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# Papers

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Research

## Nations in Harmony: The Roles and Functions of Music in United Nations Peacebuilding

John Gledhill



*Pau Casals* UNESCO Chair

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# **Nations in Harmony: The Roles and Functions of Music in United Nations Peacebuilding**

John Gledhill

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## Abstract

In 2019, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, declared: “...music is a universal language. Music brings us together. Music is a symbol of peace.” (UN Secretary-General Press Release 2019). Embracing these characteristics, various actors and organizations from the UN system have, over time, incorporated music into activities and interventions aimed at realizing the UN’s core objective of maintaining peace and security, globally. Those activities have been highly varied, running from concerts at the UN General Assembly, where world-famous musicians have performed in support of peace and human rights, to local-level initiatives in which UN actors have brought together communities divided by conflict with the aim of promoting societal reconciliation through collaborative music-making. Despite the relative frequency with which UN actors have used music in support of peacebuilding, there has not been a systematic attempt to document, review, and categorize the roles and functions of music-for-peacebuilding activities realized within the UN system. This study addresses that lacuna by posing three questions; *who* (within the UN system) uses music in support of peacebuilding; *what* forms do music-for-peacebuilding activities take; and *how* do those activities aim to support the consolidation of positive peace? To engage with these questions, the paper draws on a reading and analysis of hundreds of (largely public) documents and reports on music-for-peacebuilding initiatives that have been realized in recent decades, right across the UN system. After categorizing such initiatives, the study concludes by calling for impact assessments in order to gauge the degree to which such initiatives succeed in realizing their goal of contributing to peace.

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## Introduction

Shortly after the United Nations (UN) system was established, the agency charged with facilitating international cooperation in cultural affairs – UNESCO – published an article in its new, flagship journal titled “Unesco to Use Music As Weapon for Peace” (Corrêa de Azevedo 1948, 7). While more aspirational than descriptive, this declaration reflected an early belief among some within the UN system that music – and the arts more broadly – could be harnessed in support of the UN’s mandate to “strengthen universal peace” (see Fléchet 2023; United Nations 1945). Over the following decades, that belief translated into action as organizations right across the UN system incorporated music into initiatives that aimed to promote peace, reconciliation, and human rights. Indeed, by 1982, the UN recognized that “music ha[d] become very much a part of the United Nations, an organization founded...[as] ‘a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations’” (UN Department of Public Information 1982, ii). Since that time, actors from right across the UN system have continued to use music in support efforts to build peace. That instrumentalization has taken diverse forms, in equally diverse settings – ranging from concerts at the UN headquarters that have promoted norms of peace at the global level (e.g. UN Secretary-General Press Release 2013; United Nations Messengers of Peace 2023) to support from UN peacekeeping missions for projects that have fostered peace and reconciliation at the local level by bringing together members of divided communities to collaborate in making music (e.g. Public Information Office, UNFICYP 2006a, 2006b, 2016; UNMIK 2017).

Despite the existence and diversity of music-for-peace initiatives within the UN system, the roles, functions, and mechanisms of those initiatives have received limited academic attention – both among scholars of peacebuilding and among ethnomusicologists interested in the political impacts of music. That lack of attention is not for want of scholarly interest in connections between music and peacebuilding, more broadly; to the contrary, a number of recent studies have explored the potential for music-based interventions to contribute to the establishment and consolidation of peace (e.g. Howell 2023; Kanyako 2015; Martín de Almagro et al. 2024; Sandoval 2016; Urbain 2015). Until now, however, scholars have not turned their attention to music-for-peace initiatives carried out by the world’s most prominent set of peacebuilding actors: UN organs. This study aims to open-up

investigation of such initiatives by empirically ‘mapping’ the various forms and functions of music-focused activities in UN-backed peacebuilding efforts.

To realize such a mapping exercise, the paper draws on hundreds of (largely) public UN reports to document the ‘who, what, and how’ of UN music-for-peacebuilding. I first identify which *actors* (‘who’) within the UN system deploy music in support of peace; here, I propose that UN peacekeeping operations are particularly active on the musical front, although the UN Secretariat and selected UN agencies, funds, and programmes (AFPs) have also regularly drawn music behind efforts to promote peace and human rights. In considering the ‘what’ question, the paper then introduces three broad categories of *activity* that UN actors realize when employing music in support of peacebuilding: spectacles/concerts, participatory music-making, and recordings. I then turn to the question of ‘how’ various music-for-peacebuilding activities might contribute to establishing and/or sustaining peace, by proposing four *mechanisms* through which UN-backed musical interventions aim to support peace: norm-building, relationship-building, institution-building, and resilience-building.

In the sections that follow, I first contextualize the study at hand by briefly introducing recent works that have considered the potential and actual role of the arts – including music – in peacebuilding, highlighting that existing literature has not previously explored music-for-peace initiatives supported by the UN system. I then go on to clarify key concepts and I offer a brief overview of the sources and methods that underwrite the empirical sections of the paper. Next, I move through the core objective of the paper, which is to describe and categorize the ‘who, what, and how’ of music-for-peace activities organized or supported by actors from the UN system. I conclude by arguing that, despite the relative frequency with which UN actors invoke music in support of peacebuilding efforts, we currently have a limited understanding of whether those efforts succeed in contributing to peace and human rights, at either the global or local levels. As such, I close by calling for research that applies emerging methodological tools for studying the impact of the arts on political outcomes in order to identify and evaluate the impact of music as a tool of UN peacebuilding.

## Situating the Study

Consideration of the role of music in UN peacebuilding is embedded within a broader “aesthetic turn” in the study of politics and international relations over recent years. Works that subscribe to this approach, while varied in many ways, share a paradigmatic belief that the way we (literally) see the political world informs the way that we understand and *engage* with that world (Bleiker 2001, 2018; Lilleker and Veneti 2023). While intuitive, this observation has significant consequences for the way that adherents of the “visual politics” paradigm go about studying political processes and outcomes, including in contexts of conflict and peace (Hutchison and Bleiker 2021). Specifically, they take images as key sources of data, and visual representations as key areas of investigation and concern – recognizing that images shape political preferences, communal affiliations, and inter-communal relationships. On occasion, this logic has been adapted and extended to the acoustic realm by scholars who have proposed that the way we *hear* the world informs the way we understand and relate to that world (Bleiker 2005; Bonnette 2015, Ch.1; Garratt 2018; Lewis et al. 2021; Nussbaum 2001, Ch. 5; Ramel and Prévost-Thomas 2018). The study at hand contributes to this emerging acoustic turn in the study of politics and international relations by exploring how the world’s most prominent set of multilateral actors, the UN system, use music to shape the way that global and local audiences perceive, and engage with, the concept and practice of peacebuilding.

This study is also situated within a second – more finite – body of literature, which has explored ways in which the arts, including music, can be put to the service of peace (for an overview, see Guevara and Cole 2024). Broadly, these works fall into one of two categories. One set of studies has taken a largely inductive approach to understanding the arts and peacebuilding by detailing the design, process, and/or impact of specific art-for-peace interventions, including music-for-peace initiatives. These case studies have considered projects in which the arts have been instrumentalized in support of a range of peace-related goals, including long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation (Pruitt 2011; Teeney and Brewer 2016), transitional justice and healing (Fairey and Kerr 2020; Martín de Almagro et al. 2024), (collective) remembrance (Redwood and Wedderburn 2019), and combinations thereof (Opiyo 2015). By exploring processes on the ground, typically through detailed qualitative (sometimes ethnographic) work, these studies make

an important contribution to our understanding of the range of ways in which the arts — including music — might contribute to peacebuilding efforts, across diverse contexts. The detailed focus on particular cases, however, necessarily comes at the expense of a wider overview, analysis, and theorizing of the ways in which the arts can be mobilized in support of peacebuilding across diverse contexts.

A second set of studies speaks to this limitation, in part, by prioritizing theorizing and generality over empirical claims, proposing how arts-based initiatives may, in principle, facilitate discrete peacebuilding-related processes, including conflict transformation (Lederach 2005, Ch. 7; Shank and Schirch 2008), peace education and representation (Hunter and Cohen 2019; Mitchell 2020), and post-conflict reconciliation (Cohen 2005; Kerr 2017). While thought-provoking, these works tend to focus on, and explore, the potentially positive contributions of arts-for-peace initiatives, sometimes at the expense of sufficient engagement with the potential limitations of such initiatives. As such, theoretical overviews have collectively provided a somewhat blinkered perspective, highlighting and even advocating for the potential of the arts to contribute to peacebuilding. A further limitation is that these theory-focused studies have given only limited attention to the potential for *musical* interventions, in particular, to contribute to peacebuilding (notwithstanding some important exceptions, such as Howell 2023; contributions to Urbain 2015). Consequently, there have been few efforts to theorize the specific (and possibly unique) mechanisms through which musical interventions might contribute to building peace.

In sum, while existing studies have made important contributions to our knowledge of the arts and peacebuilding, we still have a limited understanding of the cross-contextual forms that musical interventions take, and the associated range of mechanisms through which those interventions might, in theory, contribute to peace. By mapping and theorizing UN music-for-peacebuilding projects, the study that follows aims, as possible, to speak to those limitations. It does so by addressing the following three questions, in turn: 1) *Who in the UN system deploys music in support of peacebuilding?* 2) *What forms do UN-backed music-for-peacebuilding projects take?* 3) *Through what mechanisms might such projects support peacebuilding?*

## Concepts and Methods

### Conceptualizing UN Music-for-Peacebuilding

Recognizing that certain concepts in these questions are contested, it is important to delimit the parameters of the study by indicating how three terms are understood and operationalized in the discussions that follow: *peacebuilding*, *music-for-peacebuilding* initiatives, and *United Nations* support for such initiatives.

I understand *peacebuilding* in a way that is consistent with definitions used within the UN system itself, where the term is seen as a “complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace” (United Nations Peacekeeping n.d.). While neat as a starting point, this definition demands further specification, particularly concerning how UN actors understand both the concept of “peace” and the “conditions” that are “necessary” for ensuring sustainable peace. On the former, UN organizations typically conceptualize peace in its “positive” form (see Diehl 2019; UN News 2014); that is, as a condition of physical *and* human security, where conflict is resolved without violence, human rights are guaranteed, and individuals are afforded basic life opportunities (Diehl 2016; Galtung 1969, 1985). In the post-Cold War era, UN organs have ordinarily assumed that liberal institutions – democratic regimes, liberal human rights frameworks, and a market economy – provide the “necessary conditions” for such a positive peace (Paris 1997; Richmond 2023, Ch. 2; Tom 2017, Ch. 3). Consequently, in this study, I understand peacebuilding broadly, as efforts aimed at institutionalizing the management of conflict without recourse to violence, along with interventions that support the realization of elections, assurance of human rights, post-conflict reconciliation, and beyond (United Nations n.d.-b).

I define a *music-for-peacebuilding* project as any initiative that uses the production or consumption of rhythmic and/or tonal sound in support of efforts to establish and/or consolidate positive peace. This understanding recognizes that there are debates over what constitutes “music” (see Garratt 2018, 11-13), but it also sets aside those debates in favour of a parsimonious and widely-accepted definition of music as sound that involves rhythm and/or tone. Such music may be instrumental or vocal, recorded or live, and it may be a stand-alone work or part of a larger theatrical or dance initiative. Where music does feature in a peacebuild-

ing initiative somehow, it may be the centre-piece of that initiative or simply an accompanying part of a much broader peacebuilding project. While some of the interventions under investigation are expressly framed as peacebuilding efforts by the UN actors involved, this is often not the case. Rather, a number of the projects considered have been framed in terms of the more finite goals at hand (e.g. community-building, refugee resilience etc.). Where the realization of such goals can be seen to ultimately contribute to positive peacebuilding, however, and music has been employed as part of the initiative at hand, relevant projects have been included in the analysis.

Since I am interested in music-for-peacebuilding activities that are supported by actors within the *United Nations* system, I explore projects and activities that are backed by a range of UN organizations. The most prominent and active UN peacebuilding actors are peacekeeping missions and, as such, musical initiatives supported by those missions are central to the analysis that follows. However, a range of other UN actors are also mandated to promote (positive) peace, and so the music-for-peacebuilding mapping exercise that follows goes beyond peacekeeping and also considers activities of other relevant UN organs, including those based at UN Headquarters in New York (i.e. the Secretariat, General Assembly etc.), alongside a host of UN agencies, funds, and programmes that are active in peacebuilding or adjacent activities within conflict-affected countries across the globe, such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), UN Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNESCO, and beyond. Where any such actors have actively planned and taken the lead in realizing a peacebuilding initiative that has featured music, I consider those initiatives. Since this is an exploratory study, I lean towards inclusion over exclusion and, as such, I also incorporate consideration of any music-for-peacebuilding interventions that may have been planned and managed by actors outside of the UN system, but with financial, logistical, and/or political support from a UN actor.

## Data and Methods

Data underwriting the analysis that follows is based on my reading of hundreds of official documents, reports, press releases, archival documents and other written materials, primarily published in English, but also in French and Spanish.<sup>1</sup> These materials were gathered online, in large part, by a research assistant (RA) who worked in accordance with guidelines for document-identification that were defined by the author. Following that guidance, the RA conducted a systematic online search for various combinations of (stems and/or translations of) the words ‘peace’ and ‘music’ and cognate terms – both through open web searches but also through targeted searches of the websites of UN organs that may contribute directly or indirectly to peacebuilding efforts within the UN system, including the websites of: UN.org, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Peacekeeping, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UN OCHA, the sites of discrete UN Political Missions (past and present), the sites of UN Peacekeeping Missions (past and present), UN Press Releases, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), UN Women, and other sites that returned limited or no materials.<sup>2</sup>

Altogether, this process returned more than 450 discrete sets of sources, although some were duplicates or replicated reports of the same initiatives, and many were quite short and offered only very limited details of the activities in question. As such, only a subset of these materials was ultimately included in the analysis. Web-based materials were complemented by documents provided directly to the author from the Pau Casals Archives in Catalonia, which hold, *inter alia*, records relating to the relationship between the UN and Casals – the world-renowned cellist, conductor, composer, and peace advocate. Taken together, the sample of materials for analysis is extensive and informative, but neither exhaustive nor representative of the full range of music-for-peace initiatives implemented across the UN system. Rather, it is likely that the sample is biased towards recent initiatives (which are reported online) and initiatives supported by branches of the UN that

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<sup>1</sup> Where documents in Spanish or French have been quoted directly, the quotes have been translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> A full record of the document search process, and the associated documents, remains on file with the author.

have a large online presence (such as peacekeeping missions). These possible biases mean that I cannot make reliable quantitative claims about the nature of UN music-for-peacebuilding. Nevertheless, the size and scope of this body of material does allow for broad qualitative inferences to be drawn concerning music and peacebuilding across the UN system. In drawing those inferences, I am aware of the possibility of bias *within* some of the materials reviewed, which are often press releases produced by UN actors that wish to advertise (rather than simply report or reflect on) activities that they have realized. As such, the materials have been reviewed critically, but the conclusions that I draw from those materials should also be viewed critically.

With materials to hand, I read and coded the documents, using NVivo. The coding process followed what might be described as an ‘abductive’ or ‘pragmatic’ approach (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009), which is to say that it moved back and forth between coding based on categories that were devised prior to reading the materials and additional categories that were added as conceptualization developed through reading the materials at hand. The primary categories that I used for coding (actors, activities, mechanisms/objectives), each of which had multiple subcategories, are reflected in the way that materials are presented in the discussion that follows.<sup>3</sup> After completing the coding, I used NVivo’s analytic tools to identify intersections between coded materials, revealing trends in the way that discrete actors in the UN system use music in support of peacebuilding. Insights from these trends were combined with theoretical insights into music and peace from relevant literature in order to build an understanding of the ‘who, what, and how’ of UN music-for-peacebuilding.

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<sup>3</sup>‘Objectives’ and ‘mechanisms’ were initially coded as separate categories, but I have effectively combined them for the analysis that follows.

# Mapping UN Music-For-Peacebuilding Initiatives: Who, What, and How

## 1. The 'Who': UN Actors Deploying Music-for-Peacebuilding

Which branches of the UN system are particularly active in deploying music in support of peacebuilding efforts? Unsurprisingly, it is branches that are active in supporting peacebuilding, period: that is, peacekeeping missions, the Secretariat, and AFPs whose mandated activities pertain to positive peacebuilding. There is, however, variation in the form and degree to which these various actors pursue music-for-peacebuilding activities. To understand that variation, it is helpful to distinguish between actors that operate *on the ground* (in conflict-affected states) and those that promote positive peace at the *global level*.

### Actors Operating in Conflict-Affected Regions

Within conflict-affected contexts, UN peacekeeping missions incorporate music into peacebuilding activities more regularly than any other UN actor, although there is variation across missions. Perhaps the most musically-inclined of all contemporary peacekeeping operations is the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which has gone so far as to set-up its own in-house band, *The Flamingoes*, which has joined local acts in performing at concerts right across South Sudan in support of peace over the past decade (UNMISS 2017, 2018a, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). In 2018, then-head of UNMISS, David Shearer, even picked up his guitar to perform live on television with local musician, Emmanuel Kembe, in a broadcast promoting peace (UNMISS 2018b). While this level of engagement is arguably unique, other peacekeeping missions have regularly incorporated music into their support for peacebuilding in various ways, most often by backing musical events that have served as vehicles for peace messaging. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, MONUSCO has long-supported the *Amani* ("Peace", in Swahili) music festival in Goma (MONUSCO 2014, 2018, 2020). Similarly, MINUSMA supported the *Vivre Ensemble* ('To Live Together') festival in Mali while it was deployed there (MINUSMA 2019, 2020, 2021a), and UNOCI organized the *Festivals des Musiques pour la Paix et la Reconciliation* ('Music Festivals for Peace and Reconciliation') in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI 2011).



Figure 1: Martin Kobler, Head of MONUSCO, dances with the Mayor of Goma, Nasson Kubuya Ndoole, at the *Amani* Festival for Peace, Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, February 2014. Credit: UN Photo / Clara Padovan. <https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9LOBVC6JS>

Beyond peacekeeping missions, UN AFPs that are active in conflict zones have also occasionally integrated music into activities that contribute to building or consolidating positive peace. The UNHCR has been particularly active on the musical front, using the production and diffusion of songs for diverse purposes, including as a means of relaying information to displaced populations in conflict-affected regions (Fontanini 2004), raising awareness of displaced populations among the wider public (Verney and Valdivieso 2007), and providing displaced populations with a source of solace or entertainment (Opile 2018; Schmitt 2014; UNHCR 2015). UNICEF has also occasionally incorporated music into its support for children and youth in conflict-affected regions (UNICEF 2017, 40; 2018, 55; 2020, 72, 74), as has UNRWA in its programmes of support for displaced Palestinian youth (Pontefract and UNRWA 2016). Other UN AFPs, including the IOM and UNDP have also realized programming that has brought music behind efforts to build peace in conflict-affected regions in one way or another.

## Actors Operating at the Global Level

At the global level, the UN Secretariat and, more specifically, Secretaries-General have been active in using music in support of peace, primarily by hosting and/or introducing concerts that have served as vehicles for promoting messages of peace. Annual concerts celebrating United Nations Day – often held in the General Assembly Hall – have provided a particular opportunity for Secretaries-General to diffuse peace messaging, both through introductory speeches at concerts and through their support for accompanying performances of musical works that, in themselves, have sent messages of peace (e.g. Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”) (UN Department of Public Information 1982, 2009; UN Secretary-General Press Release 2002a). Secretaries-General have also participated in ad hoc musical events that have been held around the globe in support of peace and peacebuilding; Kofi Annan, for example, spoke at a concert in Sarajevo marking the pending closure of the UN peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, declaring that “if music be the food of peace, play on” (UN Secretary-General Press Release 2002b); Ban Ki-moon introduced a Hebrew-Persian performance at the General Assembly in 2013, extolling music’s capacity to “build bridges, and connect people” (UN Secretary-General Press Release 2013); and António Guterres celebrated music’s status as a “universal language” and a “symbol of peace” when introducing a musical workshop in support of refugees, led by world renowned cellist, Yo-Yo Ma, in Austria (UN Secretary-General Press Release 2019).

Beyond the Secretariat, the headquarters of AFPs (commonly based in New York or Geneva) have also been active in using music to support activities that contribute to building positive peace, albeit in less direct ways than the field offices of these organizations. The UNHCR, for example, has run fund-raising concerts at the agency’s headquarters in Geneva and other global venues (Colville 2003; Gatti 2008; Tan 2003). It has also supported public events and the release of recordings that have aimed to build global awareness of the challenges and resilience of displaced persons in conflict zones (Al-Achi 2009; Schmitt 2018; Tan 2005; UNHCR Public Information Section 2001). UNICEF and UNRWA have, similarly, supported concerts and the sale of albums as a means of generating global awareness and/or funds in support of their work with children in conflict-affected regions (Flabat 2022a, 2022b; UNICEF 2022; UNRWA n.d., 2009). Given UNESCO’s remit as the UN’s cultural agency, it is unsurprising that it has also employed music as a means



Figure 2: Yo-Yo Ma, UN Messenger of Peace, performs at UN Headquarters, International Day of Peace, September 2006. Credit: UN Photo/Marco Castro. <https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9LO3N9TIH?&WS>

of advocating for peace at the global level – most notably through its “Artists for Peace” programme, which has seen renowned musicians advocate for peace and related goals, globally (UNESCO, n.d.). This programme mirrors the Secretariat’s “Messengers of Peace” programme, which has seen a number of prominent celebrities appointed to advocate for peace and human rights, globally, including world-renowned musicians such as Daniel Barenboim, Lang Lang, and Stevie Wonder (United Nations n.d.-a).

## 2. The ‘What’: Music-for-Peacebuilding Activities

Given variety in the range of UN actors that draw on music to support peacebuilding efforts, and equal variety in the scope of finite peacebuilding goals that those actors aim to realize with music-related initiatives, it is not surprising that music-for-peacebuilding activities take many forms. That said, it is possible to place

many, if not most, UN musical activities into one (or more) of three broad categories: *spectacles*, *participatory activities*, and *recordings* (categories based on Gledhill et al. 2022).

## Spectacles

In the data analysed, the most common forms of music-for-peacebuilding activities were *spectacles*, understood as a broad category of events that includes concerts, festivals, and other kinds of public musical performances in which the targeted constituency for peacebuilding efforts is the (oftentimes large) audience rather than the (typically limited) set of performers. Thus, spectacles aim to contribute to building peace through mechanisms that derive from the consumption – rather than production or performance – of music or songs. That consumption can take place at the local or global level.

*Local spectacles* are typically music concerts or festivals organized within regions that have been directly affected by conflict, ordinarily with the aim of contributing to building peace and societal resilience within those regions. Given this context, such local events are often organized or supported by UN organs that are active in conflict zones. In large part, this means UN peacekeeping missions, such as those in South Sudan, the DRC, Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, and beyond (see, e.g. MINUSTAH 2014; MONUSCO 2018, 2020; UNMISS 2023b; UNOCI 2011). Other UN agencies that address the needs of conflict-affected populations – including the UNHCR, IOM, and UNDP – have also occasionally supported local spectacles in support of peace-related objectives (e.g. International Organization for Migration 2006; UN Development Programme 2022; Verney and Valdivieso 2007). The performers at such events vary; they are sometimes renowned professional musicians contracted by UN actors for finite events (e.g. BNUB 2014), sometimes members of local communities (e.g. Public Information Office, UNFICYP 2016, 7), and, as highlighted above, sometimes even the in-house band of a UN organ (e.g. UNMISS 2023a, 2023b). Whoever the performer, however, the audiences at local spectacles are typically drawn from the conflict-affected environment in which the concerts are being held, and so local spectacles provide UN actors with forums for bolstering peacebuilding efforts at the grass-roots level.

UN-sponsored *global spectacles* are musical concerts that aim to spread messages of peace beyond finite regions that are directly affected by ongoing conflict – to global audiences. These events have often taken the form of performances at the headquarters of UN organizations in New York or Geneva and, in recent years, performances have sometimes (also) been broadcast or streamed via the internet to interested audiences around the globe. A number of these global spectacles have been events organized to mark significant, peace-related dates in the UN calendar, such as the International Day of Peace (United Nations Academic Impact n.d.), or the International Day of Non-Violence (UN Secretary-General Press Release 2014). Given the exclusive venues in which global spectacles are sometimes held, the immediate audiences can include high-profile diplomatic figures and other elites, although broadcast events can evidently reach much wider and more diverse audiences. The performers at such global events have included internationally-renowned stars such as Beyoncé and Gilberto Gil (BBC News 2012; UN Press Release 2003), in addition to celebrated artists from the classical world. The UN's own Chamber Music Society also regularly performs at events in support of peacebuilding-related goals, and those events are sometimes streamed (UN Chamber Music Society n.d.).

## Participatory Activities

A second, broad category of music-for-peacebuilding activity – *participatory* music-making – involves conflict-affected individuals and communities actively participating in the (co-)production and/or performance of music. While spectacles aim to foster peace through the (passive) consumption of music by recipient audiences, participatory activities aim to use the process of (actively) making music within conflict-affected communities as a means of building peace at the grass-roots level.

It is possible to distinguish between two forms of *participatory* musical activities, and two associated vectors of peacebuilding. One set of such activities brings together individuals from *across* conflict divides and invites them to collaborate in making music together. The hope is that the act of collaborating (and harmonizing) to produce music might translate into social collaboration (and harmony) among participants, in a way that contributes to building mutual understanding among

those participants, and then onwards to their wider communities. This logic has underwritten a project supported UNMIK, which has brought together Serbian and Albanian youth from the divided city of Mitrovica (Kosovo) to create cross-communal rock groups (Foden 2017; UNMIK 2017). The programme received financial backing from the UNDP (Mitrovica Rock School n.d.), which has also been active in supporting participatory musical projects that have aimed to foster trust in societies characterized by multiple, cross-cutting communal cleavages, such as Iraq and Syria (UNDP Iraq 2022; UNDP Syria 2022).

A second form of participatory activity employs music-making as a means of facilitating healing *within* conflict-affected communities. In these (UN-backed) projects, individuals are supported in learning and practising music or dance, ordinarily as a form of recreation, education, or means of expression that can facilitate the capacity of those individuals to cope with the impacts of conflict. Given the focus on learning, such participatory activities often engage children and youth. UNRWA, for example, has worked with the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in Palestine to train choirs from UNRWA-run schools (UNRWA 2017), it has supported a Palestinian refugee youth choir in Syria (UNRWA 2023), and it has integrated musical activities into recreational offerings for Palestinian children and youth (Pontefract and UNRWA 2016; UNRWA 2013, 25). UN OCHA and UNICEF have similarly integrated music into psychosocial support programmes for conflict-affected youth in Sierra Leone and Chechnya, respectively (UN OCHA 2000, 2006), and UNICEF has integrated *capoeira* (a Brazilian dance/martial art) instruction into its support for former child soldiers in the DRC (MONUSCO 2015).

## Recordings

While the majority of UN music-for-peace initiatives can be classified as *spectacles* or *participatory activities*, UN actors have also occasionally drawn music behind positive peacebuilding by supporting the *recording* and release of songs that aim to raise awareness around issues tied to positive peace and human rights protection. Since such recordings can be diffused through broadcast media and internet-based social media, recordings have the potential to reach wide audiences (although data from digital media platforms suggest that this is not always the case). The UNHCR has perhaps been the most active of the UN's 'record produc-

ers,' having worked with artists from around the world to support the production of singles and full albums that speak to refugee experiences, including an album coordinated by global star Youssou N'Dour, which featured a track titled "Freedom Soldiers, Making Music Not War" (Al-Achi 2009; UNHCR Public Information Section 2001). Other UN actors have also used songs as vehicles for awareness raising. The peacekeeping mission in Haiti, for example, supported its violence reduction programme by backing the production of an album titled "Vwa Ayiti Pou Lapè" ("Voices of Haiti for Peace") (Haiti Libre 2016; MINUSTAH 2016). In the DRC, meanwhile, the UN Mine Action Service supported violence reduction efforts by releasing the David Dube track, "Sois le premier à remettre ton arme" ("Be the first to give up your weapon") (UN Mine Action Service n.d.). And, in 2016, the UN's central Outreach Division worked with the hip-hop-based education organization, Flocabulary, to release a song about the Sustainable Development Goals and "how they can help build peace" (Education Outreach Section, United Nations 2016).

### **3. The 'How': Mechanisms (Possibly) Underwriting the UN's Music-for-Peacebuilding**

Having introduced actors within the UN system that are active in deploying music in support of efforts to build peace, and outlined the key forms that music-for-peacebuilding initiatives take, I now propose *how* those initiatives might contribute to a consolidation of positive peace, either directly or indirectly. In the documents examined, the proposed mechanisms are generally under-specified; indeed, the way in which the cited activities might contribute to building peace is ordinarily either assumed or simply asserted by the UN actors in question. In order to understand and ultimately assess the merits of the UN's music-for-peacebuilding initiatives, however, it is important to identify the mechanisms through which those initiatives might – in theory – contribute to building peace. Thus, as a first step toward such an assessment, I now draw on my reading of the diverse documents gathered to identify and elaborate four paths through which UN music-for-peacebuilding initiatives may contribute to the establishment or consolidation of peace, locally and globally: *norm-building*, *relationship-building*, *institution-building*, and *resilience-building*.

## Norm-building

Within the sample of materials examined, the UN's music-for-peace initiatives most commonly aimed to build peace by contributing to normalization of the idea that conflict should be resolved without recourse to violence, and in a way that assures basic human rights. The path to such a normalization begins with UN actors using music and musical events as conduits for messages of peace – either directly (through, e.g., the lyrics of a song) or indirectly (e.g. through the performance of pieces of music that are widely associated with peace). The move from such peace messaging to peacebuilding is then assumed to flow from the power of language and ideas to shape the way that actors understand what is a possible and appropriate course of action in relation to a given concern (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Wendt 1998). In the context at hand, widespread diffusion and internalization of the language and discourse of peace is assumed to increase the likelihood that parties that find themselves in situations of conflict will internalize the idea that the appropriate response to those situations is resolution without violence and they will act upon that idea.

The way in which music acts as a vehicle for peace messaging and associated norm diffusion differs at the local and global levels. Local-level peace messaging is ordinarily quite direct as UN actors use *spectacles*, in particular, as a means of connecting with audiences that are living immediately within conflict-affected regions. Where that messaging resonates, it is hoped, community pressure will build on local elites to bring active conflicts to peaceful resolution. As suggested above, UN peacekeeping missions have been particularly active in promoting norms of peace in this way, through the many peace-focused concerts and festivals that missions have organized or supported – in Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, South Sudan, the DRC and beyond (e.g. MINUSMA 2021a; MINUSTAH 2014; UNMISS 2023a; UNOCI 2011). Often, the missions behind these events have been quite explicit about their instrumentalization of *spectacles* as vehicles for norm diffusion; UNMISS for example, made it clear that the “Stand Up for Peace” concert tour it organized in 2022 aimed to “promote peaceful coexistence” and accountable governance in South Sudan and that “lyrics of the songs performed” were “aligned with these goals” (UNMISS 2022). Similarly, in 2017, MONUSCO advertised that the primary objective of its “Peace for All” concert in Kamina, DRC, was to “raise awareness of youth to the culture of peace, tolerance, and non-violence” and that

the local population confirmed they had “absorbed the message of peace” delivered at the concert (MONUSCO 2017b).

At the global level, peace messaging and norm diffusion through musical initiatives –again, primarily through *spectacles*, but also through *recordings* – functions in a somewhat more indirect fashion because large segments of the audiences that encounter the peace messaging are not based in conflict-affected regions or, indeed, directly affected by violent conflict. Rather, the audiences of global *spectacles* are likely to be an eclectic mix of elites (i.e. those invited to events at the General Assembly or other exclusive venues) and the global public (for musical events that are broadcast, streamed, or otherwise diffused through global media). Given this diverse audience make-up, peace messaging at global events often does not directly pertain to finite conflicts or crises. Instead, global spectacles can be seen as efforts from UN actors to seed the “emergence” of a generalized norm that all conflicts, globally, should be managed in a peaceful and rights-centric fashion (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Global spectacles provide vehicles for such norm emergence as they are contexts in which UN actors can deliver messages of peace to governing elites from around the globe (i.e. those who personally attend exclusive events) and, when events are broadcast or publicized, also to wider publics. Where these processes unfold in tandem, it is hoped, global norms of peaceful conflict management may start to take hold.

Such a “norm emergence” dynamic was in evidence at the exposition of the “Hymn to the United Nations,” which was first performed at the General Assembly on United Nations Day in 1971. The piece was commissioned by Secretary-General U Thant, who invited Pau Casals to compose the piece, with lyrics provided by poet, W. H. Auden (see Casals and United Nations n.d, i). Immediately prior to the performance, U Thant delivered broad messages of peace before the Assembly (see UN Office of Public Information 1971), and those messages were then echoed in the lyrics of the hymn itself, which was subsequently performed (United Nations 1971). The event and its peace messaging were then reported in the press, globally –both at the time and over the years that followed (Morgades 1996; Raymont 1971) – thereby diffusing norms beyond the initial audience that witnessed the concert.

Other concerts promoting messages of peace and human rights organized by actors based at UN HQ or other global venues have followed similar dynamics, with



Figure 3: Pau Casals conducting the Casals Festival of Puerto Rico Orchestra, the Chorus of The Manhattan School of Music and the United Nations Singers in the premiere of his “Hymn to the United Nations” during the UN Day Concert at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, October 24, 1971. Credit: Fundació Pau Casals/ Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (FPC/ANC). Fons Pau Casals, ANC1-367-N-2561.

more recent performances benefitting from a capacity to convey peace messages to truly global audiences via internet streams (see, e.g. United Nations n.d.-c).

### **Relationship-building**

A second mechanism through which music-focused initiatives from UN actors can foster peace is by creating environments for the (re)construction of social relations that have been ruptured by conflict. In particular, *participatory activities* that are based around the co-production and co-presentation of music provide a context in which members of communities that have been separated by conflict can gather around a shared interest in making music; through the social interactions that follow, participants can start to build mutual empathy and trust, in a way that will

lay a societal foundation for conflict transformation and, thus, a consolidation of peace (see Galtung 2008; Howell 2023; Teeney and Brewer 2016).

While the UN and other peacebuilding actors pursue various kinds of arts and sports-based participatory activities in support of relationship-building (Ramsbotham et al. 2024, Ch. 12), cross-communal musical ensembles are seen to offer particular promise as a tool for building social relations across conflict divides because the act of playing in a band, orchestra, or choir necessarily demands close inter-personal cooperation – and the goal of that cooperation is sonic harmony, echoing the wider goal of social harmony (Begbie 2015). Thus, musical collaborations are seen to offer individuals divided by conflict with a forum for initiating cooperative social interactions across conflict cleavages. This potential is reflected in the words of the manager of the aforementioned UNMIK-backed Mitrovica Rock School in Kosovo, who described musical co-creation (across the Serbian/Albanian cleavage) as “the purest and most sincere way to get people together” (UNMIK 2017). This logic has also underwritten an extensive set of musical collaborations run in Cyprus with the support of the peacekeeping mission there, UNFICYP. Over decades, a bicomunal choir has brought together individuals from the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities in song (UNFICYP 2017); similar initiatives have underwritten participatory musical activities involving children from both communities (Public Information Office, UNFICYP 2006a), a bicomunal jazz band, and more (Public Information Office, UNFICYP 2003). When these ensembles have performed publicly, their concerts have created spaces for social interaction among audiences drawn from both communities, thereby extending the potential reach of musical collaborations as mechanisms for societal reconciliation beyond the performers, to the audiences. Such an extension of the reconciliatory possibilities of collaborative music making to audiences has also been seen at the global level, where performances of Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (initially an integrated Arab-Israeli ensemble), in particular, have illustrated the potential for cooperation across conflict divides to wide audiences across the globe (ONU Info 2023).

In addition to facilitating social connections across divided communities, participatory musical activities can also serve to strengthen social ties *within* communities, thereby contributing to the development of social capital that is important for the effective functioning of liberal political (i.e. democratic), economic (i.e. mar-

ket), and rights regimes – i.e. liberal positive peace. Participatory activities can build social capital by bringing together individuals from communities that have been atomized through a breakdown of societal trust alongside violent conflict. By learning, rehearsing, producing, and/or performing music together, social connections can develop, providing a foundation upon which intra-communal trust can be established (Pruitt 2011). Speaking to that possibility, UN peacekeeping missions in Haiti supported projects that encouraged “social capoeira” as a part of Community Violence Reduction programmes there (MINUJUSTH 2019). The UNDP has also supported a project that uses music-making to build social ties and facilitate integration of internally displaced youth within Ukraine (Abdulmoumen et al. 2024, 5). And music has been part of community-building programmes supported by the UNHCR in Colombia, where a youth centre and festival have helped “develop a sense of belonging to the community” for persons who were internally displaced to the town of La Gloria and initially faced challenges of acceptance and integration (Murillo and de la Portilla 2016).



Figure 4: The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra Performs at the UN General Assembly, December 2006. Credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten. <https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9L00Z0R5A?&WS>

## Institution-building

A third, broad mechanism through which musical initiatives backed by UN actors may contribute to building peace is through supporting and legitimizing efforts by peacekeeping missions, in particular, to build (liberal) state institutions that can guarantee security, allow for political representation, and facilitate economic growth in conflict-affected regions. That is, UN actors have used music to support peacebuilding as liberal statebuilding, in two ways.

First, musical *spectacles* organized or supported by UN peacekeeping missions have been used as communication tools – vehicles for diffusing information to host state populations about the activities, interventions, and objectives of peacekeeping missions. Spectacles are effective in playing this role partly because they can attract wide, and somewhat captive, audiences to whom information can be conveyed but also, according to Public Information Officers from the UN Mission in Liberia, because music and song can be an accessible means of communication in areas where literacy is low (UNMIL 2018), as is sometimes the case in regions that host peacekeeping missions. Thus, in Liberia, but also Mali (MINUSMA 2020, 2021c) and South Sudan, concerts, festivals and other *spectacles* have provided UN actors with contexts in which they could “educate the public” (UNMISS 2022) about the mandates and goals of peacekeeping missions in their countries, while also spreading wider messages of peace as a part of norm-building efforts. During the deployments of UN political missions in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL and UNIPSIL), meanwhile, UN actors worked with a set of local artists who toured the country, using their performances to communicate messages of civic engagement and non-violence during the electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2012, respectively (UN News 2007; UNIPSIL 2013). A similar effort was supported by MONUSCO in the DRC (MONUSCO 2017a). And in Darfur and the Central African Republic, UNICEF has incorporated music and dance-focused performative activities into campaigns aimed at informing children and youth about their human rights (UNICEF 2018, 55; UN OCHA 2007).

A second way in which music is brought behind liberal institution-building is by providing missions with a means of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of host state populations, whose support for – and associated cooperation with – the institution-building efforts of peacekeepers is seen to be central to the success of those

efforts. In this scenario, music and musical events do not directly foster peacebuilding; rather, they are used to legitimize and bolster popular support for the wider set of peacebuilding-as-institution-building efforts that the UN is realizing in a given conflict-affected region. Such a strategic use of music is reflected in the fact that the missions in the DRC and Mali both sponsored music-based spectacles and participatory activities as “Quick Impact Projects” (QIPs) (MONUSCO 2020; MINUSMA 2021b), which are development initiatives that peacekeeping missions realize with the explicit aim of “building confidence towards the peace process, the Mission and its mandate” (MINUSMA 2015). In Lebanon, UNIFIL has also hosted musical spectacles and participatory activities, facilitating interactions between peacekeepers and the host state population in a way that aimed to help build mutual understanding and “strengthen the bonds between them” (UNIFIL 2018a, 2018b). Concerts that have aimed to highlight the contributions of peacekeepers in host states have also been run on important days in the UN calendar in Abyei (UNISFA 2022), Darfur (UNAMID 2020), and the Golan Heights (UNDOF 2011). While it is difficult to gauge the efficacy of musical interventions in winning hearts and minds, attendees at a MONUSCO-sponsored concert in Kamina, DRC, “voiced their hope to see MONUSCO get closer to them through organizing similar activities in [the] future” (MONUSCO 2017a).

## **Resilience-building**

A fourth mechanism through which UN musical initiatives aim to contribute to peace is through the provision of creative outlets that facilitate the capacity of individuals to cope with traumas generated through exposure to conflict, both at the time of exposure and thereafter. By using music – primarily in the form of *participatory activities* – as part of efforts to sustain individual *resilience* in the face of conflict, UN actors can offer individuals a means of managing social and psychological harms of the past and present, so that those individuals and their communities are enabled to look towards a more peaceful future.

One way in which UN music-for-peacebuilding initiatives aim to support coping and resilience is by providing conflict-affected populations with creative, recreational outlets that can provide relief by (temporarily) shifting their attention away from ongoing (human) security challenges. Thus, in Kenya, the UNHCR has supported



Figure 5: The “Let Us Laugh Festival”, Juba, organized by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in 2016. Credit: UN Photo/JC McIlwaine. <https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9LO6AF18Z?&WS>

the realization of a reality-TV inspired competition – “Kakuma Got Talent” – in the vast Kakuma refugee camp (Opile 2018). Music has also been part of the (EU and) UNHCR-backed “Niños de Paz” (“Children of Peace”) project, where children displaced from Colombia to Ecuador have received music masterclasses, during which there was no talk of “all the trouble that this group of youth had to witness in their country of birth”; rather, the youth were there to “sing, learn musical skills... and make new friendships” (UNHCR/ACNUR 2015). And in Syria, similarly, the UNDP supported the “Tanaghom Harmony” choir in Damascus which, according to one participant, provided youth with a creative and social outlet that facilitated their capacity to cope with challenges presented within the context of conflict-affected Syria: “Before Tanaghom, I was in a state of hopelessness and despair. Now I can say I have some hope for the future” (UNDP Syria 2022).

A second way in which UN musical initiatives aim to build individual resilience is by providing a therapeutic mechanism that can be used to manage stresses and psy-

chological challenges that arise through exposure to conflict. In Chechnya, for example, a psychosocial centre supported by UNICEF incorporated music and other creative therapies into programmes for children affected by the local conflict (UN OCHA 2006). Music has also been used in support of youth resilience in Gaza, where UNRWA has employed music and other creative activities as a means of “help[ing] children manage their feelings, such as sadness or anger” (UNRWA 2016).

## Conclusion: An Agenda for Research

Actors in the UN system have, over time, regularly used music as a resource in support of efforts to realize the foundational – and still primary – goal of the United Nations system, which is to “maintain international peace and security” (United Nations 1945). In large part, however, the use of music as a tool of peacebuilding has gone unnoticed in academic circles, including among scholars of peace and conflict studies. This study has aimed to address the resulting knowledge gap by documenting and categorizing a wide range of music-for-peacebuilding initiatives that have been realized by UN actors, particularly in recent decades. To do so, the paper has gathered and analysed hundreds of reports on how a diverse set of UN *actors* have incorporated music into an equally diverse range of peacebuilding *activities*, with a view to contributing to building and consolidating peace through four sets of *mechanisms*.

Based on the sample of materials analysed for this study, certain trends and findings have emerged. First, in terms of *actors*, UN peacekeeping operations (most) frequently draw musical initiatives behind their efforts to support peacebuilding in regions that have experienced violent conflict. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that peacekeeping missions are, overall, the most active peacebuilding actors within the UN system and, as such, peacekeeping operations have the greatest number of opportunities to incorporate music into peacebuilding. At the same time, the paper has also presented evidence that a wider range of actors in the UN system also show a willingness to use music as a vehicle for promoting peace and human rights, at the local and global levels.

Across the UN system, music-for-peacebuilding *activities* have most commonly taken the form of spectacles, which are concerts and festivals in which a small number

of artists perform music to a much larger set of listeners, who are the (local and/or global) target audiences for building peace and respect for human rights. Although less common, participatory musical activities have also been incorporated into repertoires of UN peacebuilding, so that processes of learning, creating, producing, and/or performing music have provided individuals and communities with creative outlets aimed at helping them overcome social and psychological barriers to building peace.

I have also proposed that the full range of the UN's music-for-peacebuilding activities aims to facilitate the construction and consolidation of peace through one or more of four broad *mechanisms*:

- a. Contributing to the development and consolidation of pacific *norms* concerning the possible and most appropriate way for societies to manage conflict and ensure basic rights.
- b. Facilitating the (re)construction of *relationships* between individuals and communities that have been divided along cleavage lines and/or been socially atomized through exposure to conflict.
- c. Facilitating and legitimizing efforts from peacekeeping missions, in particular, to build social, economic, and political *institutions* that can consolidate liberal peace and human rights regimes.
- d. Providing conflict-affected populations with sources of recreation, solace, and/or catharsis, which can help to bolster individuals' *resilience* in the face of current and past conflicts, in a way that may facilitate healing and, thus, allow those individuals and their communities to look towards a more peaceful future.

As an exploratory exercise, the overarching aim of this study has been to identify and describe UN music-for-peacebuilding activities. The study has not aimed to evaluate the impact of those activities – specifically, whether they realize their assumed peacebuilding goals and, if so, whether they do so through the mechanisms that I have outlined above. As a next step, such an evaluation is needed, and not just (or even primarily) for academic purposes.

As it stands, there is a logic and theoretical basis to many of the initiatives that have been mapped out in this study. However, analysts and the UN actors that use

musical activities in support of peace-related goals do not currently know whether that logic translates into practice. That uncertainty is partly due to methodological challenges associated with identifying and isolating the causal impact of artistic interventions on observed social and political outcomes. It is also likely to be partly a function of resource challenges; impact assessments of any kind of peacebuilding intervention demand significant material and human resources, which are perennially in short supply within the UN system (and in academic circles).

But these barriers can, and should, be overcome. On the methodological front, in particular, a growing body of literature on arts-for-peacebuilding projects has started to give more systematic attention to how arts-based interventions (including music) can be studied and how the impacts of those interventions can be evaluated, using quantitative and qualitative methods, underwritten by positivist and interpretivist epistemologies (see, for example, Belfiore and Bennett 2010; Duncombe 2016; Gómez-Zapata et al. 2021; Martín de Almagro et al. 2024). And on the resource front, the UN system is increasingly devoting human and financial resources toward impact-evaluation programmes (UN Peacebuilding Fund n.d.), which could be adapted or channelled toward studies of the impact of music-for-peacebuilding initiatives.

Until such impact assessments are realized, it will remain unclear whether one, some, or all of the UN-backed musical initiatives documented here manage to make the important contributions to positive peacebuilding to which they aspire. Going forward, as such, research should move from documenting, describing, and categorizing UN-backed music-for-peacebuilding projects to evaluating the social and political consequences of those projects. After all, it is only through realizing such evaluations that UN actors, analysts, and conflict-affected communities can ultimately appreciate whether a ‘piece of music’ really can be a ‘music of peace’.

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