

Make music not war

Ralph J Bathurst

Massey University

In October 2022 Netflix re-released the 1957 movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, a fictional account of the infamous Death Railway built by Allied prisoners of war in World War II. The bridge of the story was an important link that would connect Burma with Thailand, thus enabling and securing Japanese supply lines. I remember watching this as a youngster and being impressed by the heroism of the incarcerated prisoners, and their ability to withstand abusive captors and their torture.

The movie begins with a squad of prisoners marching almost in lockstep while whistling the *Colonel Bogey March*. It ends with the camp doctor, Major Clipton (played by James Donald), repeating "Madness!" as he watched the destruction around him. In between is a story of British engineering brilliance showcased against Japanese engineering ineptitude, as the bridge spanning the river takes shape.

I watched the movie again last year soon after the Netflix release, and it got me thinking about why I admired it in my youth. For sure, the cinematography is stunning, but the story is pure fiction. It was made at the fag-end of the British Empire and perhaps it was an attempt to reassert colonial superiority in the face of decline.

About the time I first watched the movie I also read Ernst Gordon's autobiographical account as a prisoner in the same theater of conflict. I took the opportunity and reread the book which, when first published was titled *Miracle on the River Kwai* and was republished as *To End all Wars* (Gordon, 2002). This is a story of human degradation, suffering, and selfishness as prisoners were put to work building the railway. Gordon charts this moral decline among men seeking to survive just one more day, and the subsequent discovery of virtue, grace, and forgiveness amidst the squalor.

One of the sub-narratives of Gordon's account is of the prisoners making music instruments and of performing works from the repertoire. At first blush this appears as unlikely a story as the fictional account of the movie. However, there is an essential 'truth' which he outlines as follows:

It is impossible to remember now how often concerts were held. Once every month? Every two months? Who can say? But they became important markers of time. Whenever there was a performance no one needed to ask, 'Are you going?' Everyone was going – if he could limp or crawl or hitch along on his artificial legs – or even if he couldn't walk at all. It was by no means unusual to see a man being carried up the incline on a stretcher. In music was medicine for the soul. (p. 143)

Gordon's recounting comes with a stunning example which articulates human need, and perhaps counters Maslow's famous hierarchy where physical safety is preeminent over all others. Music superseded all other needs.

One night, as the orchestra was playing Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, I was sitting on the outside of the amphitheatre, not far from the road. A sick party was being marched from another camp. It must have been a long march, for they looked exhausted. They were bound for the cook-house for a bowl of rice, and were warily limping past the amphitheatre when the haunting strains of Schubert's lovely music reached their ears. They turned their heads; they stopped; they sat down. The rice could wait.

While they listened, their faces came to life. When the music had ended, they rose reluctantly, one by one, and moved on. I heard a little skeleton of a man say to his companion with feeling, 'God, that was lovely – bloody lovely!'

I thought to myself as I heard this, 'Aren't there two kinds of food – one from the body and one for the soul? And of the two, surely the latter is the more satisfying?' (p. 143)

As a young musician I was inspired by this story, and now in my maturity I am equally moved. I continue to believe that music can play a key role in community building, achieving solidarity, and settling differences. The ancients understood this, and we too can rediscover music's potency. But can music, indeed, satisfy the human soul, *and* quell social unrest?

I teach a postgraduate class 'Leading and Changing Organisations' and begin each semester with the question, "Leadership for what?" I encourage the students to consider problems that resist solution like homelessness, traffic congestion, and bullying. I also direct them to big problems like climate change and, perhaps the biggest of all, Palestine. Most students have barely heard the word "Palestine" much less show awareness of the intractable problems it invokes.

I offer the solution that Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said crafted in 1999, and realized in the first instance in Weimar, that year's European Cultural Capital. They formed an orchestra – the West Eastern Divan Orchestra – in the hope that young Israeli, Palestinian and Arab musicians might explore their differences and commonalities in the context of performing Beethoven and Brahms. Now called the Barenboim-Said Akademie, the orchestra still gathers to meet annually.

Of course, Barenboim and Said had their naysayers, who argued that they were being all too naïve and unrealistic. Such a long-standing conflict with bitterness and resentment on all sides cannot be solved by music. Barenboim responded when the orchestra first met by arguing that firing bombs at each other in the hope of resolution is even more naïve, a claim he continues to make (Barenboim, 2023) even after the terrifying events in Gaza beginning October 7, 2023.

The movie documentary *Knowledge is the Beginning* (Barenboim, 2005) outlines how the young musicians of the West Eastern Divan Orchestra *found* each other through rehearsals and dialogues, and in the first 1999 meeting, in the shadows of the still-standing chimneys of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Music made its way through the lives of these young people, helping them discover their shared humanity. The movie argues that we must learn to *know* each other, and these discoveries can be found in a music journey.

Music communicates with an emotional force that is the envy of rhetoricians. Piano Professor Logan Skelton (2023) makes a compelling case for this in his profound discussion of Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, via Chopin and Beethoven; for

music cuts through cognitive resistance and can destabilize long-held yet dysfunctional convictions. As we sing in our choirs, play in our bands, recite our poetry, and dance to its rhythms, music gives voice to our shared humanity and may pull us back from the brink of social and political chaos.

Let us continue to make music, not war.

References

- Barenboim, D. (2005). *Knowledge is the beginning* [DVD]. P. Smaczny; Warner Classics.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgAWv5CptHk>
- Barenboim, D. (2023, October 16, 2023). *Our message must be stronger than ever*. West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Retrieved October 30 from <https://west-eastern-divan.org/our-message-must-be-stronger-than-ever>
- Gordon, E. (2002). *To end all wars*. Zondervan.
- Skelton, L. (2023, May 30). *Chopin and Beethoven are filled with hidden meanings*. tonebase. Retrieved June 1 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiCXBn18XYw>