

“Music is Everything that War is Not”

By Maya Muir

Or is it?

I was driving when I heard this. An NPR reporter was interviewing the conductor from Sarajevo who remained during the '90 to '94 siege to conduct his orchestra. I swerved to the side of the road to write down his words. For eight years I'd been writing about war and music; I was saturated with both, but never had I posed the relation of the two quite that way. My novel concerns a Czech family, the mother a cellist, the daughter a singer, starting in Prague in 1943 after the Nazi invasion. The survivors emigrate to New York after the war. As I wrote, music emerged as counterpoint to the war: for my characters it was refuge; creativity and beauty in the face of destruction and evil; identity when that was threatened. Transcendence in the face of the unbearable.

Lately my assumptions about what music is and the purposes it serves in war and elsewhere have been challenged from several directions. I've become less sure and more curious about what has always been a *basso ostinato* in my life: never in a starring role, but foundational, constant, necessary.

As a child, I wanted to sing. Or, it might be more accurate to say, I wanted to be part of music. My mother was a member of our church choir and sang in a group each month that gathered for the joy of working on good music together. For my father, Canteloub's *Songs of the Auvergne* were a religious experience; when he played them on the stereo, no one was allowed to do anything but listen. Yet he was tone deaf, unable to even fake carrying a tune.

My mother recruited me to the choir. From the time I was the smallest girl until one of the oldest, every Thursday afternoon was practice, and every Sunday morning we donned black robes and white vestments to lead the minister into church. I lost interest in the formal teachings of the church while I was still young, but I never rebelled against choir. The offertory anthems took me closest to whatever notion of god I had.

Yet I fell somewhere in between my parents in musical ability. With lots of practice and people to lean on musically, I could hold a melody with only a slight wobble. But I loved music. As a teen I loved it the way most teens do. My friend Celeste and I rode around in her green Mustang with the top down in the humid Philadelphia spring singing along with Motown at the top of our lungs, feeling intensely alive and ready, in our innocence, for the world.

I also wanted to be in the Glee Club; but you had to try out to get in. I failed. I was abashed, but I went back a few days later.

“If I sing quietly, could I just come to practices?” I asked.

Somehow she said yes. That spring we sang Britten’s *Rejoice in the Lamb*, an eccentric cantata, words written by an eighteenth century madman from the confines of his cell. Groups of us sang that in the Mustang, too. Our favorite parts were, “For I will consider my Cat Jeffrey. . . a creature of elegant quickness,” and, even better, “For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valor.” Odd choices for teenage girls to sing ecstatically as we bombed around our green suburbs, but it was something that took us out of ourselves, beyond ourselves, together, which at 16 was all we wanted.

Mendelsohn’s oratorio *Elijah* was the choice my senior year. I’d discovered that I was an alto, which fit my personality: though occasionally provoked to take a stand, I much preferred to be inconspicuous and play a supporting role. Alto parts divide downward from the melody, standing a little apart, enriching, deepening the whole. Something about that complementarity and opposition delighted me. Singing alto felt the way I did leaning back in a heeling sailboat in a stiff breeze, my weight ballast that let us wing swiftly ahead.

From *Elijah*, *Lift Thine Eyes (to the mountains, whence cometh help)* became our anthem. It wasn’t the words; it was the delicious contrast between soprano and alto lines, the tension within each line melting into resolution, being *inside* that sheer beauty. Miraculously I was allowed to be part of the performance, when members of the local orchestra accompanied us. The night we presented it to the

school community, enfolded in the sound we all became part of something collective, grand and bold. Released afterward into the June night, we were singular again and didn't know what to do with ourselves. We should have gone somewhere to dance wildly for hours, but we hadn't known we'd feel that way. We were all high, possessed by a holy energy we had no way to channel. No one slept.

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Years later I was living in Los Angeles when, with American aid and urging, General Pinochet led a military coup against Salvador Allende, the legally elected president of Chile. When Allende first mounted the stage after his election, a banner over his head proclaimed, "you can't have a revolution without songs." The Nuevo Canción Movement had been part of the tidal movement that swept him to power, defeating the wealthy Europeanized minority.

Along with charismatic songwriter and singer Victor Jara, Quilapayun and Inti-illimani exemplified this musical movement. Intrigued by the indigenous music of the Andes, these groups of university students travelled the country learning the *zampana*, (Andean pan flute), *charango* (small instrument made by the Quechua and Aymara peoples from strings and an armadillo shell) and the *quena* (wooden flute). Both groups played traditional songs and songs composed about the lives of their audience of peasants and workers. Jara worked with both groups.

Immediately after the coup, Jara was arrested, tortured and killed, one murder among thousands in the repression that followed. Quilapayun and Inti-illimani were touring Europe and so escaped. Homeless for the years of Pinochet's

reign, these groups toured incessantly to remind the world what had happened in Chile, frequently stopping in Los Angeles.

In the late '70s, I sat in an old, low-ceilinged auditorium in downtown LA among a packed audience of Latin American exiles and North American leftists, watching them file on stage: young, bearded men in dark ponchos, whose existence made the coup in Chile suddenly real. The syncopated breathy beat of the *zampana*, its musical scale split between two players, caught me immediately. I was swept up with the emotion of the people around me for whom this was an affirmation of all they'd believed in and lost. Quilapayun ended with the song we all stood to sing, "*el pueblo unido jamas sera vencido*," *the people united will never be defeated*. The people had already been roundly defeated, of course; this was aspirational rather than real, but perhaps more powerful in the moment for that. I'd long ago given up any attempt at singing, myself, but I felt some of that same elation that I had long ago, singing Mendelsohn.

Pascal Quignard would say that, sitting there in that auditorium, we were being made into sheep. "To hear is to obey," he writes in his idiosyncratic jeremiad, *The Hatred of Music*, published in France in 2009, in translation in 2016. In Latin, *listen* is *obaudire*, he points out, which survives in modern French as *obeir*, to obey. "Hearing, *audientia*, is an *obaudientia*, is an obedience," he says.

Quignard is an erudite curmudgeon who writes with the bitter passion of the deceived lover. Scholar, author of more than sixty books, he comes from a family of Bavarian organ players and makers who settled in Alsace. Quignard himself was immersed in music for decades; he organized the International Festival of Baroque

Opera and Theater at Versailles until 1994 when, as he said, “music broke away from me,” and he abandoned it. His book is a compendium of accusations leveled at Music. Among the odder: because instrumental strings are made of animal gut and drums of hides, he accuses it of an inherent blood-thirstiness. The idea that Music is inherently innocent enrages him.

In fact, the idea that music is dangerous is a very old one, dating, in the European tradition, at least to Plato, who divided music into categories, and was furious at the blurring of genres. In his *Laws*, he says, “Possessed by a frantic and unhallowed lust for pleasure, they (poets) contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs. . .” Worse, this leads directly to “the unsettling of fundamental political and social conventions.” (*The Republic*).

It’s hard not to hear echoes of Plato in the reactions to musical innovations down into our day. Wasn’t the advent of rock and roll supposed to lead to the collapse of all morals, and society itself? Yet Plato isn’t completely wrong. New ways of conceiving music arise with new forces in society that bring change, as the blues and jazz asserted the identity and presence of Blacks within American culture.

Curious—music stands accused of making us into obedient sheep, but also of arousing us into sensuality and social unrest. What’s common to both complaints, and which Quignard and Plato both fear, is the unique power of music to move us beyond rationality.

Like any art or virtually anything, from a knife to love itself, music can be used for good or evil. Nazis used music with their *Hitlerjugend* (boys’ youth groups) and *Bund Deutscher Madel* (girls’ youth groups)—as did the leftists of the same era.

Ironically, both emphasized folk songs, occasionally choosing identical ones, each laying claim to that cultural lineage for their vision, each stressing group singing over solos.

This convocative quality of music can be used *to* an end, or as an end in itself. I think of my son, at fourteen a piano player and nascent musician, calling me to his computer to look at a video of the musician Ben Folds performing before a rapt crowd.

“Look,” he said. “Look how he brings people together.”

He saw their transformed faces, their release from the prison of their singularity, and he wanted to be able to take people to that same place. He saw in them what I’d felt singing Mendelsohn, and listening to Quilapayun.

As the Buddhists say, the world is pain, which is surely why humans across cultures so often seek transcendence, musical or otherwise. It’s no accident that the world’s major religions all incorporate music into their rites—although Christian, Buddhist and Islamic traditions have all wrestled with that inherent *power* which so concerned Plato.

The Bible is studded with references to music, or, often, “making a joyful noise.” “I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being,” says Psalm 104, one of a myriad of exhortations linking religious ecstasy with song. Yet Augustine worried in his *Confessions* that the sensual pleasure of listening to chanting or singing hymns would overwhelm what should always be the goal: inspiring devotion to God.

Similarly, some early Buddhist teachers saw music as dangerous for binding the listener to earthly desires. Yet, as in Christianity, this ascetic perspective has faded over time. And in Pure Land Buddhism, popular in China and Japan, chanting is the major form of worship, and paradise is imagined as a place where laws are expressed by gorgeous melodies.

Islam is the outlier, retaining a deep ambivalence about music. There's no explicit mention of it in the Qur'an, and subsequent commentary in the *hadith* is both vague and ambiguous, leaving the subject open for debate. The goal of all Islamic art is to direct one to the contemplation of God; the question is, does music direct one to, or away, from this goal? The *azan*, or call to prayer, which is so much the audial flavor of Muslim countries, obviously attempts the former.

Sufis, known for their music and dance, forbid it to all but the completely initiated. In Islam, the most widely accepted music follows the same pattern as its visual art in aiming at abstraction. Visual art is non-representational so as not to distract the viewer with the material world, and music is non-programmatic, with no titles or other references to outside phenomena. It is typically static, with little dynamic changes, no climax or resolution. Instead, one finds in it pattern, intricacy, repetition, and melismatic melodic lines, all to encourage contemplation of the divine. Transcendence, as long as its focus is religious, is acceptable.

Music emerges from the elemental rhythm of breath and the sound of the voice. According to Webster's Encyclopedia, it is "an art of sound in time which expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color." A neutral definition, that says nothing about what

ideas or emotions music is, or should be, available to. Yet that it can speak so directly to the emotions, “losing the problem of language,” as the Catalan viola da gamba player Jordi Savall put it, is the source of much of its power.

My son Simon, now in his late twenties, grew up to be a musician; he sings and plays keyboards with a friend, their music melodic, curiously sweet for two young men in the twenty-first century. Last summer, playing at a street fair in the city he observed a young boy, maybe 5 or 6, staring, caught in the web of their music. The boy edged up to one of the speakers to place the flat of his hand on it until his mother coaxed him away.

Afterward, the mother approached Simon. “My son is autistic,” she said. “He usually hates any loud noise and amplified music. But yours drew him in. He was trying to touch it through the loudspeaker.”

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Yet this quality of music to bypass words and speak directly to emotions has unquestionably also been put to the service of war. This was pointed out by an unlikely candidate, Alex Ross, esteemed music critic for the New Yorker. In a July 2016 article, “The Sound of Hate,” (sic) Ross reports ways music has been “weaponized,” particularly in modern war, with stories of U.S. soldiers in Iraq working themselves up for a battle with gangsta rap and heavy metal; of Pinochet’s soldiers in Chile torturing prisoners with music; Israeli soldiers doing the same with Palestinian prisoners, as well as U.S. authorities in Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Mosul and Guantanamo.

Nor, Ross adds, is this new. The Nazis pioneered musical sadism, playing cheery popular polkas as Jews were shot *en masse* at Majdanek and as laborers returned to Auschwitz after a day of heavy labor. Ross's conclusion: reports on the dark side of music "probably bring us closer to the true function of music in the evolution of human civilization."

And yet. Surely all arts can be used for good or ill—one thinks of banners inciting Red Brigades in Mao's China to root out bourgeois elements, war dances in aboriginal cultures, all the literature of hate—yet where are the wounded denunciations of the dark side of these arts? This capacity is so obvious it hardly needs to be stated.

Yet there is something particular about music, a way that it works on and within us that is not shared by its sister arts, which leads its lovers to denounce it so vehemently. And there may be some particular dialectic with war that bears further exploration.

In fact, music has been used in the context of war for millennia. Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho with trumpets. Marching bands have been part of armies for at least most of Western warfare, as have military cadences, those call-and-response chants you hear in movies as grunts jog through training exercises. One of the more repeatable from the Marine Corps, with the typical pounding rhythm:

*Jody, Jody six feet four
Jody never had his ass kicked before.
I'm gonna take a three-day pass
And really slap a beating on Jody's ass!*

Something deeper is going on at the intersection of war and music, this powerful evoker of emotions.

“War. . . suspends thought, especially self-critical thought,” says former war correspondent Chris Hedges in his book, *War is a Force that Gives Life Meaning*. “We speak of those we fight only in the abstract; we strip them of their human qualities.”

Hedges maintains that authentic culture is seen as subversive in war, to be repressed while a new narrative justifying conflict is hammered together. The textbook example would be the suppression of arts in the Weimar Republic by the Nazis, and their policy of *gleichschaltung*, the coordination of culture with Nazi ideals and elimination of all else. Pinochet went after the musicians of the Nuevo Canción movement with a particular viciousness.

In our time, we need only look at Sunni Jihadist organizations. In Mosul, Islamic fundamentalists banned all art and music along with the teaching of Darwin and evolution; patriotic songs were declared blasphemous. Libyan militants burned drums, brass and woodwinds near the city of Derna. Syrian fundamentalists have sentenced oud players to lashings for their “offensive” behavior and have arrested citizens for songs found on their mobile phones. It’s been speculated that the choice of the Bataclan Concert Hall in Paris for the November 2015 shooting massacre of 80 was to strike at the music, as well as the people, of the West. Yet these militants can’t do without music themselves; they’ve devised their own *nasheed*, a *capella* hymns written to accompany videos of battles used in their propaganda, Ramadan recruitment drives, during military parades and executions.

On the other side of the dark mirror, the attacked, defeated, and oppressed find that, when all else has been taken away, they still have voice. That fertile mother of so much American music is the raw pain of the blues. Spirituals were born of a reaching beyond the caged present towards the hope of hope.

As in Chile with the Nuevo Canción Movement, protest music expressed the spirit of the South African resistance movement, starting at least in 1897 when Xosa songwriter Enoch Sontonga wrote *Nikosi Sikelel iAfrika, God Bless Africa*. The African National Congress picked it to become their theme song, and in the decades before apartheid's defeat a crescendo of songs gave heart to activists. "It was the first revolution to be conducted in four-part harmony," said South African jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim.

In Europe, in May 1933, two months after the Nazis surged into Prague, the Czech orchestra performed *Ma Vlast*, Bedřich Smetana's homage to his homeland and its mythic history, knowing that the Germans, once firmly ensconced, would forbid any such affirmation of Czech culture. The Estates Theater in central Prague was packed, the audience emotional. After the last note, riotous applause lasted fifteen minutes as the audience threw flowers, whatever they had, onto the stage. The conductor lifted the score to kiss it.

During the four-year siege of Sarajevo by the army of the Republika Serpska, the cellist Vedran Smailovic became the symbol of Bosnian resistance, playing in the ruins and at funerals, even during bombings and under fire. The orchestra maintained a program of concerts, and string quartets played in the streets. Artistic expression and consumption increased, says Steven Galloway, author of the novel

The Cellist of Sarajevo. “Throughout history, you’ll find that when there is war, art doesn’t disappear,” Galloway says. “It thrives.”

And after war?

“Imagine a family expelled from Spain that arrives in Istanbul in a world where they know no one; and after terrible travel and problems, what do they do?” asks Jordi Savall. “They sing something together. And only in this moment of singing does their peace arrive. And these people conserved these songs because they were the necessary food for having peace and hope.”

Savall has worked extensively to use music to repair the damage and divisions left in the wake of war. Since 1974, Savall has been rediscovering forgotten early music from Europe, the Near East and South America, and gathering groups of musicians together to play it, tour, and record. He has worked consciously to bring together musicians from cultures that have been in conflict. “Music making is the best way to learn intercultural dialogue,” he says. “You cannot do music if you can’t decide together what to play and how to play and how to leave space for others when you are playing. It’s only if you find a certain harmony that you can do music.” For a 2008 ensemble to play the music of Jerusalem, he invited Greeks and Turks, Israelis and Palestinians to join him. At the beginning tension between musicians was high, conversation sparse. That didn’t last long.

After apartheid was finally defeated in South Africa, elements of *Nikosi Sikelel iAfrika* were combined with elements from the Afrikaner’s national anthem, *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*, *The Call of South Africa* to create a new national anthem, a melodic reconciliation of the two cultures which had been so recently at war.

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Or is music just auditory cheesecake, an inessential sweet trifle rather than the bread of life?

Alex Ross references this phrase of evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker's from Pinker's influential 1997 book, *How the Brain Works*. It's curious to find Pinker quoted in an article on the hatred of music, as Pinker strives above all for scientific objectivity; hatred has no place in his language.

Yet Pinker is fundamentally stumped by the enigma of music. He systematically examines the possible evolutionary reasons for the arts in general. They engage in the psychology of status, he posits, in that their very uselessness makes acquiring or experiencing them a symbol. He wonders whether music's emotional pull relates to ancestral mating calls, or whether there's an element of habitat selection at work: we pay attention to ambient sound because it relates to our safety, etc. He acknowledges benefits: bonding social groups, coordinating action, enhancing ritual, releasing tension. But for him, in developing any scientific theory, *why* is as important as *how*, and this is what puzzles him about music. "Music," he says, "shows the clearest signs of being non-adaptive." And if it can't be an adaptation, then, in his terminology, it is a technology, a pleasure technology, like pornography.

Where evolutionary theory abandons the field, neuroscience steps in. Interest in the uses of music in healing is building among neuroscientists, and studies proliferate. Psychologist Daniel Levitin, in a meta-analysis of 400 studies, concluded that music strengthens the immune function and lowers the stress

hormone cortisol. Listening to music has been found to lower heart rate and blood pressure; soft music now soothes newborns in neo-natal units and adults with pain facing the ends of their lives. It's been found to improve symptoms and social functioning in schizophrenics, and ease symptoms of depression, anxiety, and chronic pain.

Does this make music adaptive?

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Quignard's final accusation, perhaps the real source of his rupture with what he had so loved, is overuse. He rails at the auditory imposition of music in shopping centers, department stores, bookstores, lobbies, swimming pools, etc. In its ubiquity, he argues, it has lost meaning—or in those instances when it is employed to pacify or increase consumerism, it has developed a new, coercive meaning.

And what of people who walk our streets with ear buds wiring them to their own private soundscape? Music, that great collective art, has finally been rendered solipsistic. What used, of necessity, to be shared, has been ultimately individualized, a sign of the times.

More, to answer Quignard, I'd argue that TV has replaced music in many of those same venues, and it is an even more aggressive medium, commandeering our attention even more coercively. Still, less music in public spaces would give us the silence to be able to hear it when it matters.

And matter it does. The divisions are deep in our country now. We have clashing narratives and our own, homegrown divisive demagogue. We do not know

where he will take us. Truth is under attack, and cuts in support of culture of all kinds has begun.

I think now that music is not, at all times and places, everything that war is not, though if music is based on breath, war is about extinguishing breath. Still, music's power to reach directly to our emotions can be used for manipulation and for evil as well as good. Yet I come back to the notion of harmony. Can it be an accident that harmony is an intrinsic element of music, while in daily speech denoting peace and the ability to get along? Thomas Mann's Faust sold his soul to the devil to become a great composer; "weaponizing" music is another sort of pact with the devil, a use of this art against its intrinsic nature.

In singing, in making music, we have voice; we are not passive. Music gives pleasure, yes, but not through solipsism like pornography; it *joins* us. In coming together with others to play or to listen, we find commonality across divisions and collective strength. Lifted by music we can sometimes touch hope, and even, if we are lucky, transcendence.

You can lose yourself in music, but you can also find yourselves in it.

Coda

My father was skinny, near-sighted, intellectual, more tender than tough, yet he fought in the U.S. 6th Army in WW II from the invasion of Normandy through the Allied victory. I have several packets of his letters discovered when, long after his death, I tried to reconstruct his war experience, as he had never talked about it and I

had never asked. His letters are curiously vacant, as he avoided talking about the horrors of his real experience in five major battles.

One letter, dated the 16th of April, 1945, stands out. By then my father had been among the troops discovering slave labor camps in northern Germany, liberating some portion of the 2 million Russians and Ukrainians held there by the Gestapo. Though fighting continued nearby, the roads were clogged with exhausted refugees from many nations trying to get home.

The letter starts with my father describing an evening meal set out in jerry cans on planks in a farmyard among tractors and threshers. A brilliant evening sun lit the surrounding fields an eager green, warming them all who had survived the long brutal winter.

A Russian, recently released from a camp, appeared from the passing throng, an accordion cradled in his hands. In blue cap, black pants, brown coat and blue vest, he appeared gilded by sunlight as he began to play. As they finished their meal the American soldiers, who'd heard little music for months, circled around him.

Drawn by the jaunty music, more Russians appeared. A peasant woman in tattered clothes pulled out a balalaika and began to strum. Another man grabbed a bucket to make a drum. The balalaika player threw back her head to launch a song. Someone had a mandolin. More Russians left the passing stream of the newly-liberated to join in, and more voices soon joined the first, drowning out the dull thud of nearby cannon. They danced together, lifting their heels, throwing back their shoulders, clapping hands, celebrating survival and freedom.

The sun dropped below the horizon. The brilliant light and warmth quickly ebbed. For my father, the other soldiers, and the Russians, the land became German soil once more. They remembered the curfew and began to feel the descending dampness of night.

The clothes of the Russians, in the failing light, were again threadbare and dull, their feet heavy, now that the music was gone.

