

Cultural. Diplomacies

AS SOUNDS OF PEACE?

According to Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, “music leaps across language barriers and unites people of different cultural backgrounds. And so, through music, all peoples can come together to make the world a more harmonious place”. This allusion to music as a shared perspective but also as a vehicle of solidarity is not entirely new. One of Kofi Annan’s predecessors, Dag Hammarskjöld, compared the UN to a new political form that, to define itself, should draw on the arts and in particular, the art of music. But did this concept materialise? Does music demonstrate pacifying and unifying virtues that extend beyond national borders? Does the cultural diplomacy employed by nation-states target these objectives?

As a source of entertainment for mediators, music does serve to bring distinct parties together.

Music, a source of entertainment for mediators, does serve to bring distinct parties together. During the 1815 Congress of Vienna, Metternich and other European leaders hosted a series of balls and concerts. Official government commissions to renowned musicians have accompanied the signing of peace treaties: Handel and his “Te Deum” for the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), for example,

or violinist and oud player Yair Dalal for the Oslo Accords (1994). Postconflict reconciliation initiatives often take the cultural route, with a particular fondness for jointly created musical performances. The Office franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse (Franco-German Youth Office) offers, among other things, orchestra internships that bring together young musicians from both sides of the Rhine.

But the use of music in cultural diplomacy is sometimes guided by other interests. In these cases, peace is relegated to a secondary role, and indeed even undermined by the tensions these interests generate. First, there is the market-based interest that gives priority to the commercial promotion of a label or cultural product. The evolution of capitalism has fostered this orientation of cultural diplomacy. Wealth is generated less by the mass duplication of a product than by the creation of a prototype (molecule, drug or... song) whose intellectual property rights represent the bulk of the added value (a ‘capitalism of intangible assets’). The success of “Gangnam Style” and more widely of K-pop, belong to a major economic trend that in the long run could lead to a large-scale standardisation of tastes, posing a real threat to cultural diversity.

A second interest is the circulation of an identity. During the Cold War, the US State Department sent out jazz ‘ambassadors’ whose purpose was to showcase the Afro-American part of American identity as well as the country’s model for integration – an advantage in the ideological war with the USSR. Gillespie, Armstrong and Ellington began touring internationally in 1956. The State Department’s current “American Music Abroad” programme includes musical genres such as Hip-Hop and is motivated by the same goal: to promote an American

identity characterised by freedom. This use of music has not been neglected by large emerging economies like China. In 2004, the China Arts and Entertainment Group was created to sell foreign companies a variety of shows, including musical performances. That’s how the Lanzhou song from the opera “The Rain of Flowers along the Silk Road” (1979) came to be performed internationally. The song aims to show a different facet of post-Mao China. It contrasts with the famous ballet “The Red Detachment of Women” which, when performed during President Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972, was first and foremost a glorification of Maoism. “Rain of Flowers” champions a multi-ethnic Chinese state concerned with the preservation of political stability between the different countries along the Silk Road.

A third interest lies in the expression of power. With music being used by public diplomacy as a way to refashion the image of a country in the eyes of foreign populations, the concern for reputation goes hand in hand with the importance of prestige. Preserving one’s status as a power to reckon which goes beyond acquiring military might: it implies the ability to generate the admiration of others. What could be more elegant than offering a concert to a variety of audiences? This type of gift expresses the superiority of the giver. It resembles a potlatch, celebrations during which indigenous chiefs offered gifts to their rivals as a way of establishing hierarchical relations. The symphony concert presented by Russia on 5th May, 2016 in the amphitheatre of the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra follows this logic. But the gift of the music cannot be detached from its strategic context, Vladimir Putin’s support for the Syrian regime. American orchestras that toured during and after the Cold War can also be understood in this way, even if listeners sometimes expressed their disapproval: the gift was challenged, even refused when the technical skill or orchestra’s renown was judged too low.

Can societal cultural diplomacy (i.e., civil society diplomacy) offer an alternative to the formal cultural diplomacy practised by states? It’s hard to say. On the one hand, governments are increasingly calling upon societal actors in a bid to realise their public policies (such as ‘New Public Management’ based on public-private partnerships). On the other hand, these actors are sometimes themselves engaged in an asymmetrical war against states where music is used to rally forces or ritualise killing (e.g., the nasheeds of ISIS). At the end of the day, ‘powerful’ and ‘weak’ actors alike seek to exploit the power of music as a way to express their resolve. To succeed, Music and Peace will probably opt for multi-track diplomacy and hope that their alliance will lead to a new concept of the future.

// **Frédéric Ramel**
Full Professor, Political Science
Sciences Po Paris