



SPIRITUAL MUSIC IN THE LEVANT: A SAFE SPACE FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Renee Hattar

Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-faith Studies.
She holds a PhD in Peace Studies from the University of Granada-Spain.

Abstract : Although many countries of the Middle East are going through difficult moments at present, where religion is misinterpreted as the main reason for conflicts and violence, there are also living experiences of peace and dialogue between people from different religions in the region, mainly Christians and Muslims. This paper suggests that religious Arabic music could be used as a method for creating nonviolent spaces that would lead to dialogue among members of both religions. Such an experience has been present in joint choirs for religious Arabic music in different countries in the region. Through examples of such choirs, the article will examine the influence of religious music and the possibility of applying it as a method for peacebuilding.

Key words: Peace, religion, music, non-violence, interreligious dialogue

Music has always been an element of dialogue and harmony among peoples from different cultures and backgrounds. This has been manifested through many different workshops, concerts and recordings. Several concerts and musicians come to mind as an example, such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Bob Marley, Youssou N'Dour, Nina Simona and many others. These musicians have performed at many concerts in different places of the world

and have served many humanitarian causes for peace.

Music is perceived as a universal and expressive language in moments of sadness or happiness. Therefore, music could be a means for education, communication and dialogue among individuals, groups and cultures. In this paper, it is important to outline the role of texts which accompany the melodies, with a special

language of peace, making music an even more powerful language. In this context, the Arabic language is considered as an essential element in culture, and in this case, as an essential shared element that shapes both the identity and reality of artists. In the Arab Middle East, language brings members of different religions closer, mainly Christians and Muslims, and unites them in a common Arabic culture.

In this article, music is not intended to resolve conflicts or end wars, however, it is perceived as a preventive process through which musicians can spread awareness about peace and non-violence since music is a pacific method that reinforces human values such as harmony, cooperation and integration. Such ideas are shared with some peace theories, like positive peace¹ and imperfect peace.² The latter recognises moments of peace as they occur instead of waiting for perfect peace to be attained and therefore helps people in a society to look forward to the future, recognising at the same time that peace would still be “conflictive and incomplete” yet genuine and attainable.³ Through choirs of religious music, members share the musical experience, their thoughts, sentiments and creativity which is how their individuality is turned into social participation.⁴ This happens because the artistic musical act involves, inevitably, having relationships of solidarity and fraternity produced through shared time, where self-esteem is enhanced. Participating in a choir requires discipline and dedication; musicians learn to live this experience with love, joy and respect born out of their love and passion for music.

MUSIC, PEACE AND DIALOGUE

Borrowing Small’s explanation, Felicity Laurence speaks of several relationships in connection with the musical act⁵ and suggests that when music is made, certain relationships are established and may occur during the performance. The nature of these relationships varies in its interpretation according to the imagination of participants. Such relationships might take place “between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even

perhaps the supernatural world.” This could be a possible definition of the act of Musicking, which leads us to “explore, affirm and celebrate” “these relationships.”⁶ Laurence considers empathy to be an integral element of peace and that both music and the act of Musicking are possible means for accomplishing both an education and relationships of empathy.

In choirs, members have the opportunity to share feelings, ideas, experiences and beauty through music; this happens through playing melodies in different musical scales and/or through singing together certain texts with the content of specific messages. The members of one of the choirs mentioned in this study were of different religions, mainly Christians and Muslims. Some of them had witnessed a civil religious war. Many of these members had learned that the “other,” with reference to a person of a different faith, is evil, dangerous or even an offender, to whom they were not supposed to talk. These fixed ideas are the result of cultural violence that these members have experienced in their countries, especially in a post-war era and became part of their social structure; in a way that it was used for several years to justify structural violence lived in the country.⁷ However, within the choir, the same people had the chance to find themselves, to look this “other” in the eyes, to know him or her closely and to decide that these fixed ideas, prejudices and previously learned stereotypes, in relation with the “other” were not true.

Expressing oneself, transmitting feelings, ideas and thoughts in a new way that somehow speaks of a person leads to creativity. Nevertheless, in order for this creativity to be born, flourish and continue in the lives and performances of musicians, spaces of liberty are needed. Choirs can offer these free and safe spaces of expression, and the decision of musicians to participate in such an experience is the first act of free will made by these people who dedicate themselves to a particular musical project. Creativity, both in the musical act as well as in the way of thinking of these musicians, because of all these qualities and

influences mentioned above produced by music, makes such people aware of the possibilities of transforming reality. Johan Galtung establishes a beautiful relationship between music and the work for peace saying: “there also has to be an element of disharmony in the harmony, of contradiction in the transformation of conflict.”⁸ He perceives harmony as “emotional resonance in suffering and fulfilment” and thinks that empathy is a “basic approach” to harmony as well as “seeing reality as seen by the other.”⁹

Everyone seeks stability and balance essential to maintain the functioning of our lives, preserving our identity and dignity.¹⁰ This balance can give us harmony, which is considered as the path to peace through cooperation. Cooperating and sharing allow for reciprocity related to the peaceful regulation of conflicts. Within a choir, in order to achieve musical harmony, members learn to listen, to respect their differences and to overcome inequalities of all kinds that are normally part of their cultural practices and that exist in the societies where the members of the choir live or have once lived.¹¹ Through music, a “constructive activity” is realised through which a possible model of a non-violent society is prepared.¹² Because these choirs form a small society, musicians (similar to the citizens in a society) deal with members of the other group in conflict (in this case members of another religion) and collaborate within a peaceful space (the musical act), where they communicate and dialogue through a common interest (music). At a moment in the musical act, these members come into musical, personal, and internal harmony, expressing their feelings and thoughts with creativity, leaving aside violence and transforming their “struggle” into a “constructive” and non-violent one through music. Music, whether in its structure, melodies or texts, can contribute to developing a culture of peace¹³ through which information is conveyed raising awareness among individuals and societies over important issues.

Within its programme “Culture of Peace and Non-Violence: A vision in action,”¹⁴ UNESCO develops projects to spread and

sometimes create a culture of peace and non-violence. And in this field, it insists on the importance of spreading awareness among people about intercultural dialogue and cooperation to achieve peace in their societies. For example, after the Arab Spring, UNESCO developed a group of projects aiming to develop “a culture of dialogue and strengthening attitudes geared towards openness, tolerance, mutual understanding and the promotion of common human values.”¹⁵ Such projects also take into account the consultation and cooperation of national entities, such as ministries and universities, in a way that they appreciate the inner role of actors in the process of peacebuilding towards a culture of peace.

INITIATIVES AND CHOIRS

Many initiatives applying music in general and religious music in particular for dialogue among people of different religions have taken place in countries of the Arab Middle East. These initiatives vary between concerts, recordings and establishing and funding joint choirs for religious Arabic music with both Christian and Muslim members. Many of these resulted from the cooperation between governments, institutions, religious and civil society active groups in the Arab Middle East. As an example, here are a few of these choirs, coming from three different countries in the region, mainly Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.¹⁶

1. *Ensemble de la paix – Lebanon/France*

This musical ensemble was first founded in Lebanon, where people of many religions and beliefs once lived peacefully together until the civil war broke and things changed. The ensemble was founded by Sister Marie Keyrouz, who, like many of her musicians, witnessed violence and had to go through hard times of discrimination based on religion. Therefore, when the ensemble was created, the main objective according to Sister Keyrouz was to use music as a weapon against violence and war. The first concert she gave was with musicians who had to cross the line of fire

between the two parts of Beirut divided by the war in order to play and sing the chants of peace. This concert was very significant for both her and the ensemble of friends whom she gathered. The concert was given at the school theatre where she was teaching at the time, which was also used as a shelter. They were singing religious music under the bombing of a civil war, which was misleadingly transmitted to the world through the mass media as a religious conflict. This motivated many musicians in Lebanon to transmit to the world their experience of peaceful coexistence, historic tolerance and shared identity from before this war, which served many political interests. After that, Sister Keyrouz moved to France where she also created an institute to teach sacred oriental music. In France there was a chance to share oriental music with other musicians from other religious groups and beliefs such as Buddhists and agnostics, so the work started with international orchestras and took another dimension. Through working with the ensemble, a religious identity was given to the interpreted works.

The Ensemble today consists of many musicians who play Arabic music in general and sacred music in particular. In an occidental context, these Orientals introduce and live their culture approaching pacifically, living (coexisting), and searching for their identity through Arabic (religious) music, both Christian and Muslim all the same. They all came from countries where war, conflicts and lack of liberties never allowed them to express their art, in a space where they have their liberty, they transmit a message of peace showing the occidental world, their oriental Arab identity and at the same time contribute from outside their countries to peace in their countries because they never had the chance to do it while inside the Arab world. In fact, the ensemble is formed of many professional musicians. Some are living in different places of the world; some still come from these places to play with the ensemble. Some have become famous and others are religious so they sometimes cannot commit to participating because of their obligation.

But they all still count as members of the ensemble and come to perform according to the director. Out of 45 members of the ensemble, only 15 reside in France. The Ensemble presents a repertoire of religious music from the Eastern Christian traditions of the Middle East in Arabic, Greek and Syriac and of Western religious classical music. In addition to some pieces of spiritual nature with texts of mystic authors, regardless of religion, such as Tagore, Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, Saint Augustine and many more, each with their own message of peace.

2. *Al-Farah (Choir of Joy)-Syria*¹⁷

The choir first started in 1977 and was composed of fifty-five boys and girls from all Christian rites in Syria. The first Christmas recital they offered was a such a success that the choir decided to open their doors to young men and women until the number of participants reached 450 chanters of all ages. In 1985 the choir knew the first change in its course when the director, Fr. Elias Zahlawi, met with the late singer Wadih al-Safi and collaborated in composing religious Arabic music. Al-Safi and the choir started performing together in both Syria and Lebanon and gave their first joint concert in 1988 at the church of Our Lady of Damascus, where, for the first time, members of both religions, Christians and Muslims, attended a concert at a church, listening to religious music that expressed love to One Creator, Father of all. This experience was one of a kind at the time and received attention from many groups. It also received the attention of the media in Syria and that concert was recorded and transmitted by the Syrian Television on many occasions. This gave the chants presented great coverage; these spiritual religious chants were enjoyed by members of different religions, mainly Christians and Muslims, and as a result, people started listening to them in many places, not only in churches but also in public areas such as restaurants, hotels and even public transportation.

However, there was an opposite reaction to the event, expressed by other sceptic groups and members of both religions out of their fear of syncretism. This is a normal reaction in a

place where religions not only indicate a belief in God or a personal spiritual relationship but also represent the identity of their followers and their existence within a multi-ethnic, religious society. Other activities followed until another turn took place and the choir participated in a joint concert in 2001 at the patio of the Melkite Cathedral in Damascus, where the members performed with Muslim chanters of the Great Umayyad Mosque. The concert was organised under the patronage of both the Syrian Ministry of Antiquities and the Churches of Damascus and was attended by an important Western delegation presided by Javier Solana. The objective of this choir at first was to participate in masses with Byzantine hymns just like any other church choir, but turned into chanting Arabic religious spiritual music that came out of the space of the church to share their joy, love, and music with others outside of the church.

1. *Yumbu'al-Mahabba (Fountain of love) Choir –Jordan*

The choir was founded by Tumeh Jbarah in 2002. It started as a church choir with members of youth groups, who first performed a repertoire of a variety of Christian chants from the Latin, Byzantine and Maronite traditions, in Arabic and in other languages such as English and Italian. The founder's love for music, which began in his childhood when he used to go to mass with his grandmother, prompted him not to give up on his dream despite all the rejection his family had for a career in music, following an old and traditional mentality which dictates that a musician is not a serious person like an engineer or a doctor. So, after having finished his studies in Jordan, he decided to go to Rome and study music professionally. Italy provided him with a new experience; that of Catholic movements within the church, which inspired him to start a new movement using sacred music and chants as a way for praying.

The choir also collaborates with many important musicians, writers and chanters. It has released more than four CDs and participated in many concerts, recitals and events in Jordan and around the world. Fountain of Love had a new experience when

the director invited other musicians to compose and record a CD of Christian-Muslim religious chant to praise God, considering that members from all religions and beliefs are humans created by God, which makes them all brothers and that chanting together would be an important human encounter. These ideas were already expressed by choir members and founder explaining their name saying: "We as a team pray that our chants be a fountain of love towards others, to develop their spiritual life and to welcome God into their hearts through prayers." The experience was welcomed in Jordan and received the attention of the local media as another Jordanian initiative for peace and interfaith dialogue.

DISCUSSION

What is shared between all three choirs is the fact that religious music, which helped them pray in their churches gave them feelings of joy, love and empathy that they wanted to transmit that to others outside the church. Whether in a time of conflict or of peace, these choirs felt they could serve their societies by conveying a message of love and therefore make a difference in breaking the cycle of violence. They all insisted on having many points in common with members from other religions, mainly Muslims, living in the same Arab society, where they shared the same culture and language. They made a difference by creating and sharing new, creative spaces that allowed for dialogue, common projects and mutual understanding through music and beauty.

Music, as a socially communicative act, facilitates creating open spaces for mediation. Reconciliation can take place between groups and communities and can spread between countries. In this case, concerts and different performances given by these choirs serve as mediating spaces that strengthen exchange and interaction among the musicians themselves as well as among individuals and/or groups in a society. Musical exchange helps people and groups within a society to live and develop relationships of friendship, empathy, solidarity, and sensibility, which could have a great impact

on both human and social relations.¹⁸ Music can educate us in both self-respect as well as respect for the other, solidarity, teamwork, communication and dialogue. Similarly, music facilitates intergenerational and intercultural communication allowing us to evaluate several aspects of our lives, teaching us to derive wisdom from our mistakes in the past and to consider not repeating them in the future.¹⁹

The audience is an important element in the artistic process: for a musician, it is a recipient that values the work and the musical piece directly, either positively or negatively. It also represents a part of society that receives and accepts (or rejects) the message, the ideas and the kind of music interpreted by these musicians. The audience has a significant role in making peace through music because it receives the message of peace and can transmit it to others, just like musicians once transmitted it to the audience. If we wish to contribute or influence positively in the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding, we should be aware of the sensibility and preparation of the audience listening, especially regarding “the cultural meanings carried by the music such as a sacred dimension” as it is the case in the choirs of religious music presented in this study.²⁰

The stage is another important factor in the musical act; upon which could depend ensuring positive results from the musical performance as well as from the peacebuilding process, especially if we consider that the place where the performance takes place influences both musicians and audience, whether it is a mystical, spiritual or peaceful (especially interior peace) such as a church, a chapel or a cathedral. These places invite one to listen to this type of chants with solemnity, regardless of the religion of the person listening to them. On the one hand, these places have a history, which includes persons, prayers and closeness to God, that is to say they include a previous experience of peace. On the other hand, the resonance (echo) allowed in these places through acoustics that change according to the construction and the architecture in each one of these temples, makes any person feel listened to and maybe even answered by God.

CONCLUSION

Music could be used as a creative method for peacebuilding or for preventing violence. Dialogue between civilisations and cultural exchange should be encouraged through music by promoting a culture of peace and learning to deconstruct violence,²¹ where people become aware and responsible of their fellow humans and consider putting an end to social injustice and violence (whether structural, direct or cultural) and choose peace. In spite of all these aspects and positive effects mentioned earlier, there is a usual concern that is in part justifiable, which suggests that these initiatives of peacebuilding through music are not sufficient to achieve peace and that their results are momentary and limited. This is true considering the fact that these concerts or performances, in most cases, do not give a solution to conflicts. However, it is important to bear in mind that these initiatives do not pretend to give solutions or to end the conflicts, since that would be very ambitious. What they have as an objective is to participate in preventing conflicts and violence and promote peace and nonviolence through their messages of love, forgiveness, solidarity, reminding people of the true essence and merciful message of religions: God is love.

On the one hand, we cannot try to regulate the conflictive side of each person, simply because conflicts have always existed in the lives of all the actors who take part in the musical and nonviolent experience. The aim, however, is to find these pacific moments, to acknowledge them and take a step in an unfinished process, in progress, in search of the truth. These concerts could be considered as an initiation that prepares us and makes us stronger, conscious, and responsible of defending peace and choosing nonviolence, since they help us reconcile and experience brief but real moments of peace. On the other hand, the effect that music leaves in us is so powerful that it leaves a desire in us to want to remember this experience of great beauty, love and closeness that one feels inside, with the other, and probably, with God. Feelings of solidarity, brotherhood, nearness, peace and love,

encourage us to share them, because when they are shared, real happiness and pleasure are felt in a way that changes our way of thinking and how we see the world. And it is so that these initiatives can transform us and give us motivation for transforming circumstances, thinking more of love and forgiveness, than of revenge and victory. We could then feel capable and sure of being able to change situations with optimism, because we know, across this musical pacific experience, that peace exists and that it is real and reachable.

In order to make all of the above mentioned possible in our societies, we should consider something more than just offering music for peace. We should collaborate with the local governments and people in power, at the political and economic levels,²² in order to try and end the reasons of conflict and social injustices that reside in depriving people of their basic human needs, such as health care, education and food. Such collaboration in several levels of society is important considering that efforts for peace need to be carried out by actors in these different levels, which can translate these good pacific intentions into concrete action for peace.

In some countries of the Middle East today peace seems impossible, and religion seems to have become the reason for conflict. However, the Arab countries of the region have always had religious cultures that clearly affected the lives, customs and relationships of the members in their societies, where variety and difference of these religions have always been a present and strong characteristic of such societies, and coexistence had its share in their history. Music is an instrument that could serve as a bridge of communication between people, since it contains messages elaborated in a language of peace facilitating mutual understanding, while forcing us at the same time, because of its nature, to listen to each other in order to communicate, dialogue and come into harmony. Religion is part of the conflict and part of the instrument, because music is religious, and would help us prevent this conflict and/or resolve it.²³ Through religious music, dialogue is an act (established across music) as well as a positive result of our unfinished process, where music and religion act. Finally, peace is the main objective and final result, as well as being a primordial component of music, religion and dialogue. Peace is the path which appears and accompanies us through the whole process while being a part of music, religion and dialogue.

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