

LISTENING THROUGH THE MUSIC: COMMUNICATING ACROSS DIFFERENCES THROUGH
IMPROV GAMES IN MUSIC & MOVEMENT

Guy Mendilow

"I believe that it is not about being a Palestinian or an Israeli or an Indian or Pakistani - it is about being human."

— *Bushra, Palestinian youth participant in Seeds of Peace International Camp*

"Teachers at my school asked us to say the first word that crosses our mind when we hear the word 'Palestinian'. Some said terrorists. Some said neighbors. I said 'FRIENDS'."

— *Maayan, Israeli youth participant in Seeds of Peace International Camp*

Ever since a half mad emperor burned Rome while playing his violin, musicians have wondered about the interrelations between their art and the social issues of their time. Music has been used to inspire and unite people against enemies in countless struggles, as for instance the Civil War or South Africa's Anti-Apartheid movement. This paper aims to demonstrate that certain approaches to improvisation in music and movement can also serve to mitigate hostilities. Joint musical projects may establish grounds for effective cooperation and thereby aid the participants to communicate and work alongside one another. This, in turn, may assist them to overcome cultural differences, reduce distorting images, and overcome mutual attributions of malice.

The argument rests on several positions that should be explicated. The notion of the "social construction of reality" (Berger), central to the modern social sciences, is based on an epistemology that lies halfway between idealism and materialism. Already in the early 19th century there were those who claimed that (in Shelley's famous words), there is "an unremitting interchange" between mind and matter. What is external to us is not simply "there", but something that we ourselves fashion from the data received through our sensory organs. Thus, all 'realities' are subjective constructs of their perceivers. "Mental activity forges its reality out of



what is external to itself, each conditioning and being conditioned by the other as both cause and effect. Man and his environment...are consequently the products of developmental processes of constant, mutual modification" (Mendilow 8)¹. Modern social scientists added to this the notion of the cognitive map (Ranney and Tajfel). Actual maps help prevent information overload by creating a simplified representation of a terrain. They filter out features that are considered "unimportant," categorize the remainder, and imbue what is thereby rendered intelligible with values. Red lines on roadmap, for instance, signify highways (as against the black lines of surface roads) and this carries meaning relative to the rapidity and costs of the journey and even the view one can expect to meet. Similarly, our cognitive map forms our knowledge of reality by filtering, classifying and assigning value to information from the external world (Ranney and Tajfel). Road maps are not merely the work of individual cartographers. If they are to have meaning, they must rely on socially accepted mechanisms for selecting, categorizing and interpreting information. The same holds for our cognitive map. It is the product of our socialization and experiences proceeding the moment of perception just as it is constantly altered by perception itself. No two people can share exactly the same "reality", and no two maps are precisely the same. Nonetheless, common socializing forces, ranging from climate and geography to religion, language, family structure and education, result in individual maps that are similar enough to form a societal "average." This, in turn, permits widespread agreement on the meaning of elements of the group's environment and communication among its members. Significantly, both cognitive maps and the understandings they generate are usually tacit. For the cognitive "map-reader," the map is not a *representation* of reality but reality itself, simply "what exists".

¹ For a modern application of the theory of social construction of reality see Lyotard, Jean Francois. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.



Conflict, especially between different cultural groups, often involves a clash of realities. Members of opposing parties may operate according to significantly different cognitive maps, leading to different accounts of the same events and stereotypical depictions of the each other. These may acquire an independent status, becoming themselves a major impediment to settlement. A prominent example is offered by the Arab-Israeli conflict, where each side frequently accuses the other of “aggression, of brutally persecuting racial or ethnic minorities, of falsifying history, of terrorism, of seeking to expunge the other’s identity, of betraying the cause of peace, of untrustworthiness, greed, and more” (Peretz 469-70). These twisted perceptions foster such mistrust and mutual hatred that they make negotiation all but impossible. Prolonged conflict is itself a socializing force, and such images may become so entrenched that they infiltrate daily speech, media, religious institutions and even children's stories.

Nevertheless, cognitive maps may change as a result of an individual’s experiences. As observation naturally builds on observation, new ways of perceiving become more and more familiar, until eventually they are included as part of one’s worldview. According to theorists like Piaget, this is the very process by which cognition develops from birth (Construction of Reality and Essential). The key to success in communication between different sides of a conflict is precisely a re-orientation of the cognitive map in which “the other” slowly *gains* human attributes. The concept is neatly summarized by Brian Spitzberg’s model of Intercultural Communication Competence. Western cross-cultural encounters, Spitzberg argues, contain three overlapping dimensions: The personal dimension (the I or Me), the meeting (Me and the Other), and the effect of the meeting on the future (e.g. the results, positive or negative, of a negotiation). Efficacy in communication hinges on the ability of both sides to create and sustain a positive overlapping zone of comfort and trust, based on



identification of similarities, understandings of each other's opinions and needs, and awareness of the rewards of communication.

Collective improvisation in music and movement can create the conditions required for the re-organization of the cognitive map and the establishment of the zones of mutual trust required for effective communication. The results of participating in such improvisation can be the creation of a shared reality and the perceptual transformation of a malicious enemy into a trusted collaborator. This is due to several factors group improvisation entails. To begin with, such improvisation is a process in which individual participants work together in a mutual venture. It is a thrilling process of spontaneous creativity and mutual discovery. When I improvise with a partner, "he doesn't know where I'm going, I don't know where he's going, yet we anticipate, sense, lead and follow each other" (Nachmanovitch 94). For this to occur, participants must be receptive to the many types of information exchanged back and forth, from sounds to gestures and visual cues. Group members must, in other words, attune to one another, carefully watching, sensing and listening. Improvised music or movement can also be seen as greater than the sum of its parts. The result does not come wholly from any one member, though each person contributes uniquely. "Nor does the work come from a compromise or halfway point...but from a third place that isn't necessarily like what either one of us would do individually. It is as though we have become a group organism that has its own nature and its own way of being, from a unique and unpredictable place which is the group personality or group brain...it is...not a matter of meeting halfway. It is a matter of developing something new to both of us (Nachmanovitch 94-5)." In a clearly perceptible way, the group's improvisation could not be the same without each person's distinctive contribution, making each participant an equally valid player. In this light, improvisation can be seen not only as an act of unity, but as a celebration of diversity. Moreover, successful improvisation is a process of agreement. Working together in this



fashion requires ensemble members to accept and support ideas initiated by fellow participants while making their own contribution.

It is significant to note that communication in such improvisation is primarily nonverbal. Rhythm, melody, harmony and gesture are the primary content of the shared messages, allowing people to work together despite language barriers. Such nonverbal communication also circumvents much of the discord resulting from the connotations, denotations and misunderstandings of speech, especially with an interlocutor with whom one is conditioned to disagree.

Finally, while the process of improvisation is itself the source of positive, even transformative experiences, the resulting music or movement is also notable because it can be an agent of joy. The pleasure of good music and movement can be both a motivating force as well as a conditioning factor in its own right.

A number of challenges exist in using improvisation in music and movement as a tool of communication and interpersonal connection between members of conflicting parties, starting with the background of the participants. While workshops or lessons in musical or movement-based improvisation are normally geared for people interested in learning something about music and movement and who may already have some experience with either art form, participants in these workshops may have neither previous experience nor even a genuine interest in music or movement. As experienced music teachers quickly point out, these participants may also carry insecurities about singing, playing instruments or moving in public, perhaps because they perceive music and movement to be the domain of trained artists alone (Farber and Lilley). Another obstacle is that participants may also not share mastery over a common language. A final challenge is the necessity of neutrality of facilitator, workshop site and of language used to facilitate the activities (Ott 599). Workshops such as these typically cannot occur in the heart of the conflict. It would be unlikely, for instance, that a Palestinian party will



feel comfortable in a workshop with Israelis when facilitated in Hebrew and in Tel Aviv, or that Israelis will want to play movement games with Palestinians in Arabic and in Jenin. It is significant that Seeds of Peace, a mediation organization for Arabs and Israelis that hosts such workshops, is located in rural Maine, and that the *lingua franca* is neither Arabic nor Hebrew but English.

To negotiate these challenges, activities in such workshops should have certain characteristics, illustrated here through a sample game (See Example 1). Anne Farber highlighted Go, Stop, Melt as the game that led to one of the most outstanding examples of group connection and communication in her decades of teaching. I participated in this exercise when Ms. Farber led it at the Longy School of Music in 2005. The experience was so powerful that, nearly two years later, it serves as a primary inspiration for the current project.

Example. 1: Go, Stop, Melt

Duration: 10-15 minutes

Placement: Near start of workshop

Objectives:

- Enhance group cohesion through development of listening, watching and sensing.
- Foster teamwork and cooperation skills
- Cultivate individual leadership
- Practice taking direction from others
- Experience synchronicity
- Develop ability to maintain connection while contributing different elements to a group piece

Phase 1.

Facilitator: "This game is called Go, Stop, Melt. What do you think you are going to do when I say go?"

Participants begin to walk in the space, moving at various speeds. Some explore different types of movement, e.g. a light jogging or jumping. The facilitator allows the group to experience "going" for a few moments.

Facilitator: "Stop!"

All movement stops. The group remains "frozen" for a moment.



LISTENING THROUGH THE MUSIC

GUY MENDILOW ENSEMBLE

Facilitator: "Melt"

Participants slowly "melt," descending to the floor by bending knees and torso and letting head and arms hang. Finally they lie on the ground and cease moving. The facilitator allows them to remain in this position for a moment.

Facilitator: "Go"

The group resumes movement.

This sequence repeats with different intervals between each command.

Phase 2.

Facilitator: "If I tap you, you become the leader. You tell the group to go, stop, or melt. Once you've given two or three commands, find a way to secretly tap someone else so they become the leader. Ready? Go!"

The group begins moving and the facilitator taps someone. That person gives a few commands and then taps someone else. In this way, the leadership is passed around the room. This continues for a length of time determined by the facilitator who ceases the action with a signal (e.g. ringing of a bell, saying "freeze," etc)

Phase 3.

Facilitator: "This time, anyone can be the leader at any time. Whenever you want to, you can tell the group to stop, go, or melt. Your job is to make it work, and to make it feel good. Everyone understand?"

Someone, or several people, gives the command to go. At first, the commands come quickly and even simultaneously, and movement feels jarring and chaotic. The facilitator allows this to continue for a few moments, to see whether it will change and to allow participants to experience this type of movement and command-giving. When deemed appropriate, the facilitator ceases the action with the same signal as before.

Facilitator: "Is this working?"

Members of the group indicate that it is not working.

Facilitator: "What can make it better?"

Various suggestions are proposed by members of the group, and these are attempted, with varying degrees of success.

Once suggestions are attempted, the facilitator stops the group to inquire as to whether there has been an improvement.

At last a participant suggests that everybody slow down and wait between commands, instead of speaking over one another. Action resume and this time feels more calm.

After a few moments, the facilitator stops the group once more to ask whether this is working, and the answer is yes.

Phase 4.

Facilitator: "Now, no one says anything, not with their voices, and not with their hands, not with type of sound. But you still have to go, stop and melt at exactly the same time. Your job is to make it work and to make it feel good. Everyone understand?"



The group begins to move. At first movement is disconnected. Some go while others melt. The facilitator permits this to continue for some time, observing the ways the dynamics of the group change.

Facilitator (if necessary): “Look up. You are part of a community.”

Eventually, members watch one another, make eye contact, and begin to synchronize. Once this is achieved, the facilitator permits the group to continue for a few moments.

Several elements make Go, Stop, Melt a model on which games, whether movement or music-based, (See Example 3) should be built. First, it requires virtually no verbal explanation and therefore is quickly learned by participants who do not have English mastery. For most groups, the game’s name alone contains enough information for play to begin.

The game is structured on limited-choice improvisation. Limits are important because they create a sense of safety. Participants are not asked to do “just anything,” a daunting task even to skilled artists. As Ginny Latts suggests, a confinement of choice creates an essential distinguish between improvisation that is “scary and exciting.” Limits also inspire spontaneity and creativity because they liberate participants from asking “what next” in an enormous possibility of options, allowing energy to be directed towards the way one makes the few moves allowed. Play is “limited to a restricted sphere within which a gigantic range of inventiveness opens up. If you have all the colors available, you are sometimes almost too free. With one dimension constrained, play becomes freer in other dimensions” (Nachmanovitch 85). In this game, for instance, one can elect to go, stop or melt in many ways, from simple walking to more elaborate movement. The concept of limited choice is essential and may be applied in many ways. For example, a rhythm game may involve short ostinati, as opposed to the constant invention of new musical phrases (Lilley and Farber).

The types of moves in Go, Stop, Melt are not only limited in number, but in scope. Going and stopping are movements that require no specialized training and that are ordinarily comfortable even to those who have



insecurities about movement. Melting is the only motion that may be slightly unfamiliar, but it too is simple enough to quickly become comfortable. Since learning the game, I have used it in a wide variety of situations, with players of many backgrounds, including people with movement disabilities. I have yet to encounter someone for whom any of these movements posed a serious obstacle as long as players feel free to move within their bodies' comfortable range. A musical application of the idea of using basic movement and sounds that require no prior training as the tools for improvisation is the chanting of nonsense words as a basis for vocal improvisation (Lilley and Farber).

Go, Stop, Melt also serves as a model because it entails an egalitarian redistribution of power. All individual and group status becomes irrelevant during the game. Every participant is equally essential to the success of the group, and is simultaneously a leader and a follower, especially in the third and fourth phases.

Another model quality found in Go, Stop, Melt is the game's requirements for success. "Winning" in Go, Stop, Melt hinges on the ability of the group to listen, watch and sense one another and to collectively solve a problem. This is, of course, most obvious in phase four, in which participants must synchronize.

In a personal interview, Anne Farber suggested the possibility of two additional steps, to be used when deemed appropriate by the facilitator (See Example 2).

Example 2: Additional Steps in Go, Stop, Melt

Phase 5.

Facilitator: "Keep watching one another. Stay connected. But this time, you can go, stop and melt whenever you want."

Phase 6.



Without speaking, the facilitator adds a sparse, pointillist musical accompaniment. The facilitator's improvised music serves both as another "player" in the game, interacting with the movements of the participants, and as a unifying force that gives this phase of the game the feeling of a collectively created artistic piece.

These illustrate a final aspect that many, though not all, games would do well to include. The requirements of success in phases five and six extend beyond the concept of unison emphasized in the previous stages. Here, participants must remain connected to the group while making unique, unsynchronized contributions. Such coordination and agreement of a diversity of ideas is an important skill both for improvisation of all sort, from music to conversation and negotiation.

Example 3: Types of Games and Their Subsets

A. Music Improvisation Games

1. Rhythm Games

- a. Instrumental
- b. Body/floor percussion
- c. Speech (nonsense-word) based games
- d. Echo games
- e. Layering simple ostinati
- f. Conducted (especially by members of the group)

2. Basic Vocalizing Games

- a. Echo games
- b. Speech (nonsense-word) based games
- c. Layering simple ostinati
- d. Conducted (especially by members of the group)

B. Movement Games

1. Ice breakers
2. Games to connect with individuals (e.g. mirroring a partner)
3. Group cohesion games (e.g. Go, Stop, Melt)
4. Verbally-led
5. Music-led



6. Image-led

Games can be drawn from a variety of sources, from drama games to the wonderful vocal improvisations of Bobby McFerrin. Dalcroze Eurhythmics may be an especially rich source of material for this type of work owing to several characteristics that make it particularly appropriate. For example, a hallmark of the Dalcroze approach is its emphasis on improvisation. The Dalcroze teacher must not only know how to effectively direct an improvisation (e.g. through gesture) and be a part of an improvising group, he must also know how to encourage students to use everyday sounds and movements as the tools for improvisation (Choksy 62-4). Dalcroze lessons are also typically social and aim to teach various extra-musical skills. Cooperation and teamwork is cultivated through partner and small group work as well as games that require participants to interact according to specific musical cues (e.g. walk alone when the teacher plays single-line music on the piano; quickly find a partner when you hear a double-line melody), while situations in which students must listen to one another with heightened sensitivity abound (Lilley). Dalcroze lessons typically also commonly foster an egalitarian atmosphere. Participants' ideas are encouraged and valued, and an individual's idea will frequently be attempted by the entire class, or serve as the basis for the teacher's musical improvisation. Likewise, Dalcroze lessons often seek to enhance leadership skills providing opportunities for students to direct the class's music or movement. A final characteristic that makes Dalcroze suitable for this work is the minimal verbal instruction common in Dalcroze lessons. Dalcroze teachers are trained to guide through nonverbal communication including musical and gestural cues (Choksy 61-8, Bachmann 42-4 and Mead 1-16).



Regardless of their source and specific nature, these games are tools with limitations that must be recognized. Improvisation games in music and movement are obviously not a form of mediation and cannot themselves yield the political solutions required to mitigate conflict. It is also unrealistic to assume that a successful outcome of such workshops — the restructured cognitive map on which “the other” appears as a trusted collaborator — will necessarily remain intact once participants return to home societies where hostile perceptions prevail. This itself is a chief struggle of programs like Seeds of Peace where the question of post-program continuity and support is paramount. Moreover, while the potential of a ripple effect in which a participant’s positive image of “the other” will spread and catch on with others at home certainly exists, it is limited, especially in societies in which the very admission of cooperating with “the enemy” may jeopardize one’s safety. Greater possibilities for such spill-over may well exist among expatriates living in foreign societal contexts where the stereotypes and prohibitions against inter-group collaboration found at home are not as deeply entrenched, as in the case of Arab and Jewish communities living in the United States. Yet even among indigenous populations, experiences that can help dispel the negative preconceptions of the opposing side are vital, however limited. Any possibility of negotiating solutions to conflict requires working with an “other” that is a fellow human being.

Appendix A: Sample Workshop



LISTENING THROUGH THE MUSIC: IMPROV AS A TOOL FOR CONNECTION

I. Name Game

General Goals:

- Get to know one another's names
- Become comfortable with the group
- Become comfortable with basic, safe movement

1. Say your name and make a gesture. The group echoes your name and gesture. Go around circle
2. Say your name and make your gesture. Then say someone else's name and make their gesture. That activates them. They then say their name and make their gesture, and then someone else's name and gesture, and so on.
3. Same thing, except now, you start walking towards the person as you say their name, and by the time you finish their gesture, you take their place. They get going and take someone else's place, and so on.

-focus on learning two or three people's names, not everyone's. Succeed by limiting yourself and getting them right!

II. Go Stop Melt

(Attribution: Anne Farber)

General Goals:

- Be aware of one another
- Become used to being a follower
- Become used to being a follower when many leaders are present and the leadership can change from one person to another quickly
- Become used to being a leader in the group
- Become used to being a leader among leaders
- Be able to work together as a group with no leaders/followers (or when everyone is simultaneously a leader and a follower)

1. Leader give commands. You can either go, stop, or melt.
2. If I tap you, you become the leader. After giving one or two commands, tap someone else (clandestinely! Don't let the group see who you tap!) and they become the leader. Keep the leadership passing.
3. Everybody may give commands. The group's job is to make it work and to make it feel good. Periodically, stop the group and ask guiding questions: e.g "is this going to work? What can we do to make it work?" If, for some reason, the group is unable to make this work after an adequate amount of time, try the game with only three people leading at any given time. Make sure everyone's voice is heard – avoid situations in which a handful of people are giving all the commands.



4. Nobody gives commands. No communication of any sort, verbal or non-verbal. The group's job is to make it work and make it feel good. Use guiding questions.
5. Possibly: No commands. Watch one another. Think yourself as part of a group.
6. Brief discussion: Why are we doing this in a music workshop? What is the point?

II. Walking patterns

Goals:

- Get to know your own pace. Is it slow? Fast?
 - Arrive at common beat.
 - Be able to feel the beat inside, feeling it when the music stops as well.
 - Be able to stop and start together
1. Take a walk around the space. Pay attention to your own rhythm
-Concentrate on the evenness – the steadiness – of your walk.
 2. Gradually find a common rhythm
 3. Teacher “catches” group’s tempo on drum and accompanies their walking. Play musically!
Teacher: “When I say pulse, stop walking and feel that beat coming through your feet and into somewhere else in your body” (*—Pay attention to the shift from walking to gesturing. Feel the pulse coming up up up from the feet and out somewhere else in the body. When you walk again, bring that pulse down until it is in your feet.*)
 4. Teacher: “Feet!” group resumes walking. Make sure the group is walking with whispering feet rather than stomping. Alternate pulsing and walking, pulsing in different body parts each time.
 5. Teacher: “When I say hold, stop walking and make a long gesture but keep feeling the beat inside.”
 6. Alternate walking, pulsing and holding. At times, make drum playing barely audible so that the group relies on its own sense of the beat rather than on the teacher’s playing. At times stop playing altogether. On holds: “Connect with someone across the room. Let them know you’re with them”
 7. Walk, pulse and hold when you feel like it. Watch one another.
 8. Discuss: Why are we doing this? Can you still feel that beat inside you? Show me...

III. Patterns with drums

(Based on a game led by Ginny Latts)

Goals:

- Be able to play short patterns on the drum
- Remember the patterns that you play
- As a group, be able to echo patterns played by others
- Be able to work together, layering one pattern on top of others
- Be able to conduct the group, signaling loud, soft, start, stop.



1. Sit in circle. Hand out frame drums. Teacher leads brief echo game MAKING SURE to use the walking tempo from previous exercise. Keep patterns four-beats long to establish pattern length. After a while repeat one pattern. No talking should be used whatsoever.
2. Teacher points to a student. They play a pattern. Group echoes. Go back and forth between people, coming back to people. When people remember the patterns they used and use them each time teacher points to them, affirm their good memory. The important thing is to remember your pattern. Keep coming back to individuals as you go around the circle.
4. Teacher points to a student (choose one with good beat) and motions to the group NOT to echo this time. Student plays pattern. Teacher uses a “round and round” finger motion to signal that person to keep playing in a loop. Choose another student (with solid beat!) and bring them in, creating a loop. With hands, teacher gestures to students to watch one another, listen to one another, work together. Gradually bring in other students, layering the patterns. Do not be afraid to take students out if their pattern does not work – some patterns are good for the base and some are ornamentation. Bring these in later! Conduct individual students to play louder or softer, to start or stop.

Conductor can:

- Bring in individuals or take them out
- Conduct individuals, telling them to play louder or softer
- Conduct any portion of the group
- Tell any portion of the group to stop/ start again
- Once all are playing, try taking individuals out, leaving only a few in, creating a “breakdown.” Gradually add people back in

If you stop the group and want to get them going again, make sure you feel the beat, count them in, use your breath to show downbeat.

7. Have different people conduct. After each person briefly talk about what worked/didn't work.

Listen carefully to one another. If your pattern doesn't work, adjust it so it fits. Keep feeling that beat inside you. What's that walking beat we had? That's your anchor – stick to it!

Experiment with solos – your chance to break away from your pattern and do whatever you like. Rotate solos.

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