

Has music ever significantly changed the course of history?

In May 2006, facing a predominantly Palestinian audience, Jewish conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim described music as a great equalizer; he said: “An orchestra can’t bring peace, but it can bring understanding, patience, and courage for people to listen to one another.”¹ Barenboim’s words shed light on music’s value within social life: music, the universal language, possesses an uncanny ability to foster profound connection and unity among people. Through radio and the internet, music can reach every corner of the world. It remains capable of inspiring mass connection and unity by virtue of its easy accessibility. This capability has been proven time and again in history.

Although often regarded as a mirror reflecting historical events and the lives of ordinary folk, music has also played a transformative role within history itself, whether by amplifying the calls for peace and freedom worldwide or promoting our highest ideals in the simplest of ways. From antiquity to contemporary times, music has influenced historical development by raising awareness for public affairs, prompting social movements and revolutionary action, shaping political narratives, and even toppling regimes.

Music, as a form of art, is easily understandable and of great public influence. It can articulate messages uniting people facing social inequalities and deficiencies. The civil rights movement offers one prominent example. As civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr explained, “Freedom songs are the soul of the movement.”² On September 2, 1957, he visited Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. During his visit, folk singer Pete Seeger, also an active protestor of segregation, played a new song he had recently learned, “We Shall Overcome.” The song soon gained great popularity within the civil rights movement. It was sung by

protestors during their marches and imprisonment. It left its mark on the Montgomery bus boycott and the march on Washington. In this way, the song played an indispensable part during the protest and in the movement's eventual success as an anchor and symbol. As historian Victor V. Bobetsky claims: it was “the anthem of the civil rights movement”.³ The song even found a place in the political establishment: after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he delivered a special message to Congress. He used the title of the song to illustrate his beliefs “This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all...we shall overcome.”⁴ Four days before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., King recited the words from "We Shall Overcome" in his final sermon: “Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome. And I believe it because somehow the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”⁵ Days following his assassination "We Shall Overcome" was sung by over fifty thousand attendees at his funeral. The song, a silent witness to the vicissitudes of the civil rights movement, accomplished more than mere observation; it actively fostered unity and propelled the cause forward.

Another occasion in which this song was heard was when Bruce Springsteen performed it during the “Hope for Haiti Now” concert.

On 12 January 2010,, an earthquake of magnitude 7.0 Mw hit the island nation of Haiti. An estimated three million people were affected by the quake. Death toll estimates range from 100,000 to approximately 160,000.⁶ The earthquake left millions in desperate need of international humanitarian aid. Yet, few would care about an earthquake on a rarely heard Caribbean Island. Actor George Clooney wanted to change that. He invited the top singers in America to hold a benefit concert called “Hope for Haiti Now.” It became the biggest telethon

in human history. The event drew an estimated audience of 83 million viewers in the United States and raised more than 61 million.⁷ The concert helped amplify the message of help for Haiti; with the power of music, countless lives were saved, changing the world.

The music continues to inform our societies in the darkest of times. In 2020, the whole world was facing the biggest epidemic in history. Again, music stepped forward to unite people and raise awareness of the hardships of medical workers. Lady Gaga organized the One World: Together at Home online concert to support the WHO. BBC reported, “Some of the biggest names in music joined forces to celebrate healthcare workers in a globally televised concert.” The concert featured intimate performances from global pop stars self-isolating at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eventually, the show raised \$127m for coronavirus relief efforts.⁸ This again shows how music can change history as well as the present by delivering messages to the general public and bringing people together in solidarity to overcome urgent issues.

Moreover, music also plays a role in the political realm, helping to shape the geopolitical landscape we see today. The 1970s was a special time for US-China relations: While China persisted throughout the aftershocks of the Cultural Revolution, America faced soaring inflation rates and political upheaval. Yet, during that time, both were cautiously attempting to communicate with one another and normalize relations. It was Vice Premier Zhou Enlai’s policy to use “music diplomacy” to facilitate cultural exchanges between the two countries. The Philadelphia Orchestra became the first American delegation to set foot on PRC soil. The Philadelphia Orchestra's tour was "an outstanding success on all counts—musically, diplomatically, and interpersonally," according to Douglas Murray, program director at the National Committee.⁹ According to reporting from ABC, with the Philadelphia Orchestra's

visit, American musicians "put a toe into the water of China and found it warm."¹⁰ In the most drastic geopolitical reshuffling of the 20th century, music had found a way to create a resonance between two countries that long depicted each other as arch enemies. After the normalization of relations between the two countries, the quality and quantity of music exchange only increased. The Boston Symphony Orchestra visited China in March 1979. Chinese audiences from as far as Tibet rushed to fill the concerts. The orchestra even went as far as to play *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, which was met with thunderous applause. Music really did change the diplomatic history between the US and China. International relations historian Kazushi Minami applauded the effort in his new book *People's Diplomacy*, claiming that "The Boston Symphony pulled off something government officials never could. With his "arms that speak," The conductor wielded the power of music to promote China's embrace of Western culture and symbolize the new relationship between the United States and China."¹¹

Music also has "destructive" power and helps challenge oppressive systems. With its messages of freedom, equality, and peace, music has remained central to toppling autocratic and fascist regimes. "E depois do adeus" was the Portuguese entry song at the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest, despite the hopes of its creator—Paulo de Carvalho—it finished last in that year's contest. During that time, Portugal was under the Estado Novo fascist regime. By 1974, Portugal was in its 13th year of fighting a colonial war on three African fronts. Opposition grew inside the ranks of the military. It gradually expanded into a sophisticated, organized, and politicized force: the Movement of Captains. They planned to stage a coup to overthrow the fascist regime and establish a democracy. They needed a signal; as one of the participators later recalled, the task was to "transmit a signal that could be heard across the country that confirmed

the operation.” They eventually chose the song “E depois do adeus” because it would be natural to play it after the Eurovision contest and bypass the national radio censorship system that was in place, and because the song bore a message of freedom and hope. On 24 April 1974, the song was played according to schedule. As the Guardian wrote, “Less than 24 hours after the first signal was aired, the oldest fascist dictatorship in Europe had fallen, and Portugal’s transition to democracy had begun.”¹²

Portugal wasn’t the only country experiencing regime change fueled by music in the late 20th century. East Germany provides yet another example. During the late 1970s, East Germany’s government treated rock and roll as counter-propaganda and a “NATO weapon”. It was strictly prohibited, and all songs were censored for “rock” content. However, the youth of East Germany were unwilling to be restricted. A wall and guards can keep the people from crossing over, but there was nothing to stop music from spreading ideologies and reaching the East German youth via bootleg tape recordings. Music had the power to change the entire political scene. Hope M. Harrison, an associate professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University, argues that “Rock became this beacon from the West. it was rock music that got inside them as a symbol of freedom and hope.”¹³ It was an invitation to the modern world and would take them one step closer to “taking down the wall”.¹⁴ It was in this climate that rock music thrived. Underground music organizations such as the Neue Deutsche Welle emerged and prospered. A series of concerts also started to chip away at the East German defenses. In 1987, David Bowie, Genesis, and the Eurythmics were performing on the same lineup in West Berlin and speakers were aimed at East Germany. When guards tried to disperse the crowd of fans assembled under the wall, the fans responded with defiance,

chanting, “Tear down the wall!”. The power of rock was working. Eventually, the same government learned that it was futile to try to prevent the sound of youth and freedom from crossing over the wall to the East. Restrictions were largely dropped. Depeche Mode, Big Country, and finally, “The Boss.” Each concert got bigger, and the music became more “rebellious.” When Bruce Springsteen held his concert in 1988 it may as well have been the final straw. It became the largest in East German history and reflected the growing thirst for freedom of young people. 160,000 managed to get tickets to see the Boss, and more than 100,000 stormed the gates to hear “freedom itself.” Springsteen said: “I am not for or against any government. I have come here to play rock and roll for you East Berliners in the hope that one day all barriers can be torn down.”¹⁵ Less than a year later, the wall was torn down and the Cold War ended. Music played an indispensable role in this process. The powerful messages of unity and peace that were conveyed through music helped to break down the walls that separated people, both physically and emotionally.

The cases are abundant, yet the message is clear: music has, and will continue to play important roles in human societies. It could act as a uniting force for previously divergent societies and brings comfort and even courage for endeavors against injustice. It is in this way that music has significantly changed history.

¹ "BBC Radio 4 - The Reith Lectures, Daniel Barenboim - In the Beginning was Sound," BBC, accessed June 21, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gm361>.

² David Spener, “From Union Song to Freedom Song: Civil Rights Activists Sing an Old Tune for a New Cause,” in *We Shall Not Be Moved/No nos moverán*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 63-65.

³ VICTOR V. BOBETSKY, “THE COMPLEX ANCESTRY OF ‘WE SHALL OVERCOME.’” *The Choral Journal* 54, no. 7 (2014): 26–36.

⁴ “We Shall Overcome The story behind the song,” The Kennedy Center, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/story-behind-the-song/the-story-behind-the-song/we-shall-overcome/>

⁵ “A New Addition to Martin Luther King's Legacy,” Hearing Voices, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://hearingvoices.com/transcript.php?fID=314>

⁶ Wikipedia contributors, “2010 Haiti earthquake,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed June 21, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2010_Haiti_earthquake&oldid=1227747865

⁷ Wikipedia contributors, “2010 Haiti earthquake,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed June 21, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2010_Haiti_earthquake&oldid=1227747865

⁸ Ben Beaumont-Thomas, “One World: Together at Home concert raises \$127m for coronavirus relief,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2020,

⁹ Memo, Murray to the Record, September 28, 1973, fol. 126, box 16, ser. 3, RG 4, FA1186, NCUSCR, RAC, quoted in Kazushi Minami, *People's Diplomacy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2024), 175-76

¹⁰ Louise Hood, “China Diary,” September 10–23, 1973, fol. 126, box 16, ser. 3, RG 4, FA1186, NCUSCR, RAC, quoted in Kazushi Minami, *People's Diplomacy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2024), 176-77

¹¹ Minami, *People's Diplomacy*, 177

¹² Fernandes, “Fascist regime.”

¹³ Erik Kirschbaum, “Who brought down the Berlin Wall? It might have been the Boss,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-11-04/how-rock-n-roll-shook-east-berlins-core-and-the-wall>

¹⁴ Ben Broyd, “Free to Rock: The Fall of the Berlin Wall,” *Medium*, October 13, 2021, <https://benswrite.medium.com/free-to-rock-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall-d7ca23e5eb2>

¹⁵ Kirschbaum, “Berlin Wall.”