

"Social impacts of music-making in Kinshasa and Gaza"

conference by Lukas Pairon @ UPJB, Brussels, 29th November 2019

The research on which this conference is based¹, was done by a practitioner-researcher with a long career in music and social work: Before taking on my research for the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Ghent (Conflict Research Group), I have been associated for 10 years with Music Fund (www.musicfund.eu), working with music schools and musicians in conflict regions (Gaza, West Bank, Israel) and in developing countries (DR Congo, Haiti, Morocco, Mozambique). I also worked for almost 20 years (1994-2012) as the founding director of the now famous classical contemporary music ensemble Ictus (www.ictus.be). My research substantially benefited from my understanding of social, cultural as well as musical contexts.

When I started my projects in the Middle East with the music ensemble Ictus from 2002 to 2004, and later with Music Fund², many people told me how wonderful these projects were. They said music is known to be a universal language as well as an important factor for bringing peace and dialogue.

That music would be a universal language, is a thought often expressed, but not true. The only thing which is universal about music, is that it brings order in the world of sound, like language does with words and meanings (Edgard Varèse: "Music is organised sound"). So, music is - like language - dependent on the human mind, and so, different cultures produce different forms of music (Storr 1992, Dave 2004): The Congolese participants in this study do not relate at all to the contemporary classical music which my friends of the Brussels based ensemble Ictus excel in performing, as others may not connect at all with the traditional Congolese percussion music or brass band music the participants in this research play.

I have been - and continue to be - critical and sceptical about hyperboles, vague ideas, romantic rhetoric and over-enthusiastic claims of so-called 'massive' impact of music on trauma, sleep, social change, conflict... I was often confronted with, without any references to serious research that might have validated such claims. It became one of my motivations to embark on my research project.

¹ see www.lukas-pairon.eu/phd, and also: 'Music Saved Them, They Say', book in preparation for Routledge New York (to be published in 2020)

² from 2005 in Gaza, West Bank, Israel; from 2007 in Kinshasa; from 2006 in Mozambique

Spending intensive and long periods of time in the project of Music Fund in Gaza nevertheless somewhat reduced the strong scepticism I had towards such popular thoughts. I started to realize that the young people, who were studying and making music in Gaza, found in their practice of music a source of inspiration and positive attitude towards life, in contrast with the often difficult conditions of Gaza.

Since 2002 I have been able to observe and closely follow the interest for music-making by young people on the West Bank, and later also in Gaza (Palestine). Even during the violent periods of the Intifada they came to learn music and play chamber music. Although I first considered doing at least part of my research in Gaza, I changed my mind and decided to focus on case studies elsewhere. The socio-cultural and political surroundings form a dramatically important factor in allowing music to develop and possibly play a role as an instrument of social change and re-positioning of any sort. Even though the interest in music is very much alive and even rapidly growing in Gaza³, music is being repressed by the conservative elements in that society. For the moment one cannot develop oneself easily as a musician in that part of the world, where only some 'happy few' succeed in music-making an important part of their lives. Still, the situation of musicians in Gaza is an intriguing one: it is astonishing how certain young adults choose to 'live dangerously' by developing their skills as musicians thanks to the help from peers and lessons on YouTube, and performing underground in musical bands. What is interesting here is that the dislike of music by Islamic fundamentalists indicates that they seem to believe that music can have an impact on the people's minds.



Furthermore, in about the same period, I discovered the grassroots social projects through musical activities (I call them 'social music projects') proposed to members of violent gangs and to street children in some of the poor municipalities of Kinshasa (called 'la cité').

³ several new music schools were opened in Gaza City in 2015 and 2016

Knowing that many social music projects were being developed worldwide, I started to wonder whether it could be true that 'where there is smoke, there is fire'. If so much practice continues to be developed in this field, could music after all play an instrumental role in social work?

There are many practitioners of social music schemes all over the world proposing the serious study of different forms of complex music - popular, classical or traditional - from different aesthetic schools. A growing number of practitioners concluded from their experience that the serious study of complex music by youngsters with difficult social backgrounds (drugs, violence, gangs, street life, child-soldiers...) can open up new perspectives for these children and youth.

However, a recent study of the most famous of such programmes - the now more than 40 years old El Sistema in Venezuela (founded in 1975) - casted doubts about many of the claims of social change made by this well-known programme (Baker 2014). The need for serious qualitative in-depth research is more than ever strongly felt in the field, while especially follow-up studies are lacking on the ways in which the participating children and young adults themselves are affected by such music training, and on what befalls them after having completed their training.

Looking for literature on research done in this field, I was surprised in particular by the frequently expressed need for research on the possible social impact of structured practices of music-making and/or education, as opposed to the scarcity of research itself, even though more and more is now announced to be produced.

My own research focuses on two case studies in Kinshasa, DR Congo - the traditional percussion band Beta Mbonda and the brass band of Espace Masolo. They share the particular characteristic of seeing music as helping youngsters to move on to a new position in their society. The number of young musicians studied is limited, but they can be seen as potential nodal points in their society. As I have worked in the specific context of Kinshasa, I did not seek easy generalisations, but instead concentrated on a contextual understanding of the realities studied there.



What is the 'social change' the participants in this research talked about? Which social ladder did they wish to climb? What was meant with 'finding a newly constructed and respected position in their society', or 'getting respect from society', or 'shifts in social positioning', all ways in which they tried to explain what had changed for them. The 'kuluna' (the name given in Kinshasa to members of violent gangs) amongst the participants of this research were efficient, successful and respected. However, they lost the respect from within that milieu when they started to dedicate themselves to music, in part because they did not earn much money with this new activity. But while being reviled by their ex-comrades in crime, they then started to be respected by their family and their neighbours, among other reasons for leaving gang activities behind them.



Music does not, or only in a very limited way, remedy societal deficiencies. It is not by music-making that young musicians can wipe out the accusations of witchcraft, which most youngsters in the brass band of Espace Masolo had received. It happened to them, and it marked them for life. They often lived in the streets of Kinshasa for years and then found that music-making could somehow help them to psychologically heal or to weaken their traumas. It is also

not by music-making that all of a sudden one can become less poor or find a job. Changes in society, politics and economics are required to change people's conditions at those levels of their lives. We have not seen big changes in the lives of the musicians we studied at the economic level, but we have seen music having an impact on their capacity to reposition themselves in their society. Someone who was first known as a 'kuluna' (member of violent gangs) or as a 'witch'-child, and then becomes a respected musician, could create a new 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1998). That 'capital' might translate into money later on, but that is not sure at all.

We are not in control of all the realities which govern and define our lives, and our realities are (fortunately) complex. But my research could provide certain elements which explain or show why and how, music could help rebuild lives within the social context. At the beginning of the research I was critical and suspicious concerning this potential, because I wanted to question the exaggerated and romanticized discourse claiming that music has magical powers. But as I noted that music is so much put to use as an instrument of social change and reintegration of young people, I wanted to study and understand it better.

As will be explained, qualitative description was the method of choice for my research, because it turned out to be the most suitable methodology for arriving at a description and understanding of the studied phenomena. The research was interested in producing a description of and an insight in the influence the experience of certain types of structured music practice and education⁴ could have on the social re-positioning of young people in a city such as Kinshasa, where they are often confronted with violence, as victims (such as the street-children) or as perpetrators actively participating in violence, such as former gang members. How can music help to (re-)construct lives affected by violence in particular - as victims or as perpetrators. How is it felt by (and expressed in the narratives of) the youngsters themselves, who claim "being saved by music"?

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⁴ My PhD-research in Kinshasa studied long-term music training and practice, which has the aim of allowing participants to end up mastering an instrument and a music repertoire. The research was not looking at time-limited short-term occupational or therapeutic interventions or workshops.