Music, Selves and Societies: Respondent Paper

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Abstract
Researchers working within the field of music and society often comment that they wish to use their research for the betterment of society and individuals, wherever possible. In many cases, this process of betterment requires some sort of behavioral change—whether this is changing poor habits to promote healthy living and thinking or changing destructive behavior in order to lead more productive and connected lives. It can increasingly be seen in the world today that social behavior has a complex array of influences and motivations and rarely is empirical evidence one of them. No amount of thoroughly researched evidence or logically developed arguments influences this behavior. Brexit and the Trump administration are two examples of this phenomenon. What seems to influence this seemingly bizarre social behavior is a collective belief in a narrative. The narrative needs to speak to common emotions, senses of identities and memories, but it does not need to necessarily be supported by empirical evidence to be effective. There is a need to understand this power of narrative in the public discourse if we are to truly influence how public policy engages with music.

Keywords
Cultural value, music, music therapy, public policy, social value

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Literature
In June 2018, the University of Cambridge held a workshop entitled “Musics, Selves and Societies: The Roles of Music in Effecting Change.” During the workshop, two policy papers were presented, one by Professor of Music and Science, Ian Cross, and a policy advisor (henceforth referred to as CS in this paper) representing a public policy perspective from the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Cross’s paper is included in this issue, while the other was solely a verbal presentation. This paper is a response to these two presentations. The two policy position papers were both very illuminating and interesting, and they already raise several obvious points for discussion and development:

1. How do researchers of music and society attribute value to musical activity? And what is the nature of this meaning? Once defined, how does it change or stay the same over time, in different contexts? How can the way we understand the value of music activity inform cultural policy on music use in healthcare, social care, education and communities? And how can this knowledge be effectively communicated to those who have capacity for policy change?
2. Something that was not discussed as much within these papers, although it is related, is how meaning is created through musical experiences. The meaning-making process in music is intrinsically social and the narrative around that needs to reflect that aspect, otherwise we are doomed to essentialise musical properties and wonder why randomised control trials (RCTs) do not yield positive results as often as we would like.
3. What do researchers on music and society even want? This question was highlighted by both presented policy papers. On one hand, Cross suggests that if researchers on music and society had an explicit agenda they might focus their efforts more

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effectively to achieve this, while CS, on the other hand, noted how policy makers already have an agenda they need to address and researchers could do well to demonstrate how their work tackles these. Does all musical activity improve the lives of the participants in some way? There are plenty of sources that claim the opposite, such as music for torture (Cusick, 2006) and conflict (Kent, 2008). If we can establish a predictable way music can be applied to a given situation and the results will be the same, what are the dangers in that approach? What could the unintended consequences be? If a future policy was decided to use operationalised music for systematic torture or oppression based on evidence that music affects emotions and behavior in a specific way, is that something to strive for? Also, would the predictability of such an approach ruin the enjoyment and engagement in the music itself?

Ultimately, I think it can be safely said that music and society researchers wish to use their research for the betterment of society and individuals, wherever possible. In many ways, how to improve lives requires some sort of behavioral change—whether this is changing poor habits (e.g., such as improving academic performance) to promote healthy living and thinking or changing destructive behavior (e.g., agitation and aggression from people living with dementia) to lead more productive and connected lives (e.g., Daykin et al., 2013; Hallam & Price, 1998; Lou, 2001; Sung & Chang, 2005). As can increasingly be seen in the world today, social behavior has a complex array of influences and motivations and rarely is empirical evidence one of them. No amount of thoroughly researched evidence or logically developed arguments influences this behavior. Brexit and Trump are two obvious examples of this phenomenon. What seems to influence this seemingly bizarre social behavior is a collective belief in a shared narrative (Robertson, 2014). Fuist and Williams (2019), for example, have attempted to explain this collective behavior motivated by nonrational calculations in terms of “emergent norms” that “develop as people in crowds cue each other and begin to understand, often implicitly, the ways of being that allow them to negotiate their settings” (p. 1136). The narrative needs to speak to common emotions, sense of identity and memories, but it does not need to necessarily be supported by empirical evidence to be effective. We need to understand this power of narrative in the public discourse if we are to truly influence how public policy engages with music.

One example of where there has been some evidence of behavioral change within social groups through musical engagement without any policy involvement was with the inter-religious choir Pontanima in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Robertson, 2014). Pontanima is an inter-religious choir formed in 1996 by Fra Ivo Marcović, a Franciscan theologian, and Pepe, a professional opera singer, who became the musical director, immediately following the Balkan conflict. It began as a choir for a Catholic church, but it quickly expanded to include singers from the other dominant faiths (Christian Orthodox and Islam) in the region for purely practical reasons, as there were simply not enough skilled Catholic singers in the area. From the very beginning of this project, in other words, the shared musical identity was of greater importance than any cultural, religious, ethnic or politically identity for at least the duration of the musical experiences themselves (Robertson, 2014). It was not long before Marcović developed his concept of “a symphony of religions” and renamed the choir “Pontanima,” derived from the Latin for “bridge of souls.”

In the previous paragraph, there is this sentence “It began as a choir for a Catholic church, but it quickly expanded to include singers from the other dominant faiths in the region for purely practical reasons, as there were simply not enough skilled Catholic singers in the area.” Pontanima performs songs from these three traditions with the addition of Jewish music, since the Jewish community had been a significant and thriving part of the regional culture from the 14th century until its near elimination in the Second World War. Some newly composed material from composers within these traditions has also been commissioned by the choir. Pontanima has a very high international profile and has performed around the world for such events as UNESCO in Paris (2003) and the World Council of Churches Inter-Religious Conference in Geneva (2005).

I will now pick out a few points in both papers that I thought would be useful to discuss further, starting with CS’s paper:

CS, a policy advisor working in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), mentioned that members of parliament (MPs) often act upon personal narratives regarding their involvement with policy work, or what he termed “personal intrigues and passions” (CS, 2018). This ties in with what I said about the power of narrative and emotions to influence behaviors. Since it is the behavior of MPs that music and society researchers are trying to influence in this context, it seems sensible that what is needed is a development of an understanding of the narratives that MPs believe in and engage with and to explore how these forms of work, evidence and narratives complement each other. This understanding could theoretically be employed as an effective means by which to communicate researcher-based forms of evidence to MPs in a manner that could help them to address some of their own agendas on a case-by-case basis.

CS discussed the cynical political appropriation of music styles to position oneself politically. This highlights a potential negative utilisation of music, or operationalisation of music. This use of music and the arts in social policy where the art must be only for a particular purpose that can be measured in a predictable fashion is explored in much more detail by Eleonora Belfiore, for example, in what she
refers to as “defensive instrumentalism” (2012). Elsewhere, DeNora and Ansdell deconstruct this argument to demonstrate that musical experiences are not generally instrumental in any particular social change but that they contribute “to a wider cultural ecology” that in turn, when combined with other non-musical practices, can influence social change (2014, p. 7). To explain further, if a politician publicly says that they favor a certain type of music, it positions them as someone who understands youth culture, is urban and contemporary, and has little to do with what the politician might actually think about any particular form of music. Given that music is often a key indicator of social group membership, this is a dishonest, or at least cynical, instrumentalisation of music for nefarious purposes.

Many dictatorships have supported easy-to-digest commercial music and hindered the spread of music that challenges the status quo, as exemplified in Turbofolk during the Bosnian War (Robertson, 2015; Čvoro, 2014). The reason for this is due to the potentially uncontrollable and unpredictable aspect of musical affect on a population, since things that affect behavior in uncontrollable and unpredictable manners are dangerous at worst or at the very least risky for any state. Western democratic states lack the explicit powers available to dictators and despots, but state and commercial institutions in these contexts tend to appropriate meanings attached to music through the process of commodification (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). Music that embodies a challenge to the state, once commodified, can satisfy the desire to challenge by those that consume music as a product without actually challenging the state; commodification of music can effectively neuter the change potential of musical experience. One example of this is how the Moroccan monarchy averted an Egyptian or Tunisian-style uprising in 2011–2012 by actively promoting hip hop and heavy metal music that had been previously associated with the revolutionary February 20th Movement. By doing so, the monarchy disassociated the music from the movement and the movement effectively lost its voice (Robertson, 2015). This is a form of conflict management but not of a mutually beneficial variety, since one or more sides to the actual and potential conflict are circumvented, suppressed, diverted or otherwise prevented from equalities.

Pressure groups attempt to influence decisions made by MPs in parliament who, in turn, need to respond to the needs (or perceptions thereof) of their constituents. Music organisations which have particular needs should therefore be talking to each other more and creating lobbies in the same way as was mentioned about the inquiry on live music venues. For example, Nordoff Robbins and the University of Leeds have developed the Music for Healthy Lives Research and Practice Network. This network at present includes researchers, practitioners and healthcare providers in West Yorkshire, but perhaps they should also be tracking common concerns within this network and partnering with other networks and organisations with similar concerns, discovering MPs who have personal stories and connections with these concerns, and collectively providing lobbies and pressure in order to raise the issue with the DCMS or the appropriate select committee. Furthermore, Norma Daykin has begun to explore the notion of music and the arts as a “social movement” where distinct areas of activity operate in community settings that focus on the concerns of the people involved rather than the agendas of outside forces and policies (Daykin, 2019).

CS mentioned that MPs might look to the evidence base and research to support and inform their policy decisions, but this information is usually not written for non-expert audiences (CS, 2018). Since this can lead to lack of commitment to enact music policy, it seems sensible, therefore, for organisations or collectives to create policy papers based on empirical evidence highlighting whatever common issues they need to make it easier for MPs to engage with the issues. Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy UK, for one, has already begun this process. Nordoff Robbins now has a policy paper on music and mental health, education, digital health and dementia, with future plans to develop policies on the social value of music and social prescribing. What is currently not known is who else has similar policy papers and how could they cooperate to amplify the messages in all policy papers? Who should partner together and how can music and society researchers work together to advocate for policy change to enable the greater use of music in healthcare provision, for example? Another aspect that needs to be considered is how to effectively communicate these organisational policies to parliamentary policy makers. CS has suggested that arts organisation policies such as those mentioned above need to be communicated in the language of the policy maker (CS, 2018), and this is supported by a report on measuring cultural value to the DCMS (O’Brien, 2010).

According to CS, personal stories and personal connections historically seem to have the greatest influence upon MP policy decisions, so no matter the evidence, it is this angle that music and society researchers collectively should be working towards. CS’s paper mentions that this sort of personal narrative can be difficult to include in academic discourse, but then it begs the question what is the academic discourse on music and society intended to do, if anything? If the ultimate aim is to enact change based on academic research to some degree, or enable the practice of music to flourish in certain settings, then it follows that this personal narrative needs to shine through the academic discourse to create the sort of engagement and impact with MPs that is required in order to influence policy, which will in turn enable further practice and research. In fact, research on the ways that research is communicated the most effectively would be useful here. One only has to look back to 2015 during Prime Minister’s Questions and Jeremy Corbyn’s use of personal stories to highlight policy concerns to see how effective these narratives can be (see https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/16/corbyn-puts-voters-questions-to-cameron-in-first-pmqs).
Value for money, which is always a concern for MPs, is very difficult to provide when discussing music and society. CS states that music research needs to be “demonstrating that the inputs required by a policy equate to the value of the outcomes it delivers” (2018). This is a key message that needs unpacking. Ian Cross’s paper provides one way to address this, but more on that later. Another potential way to frame value for money is through the notion of prevention.

How can music and prevention, broadly speaking, provide value for money by reducing the need for healthcare services, incarceration levels and/or conflicts? And how are power relations played out in such activities? What are the potential future issues by operationalising music in this way? This is something that Nordoff Robbins used as a theme for its research workshop in April 2019, which has led to the development of a Music and Prevention research network and a series of seminar events, the first of which occurred in 2020 (https://www.nordoff-robbins.org.uk/research-projects/music-education-and-prevention-seminar-event/).

Regarding the inquiry into the social impact of music: first, how does this get communicated and who is invited to provide evidence? Secondly, this is another reason to provide policy papers on all the issues that any organisation engages with ready for these instances or pressuring for the inquiries to start in the first place. It would be useful to know a little more about the process of how these inquiries get decided upon.

Then there is the discussion about value. CS discusses value for money and how this is measured against predefined outcomes. It is mentioned how these might be incompatible with music. If that is the case, then it is how we define value that is in question. Again, Cross’s paper addresses this to a significant degree (Cross, 2018). Crossick and Kaszynska’s report from the AHRC Cultural Value Project suggests that the arts in general should be valued by benefit analysis, and they have suggested a Cultural Value Observatory be established to track this cultural value over time (2016, p.7), rather than through a cost-benefit analysis, and they have suggested a Cultural Value Observatory to track this cultural value over time (2016, p.10).

If music is controlled by state policy, will it lose what we value about music? This is an important question that CS posed and it leads to another question: is it possible to have a state policy on music that satisfies the dominant discourse? Since the dominant discourse requires certain types of evidence that music is unlikely to easily provide for the reasons I just mentioned, I think it would be more effective to attempt to influence the dominant discourse. Changing the narrative around the purposes and effects of music could sway public opinion and spark the passions of individual MPs to accept other forms of value, perhaps.

Cross then proceeds to discuss the role of aesthetics and elite strong ties networks. In my own past research, I was part of a project that researched the role of the arts in social change during the so-called Arab Spring (Robertson, 2015). At the University of York in 2012, a small team went to Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco and we interviewed dozens of artists, curators, directors, musicians, conductors, policy makers and so on. In Tunisia, in particular, there was a strong western classical music scene that was left over from Italian colonialism. During the uprisings, several classical musicians were becoming increasingly despondent about their own art and profession. What did it mean to be a western classical musician in the face of such social change? What did the elite institutions that controlled the professional music classes that were state-supported mean? What was the role of the classical musician in such a time and place? There was no real answer, as it turns out, but there was a feeling that this form of elite western music was less relevant to Tunisian society in that moment. Having said that, the state was clamping down on certain forms of expression during this time, such as hip hop. It left classical music alone, as classical music was felt to be safe, unchallenging to the status quo. This created a space that allowed groups of people with challenging social agendas to congregate and discuss politics without fear. If the state had believed this was possible, it would likely have clamped down on this form of music as well. This illustrates how social behavior in and around musical

Music may even become a political pawn, a policy area that can be traded away for progress in another topical issue in a near future. Thus, a question with which I leave you, and one I hope to discuss with you at the workshop, is whether we want this for music at all. (CS 2018)

Music is already being used in this way to a degree, as already mentioned.

The next paper by Ian Cross goes some way to address many of the questions raised thus far.

Do we know the social effect of music? This is the first question posed by Cross’s position paper. The problem with this question is that it often assumes that there is an input/output, cause/effect relationship to be somehow observed in music. In my own research on music and conflict, and therefore music and social change or music and the maintenance of the status quo, meaning is attributed to musical experiences, which in turn has the potential to affect behaviors (Robertson, 2014). How does this is through a complex set of inter-related relationships between identities, memories, emotions and beliefs and the musical experience itself. This of course is in constant flux as well, since any change in any part of the system affects the rest of the system. There are not facts to establish that are immutable and immovable, but processes to understand and influences to trace.

Cross raises the issue of values. Do we align our arguments to the dominant value discourse or do we attempt to change the dominant discourse? Since the dominant discourse requires certain types of evidence that music is unlikely to easily provide for the reasons I just mentioned, I think it would be more effective to attempt to influence the dominant discourse. Changing the narrative around the purposes and effects of music could sway public opinion and spark the passions of individual MPs to accept other forms of value, perhaps.
experiences is influenced by what these experiences are believed to mean. There is no direct causal relationship where musical phenomenon A always results in outcome B.

Cross discusses how cultural heritage plays a role in sustaining and promoting group, national and regional identities. How is this controlled and what are the implications? What cultural symbols and musics are soft-censored by not being included in state promotion of music and identity? Furthermore, what does it say about a culture that wishes to commemorate histories that are complicit and active in past atrocities and colonialism? Does the music of that era perhaps at times represent these atrocities and power relations? If so, are they appropriate to continue to be supported at all in today’s climate for social, cultural and economic reasons?

For example, is Beethoven really a rapist, as “new” musicologist Susan McClary claimed a few decades ago, with the dominant masculine thematic material always committing violence to the secondary feminine themes, culminating in an orgy of patriarchal control (McClary, 1991)? Does Wagner really represent racist attitudes and proto-Nazi feelings (Hoeckner, 2007)? If so, do they have any place in our society now?

Having gone through some of these discussion points, I think it is important to remember that music does not have agency, people do. What people do with music is based on the meanings they attach to the music. The process of this meaning making is context-dependent, so the exact same phenomenon experienced at different times and places with different people will invariably result in different results in terms of emotional affect, social responses and so on. This in itself can explain the lack of positive results gained by the type of research that is considered to be “robust” within the medical hierarchy of evidence, such as RCTs. I want to leave this discussion with an example that illustrates this well.

Over a century ago, Egypt was under British rule. Egyptian nationalist leaders, such as Mustafa Kamal Pasha, began to gain inroads with the population and public opinion was turning against the colonial overlords. During this time, poet and musician Sayed Darwish wrote what appeared to be a love song for his country: “Bilady Bilady Bilady”—My Country, My Country, My Country (Robertson, 2015). The music was a mixture of classical Arabic music with local Egyptian folk inflections. The lyrics essentially were demonstrations of love for Egypt, but the hidden in plain sight meaning was: We the people love OUR country, which, by the way, is not YOUR country—of course, referring to the British. The song became very much associated with Egyptian nationalist consciousness and was extremely popular. Decades later, when the Egyptian government was experiencing domestic unrest in the late 1970s, the state adopted “Bilady” as its national anthem. The same melody, structure, and lyrics suddenly became a tool for the state, sending the message that the state was the country, and that no one could love its citizens and country more than the state, thus creating a state-controlled narrative of national identity through the music. Fast forward to 2011 in Tahrir Square. The collective singing that provided the soundtrack to the downfall of Hosni Mubarak was “Bilady,” yet again. The same physical phenomenon in terms of sound vibrations, the same musical content and materiality, the same lyrical content and language usage, in three different contexts, separated by generations and employed for different purposes, had attached to it three different meanings. These meanings were understood by the participants in different ways, thus influencing their thoughts, feelings and behaviors in different manners as well. This clearly illustrates how RCTs cannot hope to explain this narrative influence that musical experience can afford. Instead, relational and interpretive social research in this area would give us a rich insight into the meanings and values different groups and individuals attach to different musical experiences in different contexts.

I was inspired by the book series I read recently by popular historian Yuval Noah Harari called *Sapiens* (Harari, 2014) and *Homo Deus* (Harari, 2016). The first was a potted history of humanity and the second was projecting this into the future. One of his main points is that what sets us apart from other species is our capacity for mass cooperation, and this mass cooperation, beyond personal and family and tribal ties, is only possible because we have the capacity to believe in collective fictions. These collective fictions include religions, but also group identities, nationalism and ideologies such as communism and capitalism, and even the notion of human rights. I would even go as far as to say this could apply to the belief in the power of music. Music itself has no power or agency, but we believe it does, and that belief is the motivating force for action as we attach that meaning to the phenomenon.

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Notes
1. The author will remain anonymous to protect their identity since they were not permitted to publish views about their working practices publicly.
2. Narrative here refers to the stories people tell about themselves over time, while discourse refers to the manner in which people speak. For a more detailed explanation of narratives as stories, see Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. Critical Inquiry, 18(1), 1–21.
3. 3. https://musicforhealthylives.org/
4. There are three other seminar events planned but they were put on hold in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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