

**Music And War:  
Some Comments on The Pavarotti Music Centre and Its Work**

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The Bible states, “in the beginning was the word.” The Bible is wrong. First, there was the rhythm. From the time of The Big Bang, it is the beat that goes on because the cosmos has its pulse. All else may be chaos, but it is there, in mathematical time to something primordial. It is no coincidence that good musicians are often good mathematicians. In one sense, the Bible was right. Man’s first attempt to communicate involved rhythm, movement and dance which represented the first language, the first word. Look at the honey bee to see how this is true for beings other than mammals. In Douglas Whyntott’s book, *Following the Bloom*, he says that bees produce:

“sustained wing vibrations and measured sound pulses. Tempo corresponds to distance . . . [Bees] remain in the hive dancing through the day and into the night, altering the straight run to create a gravity symbol that refers to the sun’s position on the other side of the earth—a position the bee has never seen.”<sup>1</sup>

At the time of what Engels called “primitive communism,” when *homo sapiens* were hunter-gatherers, the hunters signaled to each other by beating stick on stick, stone on stone. The first vocal syllables were the whistle and the call based on rhythmic patterns which allowed human communication to take place.

Rhythm was there, at the start of everything. It was there at the start of our species and at the start of our individual lives. Take the human embryo. Some would argue that we came from the sea. Whether we did or not, we all came from the waters of our mothers. Water is a perfect transmitter of sound. Try placing a waterproof watch at one end of a swimming pool. Get there early in the morning when no one else is around and ask a friend to swim to the far end of the pool under water and ask them what they can hear?

Both the heart of the fetus and that of the mother beat to a time cycle of three: dum, dum, break, dum, dum, break. This is called three time. Mother and baby are in syncopated rhythm with each other. They have individual rhythms which meet to form a third. This may be the embryo’s first experience of the outer world, the sound of ticking hearts, and if you accept my watch analogy, sounds exterior to the womb may also be heard and absorbed. Many pregnant women will tell you that they are aware that their babies react to external sounds.

So music and rhythm or, rhythm and music to be chronologically correct, is central to our lives. It is a physical and emotional link, both to something in us and beyond us, linking us to the “music of the spheres.” Do you believe me? I could ask you which piece of music moves you and then ask you why? Perhaps it is a piece you associate with some event in your life: when you first kissed, when you went to your first teenage party, when you first made love. This musical association is strong in all of us. Perhaps it is with Albinoni’s *Adagio*, Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto*, a song sung by Ella Fitzgerald or John Lee Hooker, an Indian Rhaga, hip hop or drum and bass—we can be emotionally and even physically moved, but do we know why? In our Western rationalism we can try to explain everything, but perhaps a little mystery is a good thing. As they say, let the music play on.

I want to move from these initial remarks to a discussion of music in extreme human situations—in war. What I have to say should be taken in the context of my initial remarks. It is interesting to me that when the lights go out, when the food runs out and when death is ever-present, you still find music. In early 1994, I was in cellar bars in Sarajevo, right on the front line. The shells were exploding, the snipers were at work but people, particularly young people, gathered together, and, if they could not listen to music as there was often no power, they played it. The louder the shelling, the louder their music. It was an expression of defiance, a testament to the survival of the one thing that kept them human in an inhuman situation—the primordial language of rhythm and music sense of rhythm and music which connected them back to their essence.

I knew a young soldier in Mostar, who came to the flat where I was staying after his time on the front line, a Kalashnikov on one shoulder and a guitar on the other. He tapped the guitar and told me, “a much better weapon.” I have met young musicians in Mostar, some of them work with me today, who faced their former classmates across a narrow street, playing music to them when it was too dark to fight. Cigarettes were thrown into the building where the musicians were crouching as they performed for their enemies.

And what of the enemy within: the disturbed and traumatized minds of those who have been too close to the barbarisms of war, who have shot and killed, have been shot at and wounded, both physically and emotionally, who have seen friends die, lost mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters? All of my staff and those who attend the PMC are disturbed in some way by the recent war. This is as true of returning refugees who experienced the guilt of safety and the frustrations of their inability to act.

The Pavarotti Music Centre has been constructed in East Mostar, a part of the city completely devastated by two wars: first, in the war of the whole town against the JNA (Serb forces) and, then, in the much worse war between the Croats on the west side of the Neretva River and the Bosniaks on the East. Thousands of

families were driven into this ghetto by “ethnic cleansing,” an inaccurate phrase for attempted genocide. A more accurate phrase would be “ethnic purging.”

They lived in cellars for ten months, eating grass soup and emerging into the streets only to collect water, and, in the case of the young men, to fight. The arrival of the War Child Bakery in 1994 was the first fresh food they received. When the Anne Frank exhibition opened at the centre last year, I was asked to say something. There was not much to say, only that the Mostar Ghetto had contained thousands of Anne Franks.

The young were particularly affected. Some of those who now work at the centre use music to escape their darkest memories. I have experiences of close friends of mine who tell me that only when they play or listen to music can they escape their nightmares. It is clear to me that music has a stabilizing effect on their lives. The best of our African drummers was the youngest soldier on the front line, but if you met him, a gentle giant of a young man, you would not believe the things that happened to him or the things that he has done which now bring him close to tears.

The experiences my colleagues and I have had in Bosnia during the war and my experiences as director of the PMC in post-war Bosnia have persuaded me of the value of our work with music. The music centre was born out of these experiences and was driven by these convictions.

We started organising music workshops from the beginning of our time in Bosnia. Children were brought together in shelters and cellars, in bombed ruins and, when safe, in open spaces to make and to listen to music, to sing, to beat drums, to strum guitars, to act and to react together through music. These workshops began to take a structured form through War Child's association with Professor Nigel Osborne, who had organised a children's opera in Sarajevo at the height of the war. Osborne brought graduate students to Mostar from the Faculties of Music at Edinburgh and Hannover universities where he is Professor of Music. Intensive workshops started in many schools in and around Mostar.

Over two years ago, our schools team began a project called “The Oceans.” Every three months, our resident team was augmented by post-graduate students from Edinburgh and Hanover. First, they started with *The Neretva* which flows through the centre of Mostar. They went to the schools and took with them songs from the banks of that river - Croat, Serb and Bosniak songs. On the next visit, the theme became *The Mediterranean* - because the Neretva flows into that sea: everything from Tunisian love songs, to Flamenco, French, Italian and Greek music. Next, *The Atlantic* because that is the ocean into which the Mediterranean flows: everything from Brazilian, to blues to Celtic and West African, then *The Indian Ocean* and finally *The Pacific*. The children became aware that they did not just live in Mostar, or specifically in the case of East Mostar, in just a small ghetto, but that their town and river had links to the far distant islands of the Pacific. When

Pavarotti came to open the building some of these children performed a Hawaiian boat dance for him.

I should mention our work with the most disturbed and distressed children in the Music Therapy department. Children with extreme difficulties are being treated, and, on occasion, they are responding so well that some of them end up by joining other centre activities.

For some in Bosnia Herzegovina, such an exercise was, and is, dangerously political because we are using music to counter cultural exclusiveness; what I call cultural incest. It is interesting that the most negative and threatening music comes from this tradition: national anthems and military marching songs, to look at it from the extreme. To the contrary, the best music, as with the best art, architecture and whatever else expresses human creativity, comes from cultural mixing.<sup>2</sup> I like to remind people that Goebbels once said, "When I hear the word culture I reach for my gun." I would answer, "When I hear the word gun, I reach for my culture." This attempt to universalize music and culture at the centre is deliberate and methodical.

For the first year of our work we appointed as Director of Music Development, the South African drummer, Eugene Skeef, a cultural activist who was Steve Biko's driver. He was responsible for setting up what is today a popular African percussion tradition at the centre. On Sunday afternoons, you can find 60 children taking part in our percussion workshops. Their participation offers them more than the street activities of petty theft and car damage. We are, slowly and surely, and to the bewilderment of some adults in and around the centre, bringing back something positive into the lives of these children. We are trying to empower young people in ways that they can most easily connect with, whether that is attending a percussion workshop, joining our youth choir, learning the guitar, recording in our studios, learning drum and bass, DJ technology or, even learning computer and internet skills.

We want to encourage people to come and see what we are doing, to visit and perhaps learn. We are happy to have as many visitors as we can accommodate, Maxim Vengerov, the *Geminiani Orchestra* from Melbourne, Australia, Sicilian dance groups and Spanish and French circus acts to name only a few of the many who came to the centre last year. All are welcome, particularly when they come from the side which bombarded East Mostar. Last summer, we hosted the Zagreb Quartet and just before the present crisis in Kosovo, the first pop musician from Serbia arrived to record in our studio and DJs from Belgrade organized a party here.

But what we also seek is an equitable cultural exchange. One of our school's music team has recently started work as part of a War Child project in the Caucasus, our drummers have been in Amsterdam, our electronic music composers will soon be in Berlin, Cracow, London and Barcelona. In this way lies sustainable

recovery, allowing young Bosnians to interact as equals with other world cultures. We are working for a melting pot and not a frozen lake.

From the start, the ethos of War Child and the PMC has been to make a difference, not just in terms of the type of aid work we do but in terms of the reason we do it. We must refuse to adopt a form of aid which leads to dependency and which ensures the continuation of the outstretched hand. This form of aid becomes an appendage to war and does not address the larger questions of physical, spiritual and psychological reconstruction which minimize the possibility of future war. This is a whole subject on its own, the aid world and its ways. I find it strange that Europeans arrive in Africa to teach the people how to grow their crops. One of the places they go to sits in the Rift Valley, where agriculture was practiced before Europe was populated. Don't get me wrong; I am not saying they should not be there doing what they do. But, they should be aware of the history, economics, culture and politics of the people they have come to help and if to this is added a passion for justice, and dare I say it an understanding of the need for political radicalism then their work can be more than a "flash in the pan."<sup>3</sup>

Brian Eno, commenting on the organization which built the PMC said:

War Child is one small part of a global groundswell among ordinary people. The message of this groundswell is: the future starts here, the future starts now, and we want to have something to do with it. It's made up of people who think the world can be better, and who believe that we have the power to help make it that way. My feeling is that if we do end up with a future that anyone wants to inhabit, it will be a lot to do with the efforts of groups like these, and the people who support them. . . War Child's particular objective, is to help children in war zones and ex-war zones. This isn't only kindness—it's a pragmatic recognition that the world of the very near future is going to be made up of those same children, and the less damaged and traumatized they are the better it's likely to be for all of us. Remember—the future is the long now.

In direct reference to Europe's failure to ensure that the war in Bosnia did not take place, Eno commented recently, "The Pavarotti Music Centre is an island of success in an ocean of failure."<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. Douglas Whynott, *Following The Bloom: Across America with The Migratory Bee Keepers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

2. "Music is the weapon" declared the Nigerian musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti [from the 1982 film about Kuti of the same name (by S. Tchah-Gadjieff & J-J Flori for Antenne 2)] Aware of that fact, politicians around the world use music and musicians to achieve their goals or try to control music and musicians which they perceive as a threat to their power. The treatment of Kuti for example in Nigeria or Victor Jara in Pinochet's Chile. Even instruments are sometimes seen as a threat and are banned.

3. For more on the aid debate as applied to former Yugoslavia, see Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, "Refugees and the Challenge of Reconstructing Communities Through Aid" in *War Exile, Everyday Life* (Zagreb: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 1996). And for an overall political perspective, see Noam Chomsky, *World Orders: Old and New* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) and other writings on Cold and post-Cold War international politics.

4. The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights acknowledged in their 1993 report that "what is taking place in Bosnia-Herzegovina is attempted genocide - the extermination of a people in whole or in part because of their race, religion or ethnicity", with the international community (the parties to the Geneva Convention and the United Nations), "displaying nearly incomprehensible incapacity . . . having failed to put an end to a war between one of the best equipped armies in Europe and a civilian population, who were neither psychologically nor physically and materially prepared to fight back."