatives, such as Musicians Without Borders,<sup>13</sup> exemplify how music can serve as a catalyst for social change and conflict transformation. By empowering individuals to use music as a tool for peacebuilding in their own communities, these initiatives foster empathy, understanding, and resilience in the face of adversity. Beyond partnering with local grassroots organizations in post-war areas, they also provide trainings for people to use music as a tool to build peace in their own communities. In a sense, this builds ad hoc ensembles out of communities that would not normally have come together to build empathy and transform conflict through music.

Another organization doing important work is MOMRI (Min-On Music Research Institute), which has a Music in Peacebuilding hub<sup>14</sup> and repository, including a directory of hundreds of organizations and practitioners, alongside research articles, community networking boards, and forums for the sharing of resources. The head of this program, Olivier Urbain, also edited the book titled *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics*.<sup>15</sup>


The curricular potential of teaching music and conflict transformation is also promising. Some universities offer interdisciplinary style majors, where students can explore core courses in musical training, along with additional coursework in peacebuilding or social change, for example.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

Incorporating music as a tool for conflict transformation enhances the musical abilities of our students and equips them with essential life skills that extend beyond the rehearsal room. By fostering dialogue, em-



pathy, and creative collaboration, choral educators can cultivate harmonious ensembles where conflicts serve as opportunities for growth and connection. Through purposeful exercises and activities, choir directors can empower students to navigate conflicts with grace, understanding, and resilience, laying the foundation for a safer and more inclusive musical community that strives for balanced power through equity and giving an opportunity for all to have a voice.

As we reflect on the intersections of music, empathy, and dialogue, we are reminded of the inherent capacity for positive change within each of us. Through intentional practice and collective action, we can harness the transformative power of music to build common ground, foster understanding, and build better group dynamics. In choral education and beyond, let us embrace the journey toward peacebuilding, one note at a time. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Examples include: Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch, “Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding,” *Peace & Change* 33, no. 2 (April 2008); Sarah Beller, “Sowing Art, Reaping Peace: Toward a Framework for Evaluating Arts-Based Peacebuilding” (MA thesis, American University, 2009); Shoshana Gottesman, “Hear and Be Heard: Learning With and Through Music as a Dialogical Space for Co-Creating Youth Led Conflict Transformation,” *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 17, no. 1, <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/rt/printerFriendly/857/749>, 2017; Lesley J. Pruitt, *Youth Peacebuilding: Music, Gender, and Change* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Johan Galtung, “Three realistic approaches to peace: peace-keeping, peacemaking, peacebuilding,” *Impact of Science on Society* 26, no. 1/2 (1976).

<sup>3</sup> Rob Jenkins, *Peacebuilding: From Concept to Commission* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 18-21; and John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 10-14.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press,

1998).

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Schirch, *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004), 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Felicity Laurence, “Music and Empathy,” in *Music and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Olivier Urbain (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Johan Galtung, “Peace, Music and the Arts: In Search of Interconnections,” in *Music and Conflict Transformation*, ed. Olivier Urbain (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Bergey, “Music and Peacebuilding: A Survey of Two Israeli Ensembles Using Music and Dialogue to Build Understanding, Empathy, and Conflict Transformation” (DMA diss., James Madison University, 2019), 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Schirch, *Strategic Peacebuilding*, 49-50; John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 21-22; Lesley J. Pruitt, *Youth Peacebuilding*, 71, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Lesley J. Pruitt, *Youth Peacebuilding*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Two such examples include: Arthur Hull, *Drum Circle Facilitation: Building Community Through Rhythm* (Santa Cruz, CA: Village Music Circles, 2007); and Kalani, *Together in Rhythm: A Facilitator’s Guide to Drum Circle Music* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.musicianswithoutborders.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://hub.institute.min-on.org/>

<sup>15</sup> Olivier Urbain, ed. *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> One example is the Music and Peacebuilding major at Eastern Mennonite University (where the author teaches). There are also courses specific to incorporating musical training within peacebuilding contexts, ending in an internship and senior project of their choice. Another example is Elizabethtown College, which offers a master’s of education program that focuses on peacebuilding and social-emotional learning. Some universities are adding courses in music and peace, such as Berklee College of Music.