

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

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TRANSCRIPT

Musicians without Borders - Lis Murphy and Emmanuela Yogolelo

IAN RITCHIE: It gives me very great pleasure to introduce Lis Murphy and Emmanuela Yogolelo. They are going to take it in turns, sharing the platform, to talk about the work that they have been doing which Lis leads as artistic director of Musicians without Borders here in the UK. Lis has been a very long-standing colleague of mine and even longer standing of Nigel as first pupil and then as fellow worker in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Emmanuela hails from the Democratic Republic of Congo, she has not been able to be there since 2003, but her background is in internal and international law, and is now the lead singer of the wonderful music project the Beating Wing Orchestra but I will hand over now to Lis.

LIS MURPHY: Thanks, Ian. Thank you so much for inviting us to come and talk to you today. I want to look at connecting some of the themes and topics from yesterday, look at music and how music can be used as a positive transformative change to people who have been affected by trauma, but also within our work of the artistic responses, and the creative works of people who we work with, both in the UK and across the world.

So just to introduce myself, a little bit about my background. As Ian says, I was a student at Edinburgh University, under Nigel Osborne. I wasn't one of those disciplined committed students who could spend eight hours a day on my own playing my fiddle and singing, so when I finished with my music degree, the world was opened up to me and I didn't really know where to go with it. A job opportunity came up to work out in Bosnia, running a schools project with local musicians, connected to a music therapy department, and also an academic school there. So I went out with my fiddle and my voice, and my passion, and it's basically been a huge transformative part of my life.

The thing that really stuck with me, as soon as I arrived, was the unbelievably awful atrocities that had happened within these communities there and how it had affected not just the buildings and the bridges and everything but actually the whole community had been traumatised. We were working with young children, with children of all ages, the team that I was working with were people of my age, in their early 20s, who had either been child soldiers, who had been in prison as conscientious objectors, who had been in concentration camps, and for me as such a young age, this was a really shocking thing to start thinking about and imagining what had happened to the people I was then working with on a daily basis. So I became very interested and curious about how the people that I was working with, how they had actually managed to survive, not just physically, but mentally, through the experiences that they had had with these two different wars over a five-year period. There was one particularly amazingly inspiring musician who I met out there, who was a Sevdah

musician, that is the traditional Bosnian folk music that has influences from Islam, from klezmer, Jewish music, gypsy music as well as orthodox Christian communities. I was chatting to him one day, it was very casual, we were having a drink in the pub, and he said one day he got so bored of fighting, he couldn't be bothered any more, that's how he put it, he couldn't stand it, so he decided he was going to trade his gun for a guitar, and he then used to sit and risk his life on the frontline to play music, and that was his kind of choice, whether it was a protest, or whether he was just bored of fighting, I'm sure there was more to it than that, but this, for me, was a really strong amazing individual kind of act of, you know, how music can become more important than fighting a so-called enemy that you have been put into a situation to do.

So I lived out in Bosnia for a couple of years, came back, did a few other jobs working with refugees and asylum seekers and I was very, very keen to continue with the work, using music as a powerful transformative way of reducing trauma within different communities in Bosnia but also with refugees and asylum seekers who had come from conflict zones all over the world to this country. I met with Ian; Ian and I had worked out in Bosnia, he was running a charity out there, so I asked him, how do you set up a charity? I have no idea, but that's what I want to do. Ian introduced me to an amazing lady based in the Netherlands called Laura Hassler, she founded the organisation Musicians without Borders in response to the Kosovan war, a group of musicians had gone out there to see what they could do in the immediate aftermath of the Kosovan War, to use music in a positive way to start rebuilding communities. Music was found to be an incredibly powerful thing, that there was a huge need for, the way that music was used as well, the therapeutic way that music was used, and from that, an organisation developed. So Musicians without Borders is international now, we have a rock school in Mitrovica, in Kosovo. We have training projects, samba projects, rap projects in Palestine. We have a recent rock school in Mostar, engaging young people from both sides of the city, from different ethnicities, and gypsy Roma children as well. We also have projects in Rwanda, working with youth with HIV.

We see the methodology as three stages of how music can be used in a transformative way. The first stage is in the immediate aftermath of war, the immediate trauma, so the very sort of transformative power of music through either singing or just gentle breathing exercises, through movement, through body percussion, through changing the heart rate, changing the breathing, changing the hormone levels. Music can have a very positive effect in the immediate aftermath of trauma, in reducing the stress. A lot of feedback we get from our projects is for that moment, or the hour or two hours that people have been doing the music, they're almost in a different zone, they are not thinking about problems or the past. The next stage that we look at is actually how we can bring communities together in a positive way. So in Kosovo, there was an amazing story, last year - we have two schools there, because the children can't actually meet in their city, so we have a rock school with the Albanians and a rock school with the Serbs and we take them to another country for them to meet and form bands together. There was a story last year where a Musicians without Borders staff member had seen a group of young people with their guitars and backpacks walking across the bridge in the city, and this is never done, this is very dangerous, it's not something that happens, so the Musicians without Borders staff went up to the group and said, what are you doing, "We want to go and jam with our mates, we met in summer school, we have been communicating by Facebook and pirate radio, we just

want to get together and be normal kids and play music". This is one of these instances, just a tiny event, the way it was expressed by the young people was so casual, but in itself it's a huge, huge thing, the wanting to play music becomes more important than the divides, the history, the past and what's happened and it's a really positive way forward.

The third phase that Musicians without Borders looks at is around non-violence. We work with an amazing organisation in Palestine called Holy Land Trust and they specialise in non-violence training. Unfortunately I wasn't able to come to the conference yesterday but I'm sure that there was a lot of talk about post-traumatic stress disorder, and how sometimes that can, the violence that either by the perpetrator or victim or by observer or witness, affects human beings in such a way that then it can increase the violence, either within the home or within the communities. Within Palestine, we work with groups to look at actually what is violence, is domestic violence ever acceptable, is it acceptable to hit children, and a lot of this habitual thinking is not questioned and it's just part of this stress that's in the body, that then spills out into the rest of the community, so for us that's a really important part of our work.

I set up Musicians without Borders in the UK three years ago, the majority of the work we have been doing here is with refugee and asylum seeker communities and with torture survivors as well. One particular project we have is called Stone Flowers, I'm going to show you the DVD at the end, which is where the quote ("Imagine a world without war" Song Lyric by Rita, torture survivor from DR Congo) comes from here. This is a severely traumatised group of people from all over, Iran, Sri Lanka, Cameroon, Iraq, we have a lot of Kurdish people and it was set up in response to the use of music as an actual form of torture in Guantanamo Bay. There was an article in the Musicians' Union magazine about this and a colleague of ours, Aidan Jolly, was very upset about this, so he approached Freedom from Torture. We work with that group, to use music as a positive way to support people who have been through these unbelievable experiences of torture.

EMMANUELA YOGOLELO: Hello, my name is Emmanuela and I guess, when you leave here, what you will retain from my speech will just to emphasise the positive effects of music on people who have experienced trauma of wars in their lives but also to say that I know, we know it, that it's not like only soldiers who will suffer from traumas of wars, but also civilians, including people like asylum seekers and refugees.

I come from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa. I don't know if you know, my country has been in war for over ten years now and the United Nations has been calling my country the world capital of rape, and also one of the worst places to be a woman in the world. Basically, life had become impossible in my country, I had to leave my country. It wasn't like a plan, it wasn't like a choice, if I was talking in terms of plan, my plan was never to leave my continent, my country. I was studying, I was working, and my plan was to live in my country for all my life, I could go out only maybe for holidays or something, I have never planned to leave my country or my family, to become an asylum seeker or a refugee, but for reasons of life, realities of war and atrocities, I had to leave my country and become an asylum seeker, a refugee. When I first got here, I was so traumatised that I spent my two first years having

counseling, and it definitely helps a lot, but nothing helps me to overcome the horror of wars that I have experienced back home like music, because I had my counselors maybe for maximum one hour per week, so after that one hour, they leave me on my own, but then I couldn't even speak the little English that I can speak now, I didn't know people, I couldn't go to college to study, to work, that's in itself was enough depression for me. But I always had music with me. Because with a CD player or without the CD player, music is there. You can listen to music, you can sing yourself, you can just listen to what's going on in a room or outside, it's still a kind of music, so music is all the time there with you and for you, and also you know music sometimes it understands you better than other people or other things. Music won't judge your English, or the reason for what you are in this country and so on.

So music really helped me a lot, because I couldn't speak English, my first language is Swahili and besides Swahili I can speak French because that is the official language in my country. So if and when I wanted to say something, to express my feelings, to give my opinions, it was quite difficult, because I can't speak English. Or people, because we are from a different culture and background, it's not that easy to understand me, but with music, I can just sit down, and write a song, expressing my feelings, expressing my thoughts, and it's liberating, because sometimes keeping too much for yourself is not healthy but even if people are listening to it, but you have just taken it out, it is already a step further to your healing. And that's how I started to go out, to leave the house, I started to meet people, until the day I came across a music project, community organisations, artistic initiatives, then I discovered that I can sing, I can write songs, I can lead musical projects and so on.

So definitely music changed first of all my own life, because when I am singing, when I am listening to nice music, it may make me cry but it is a healthy cry, because sometimes you just need to take all those toxins out of you, even through tears and crying, so it helps me. When I am doing like vocal exercises, warm-ups, breathing, it's helped me to relax more, it's helped like my heart beating, it has helped my head and actually I started to think, if I can manage to write a piece that I can perform to an audience and they like it, I can still have some control, some power, that means I can just translate it to my own life, because if I can manage to create a whole piece, it means I can also manage to create a new life for myself, and you know, that reality has like a positive spirit, it has like a new force, and those are the effects of music in my own life, it's given me inspiration, it's given me courage, I can believe again, I can trust again, I can try again and so on.

That is how I came across the organisation Musicians without Borders, and we have been working with different people, in different projects, we work in primary schools, we work in community centres, we work with victims of torture, we work with aid, and last time we were working in a primary school, and it was during the refugee week, and we were just bringing awareness around the subject of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, immigration and so on, and when I was talking to them about the wars back home in my country, the kids, they will go like, "So, who won that war? Who had the victory? Who won the war?" and I think personally I don't believe in war, people should be talking or even thinking of like winning or losing, because I don't think there is anyone who could win in a war, because as we say, after a war, the group supposed to have won, okay they have won, but the effect of war they have been through, what they have seen, that's the effect that lives in them. I don't see that's

like a victory, because at the end of the day it is just traumas which people are left with, so in the first place, if it was possible, maybe it's just a dream, there shouldn't be war, because you are thinking, we are fighting for some cause, we are fighting for this and that but at the end of the day it's become even worse, so for personally I believe in the first place there shouldn't be even war.

So, I was talking about effects of war on people who have experienced traumas, and also I have been telling you about like it's not only soldiers who are affected by wars, also civilians are, civilians like asylum seekers, refugees and so on.

LIS MURPHY: We spent a long time with Freedom from Torture talking about how this music project might work. The participants who come from the Freedom from Torture centre, they receive counselling and support from Freedom from Torture. We were told that for some people to actually even be in a room for more than two minutes without being so anxious that they would have to leave again was a reality of life. Often people will disassociate and become completely separate from what's going on in reality, they will be having flash backs about the traumatic experiences they have been through, a lot of the women in particular had experienced sexual violence, and so we started off with a group of men and women working separately and we went in just with the aim of bringing some kind of calming energy, so calming breathing exercises and so on, to see how that would work, and where it would lead the group.

We are now in the third year of the project and we work with 25 torture survivors every week and we have actually found that the transformation within each individual has been absolutely incredible, and Freedom from Torture have also said that for some of their clients, music has had more effect than counselling, any of the counselling services that they offered, and I think that's partly to do with the way that we use music. We will go in and work with a group on a completely equal basis of equality of language, of culture, and so on. And we'll work together to write songs. And just to bring it back to the at the beginning of my talk, where I was interested in this human spirit and the mental survival and not only to get through these unbelievably traumatic situations but how to still come to the other side of it, and this might sound like a huge cliché but I think this for me is the fundamental thing about human beings and the human capacity for forgiveness and for survival, is that people who have had the most unbelievable things done to them by other human beings still have the capacity for hope, still have the capacity for compassion, and still have the capacity that they want to change the world to be a better place. And for me, that's something that I'm really interested in.

I just want to bring it back to the quote here, again, this was an off the cuff quote that somebody within our session said, and we then turned it into a song, and I thought about it and I thought, "Actually, I have never imagined a world where there's no war, I've always just accepted that that is part of life, part of the human existence", but I think it was Albert Einstein actually said, "Imagination is everything, it is the preview of life's coming attractions", so if we as individuals, as communities, as fathers, as brothers, as sisters, as mothers, as daughters, cannot even conceive of a world where war doesn't exist then it's not going to happen. I think for me, the message of trauma is why does trauma exist? Because it's the human body's way of screaming out to us that these genocides, atrocities and organised violence and so on is not a good thing

for us. So I want to leave with a question really of is it possible for us to even imagine a world without war, and if that's too philosophically huge, what would happen if we all just took responsibility for the transformation of one person, whether it be ourselves or somebody within our community, changing from an act of violence, converting that into an act of non-violence, what would happen then? So I just want to leave you with that, and I'd like to play you this song, that we wrote with the group, as you'll see - so these are beginner musicians, people who have never done music before, a severely traumatised group of people, who was a performance we did last year, called a "Imagine a world without war".

FLOOR: This is a question primarily for Lis. I was interested to hear that one of the inspirations for this project was reports of music being used as a method of torture. I wanted to ask, particularly in the regions you have been talking about where you have worked in, are also regions where it is documented that music has been used as a method of torture and ill-treatment, where also music and musicians have been implicated in promoting or accompanying the atrocities taking place in the conflicts. I wonder if that is something you have to address in the work that you do with survivors of the trauma of these conflicts, and potentially the torture survivors who have had to experience some forms of music torture in their own countries?

LIS MURPHY: With the clients we work with through Freedom from Torture, when we originally started the project, we thought that might be the case that there would be some people who had actually experienced that use of music as torture, but so far we have worked with about 45 clients over the last two to three years and there hasn't been anybody who has actually experienced that. With the article I read about it, the majority of that was done in Guantanamo Bay.

FLOOR: I'm involved in a research project, there is another researcher here doing a lot of work on a specific case in Chile. We have established that music torture can be forced singing and forcing people to listen to music and forcing people to do exercise while there is music in the background. It is very, very widespread and has a long history. In the talk earlier on when some of the positive impacts of music in the concentration camps, it was also very much linked to the Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz, also had to accompany acts of torture; so it is a very, very widespread issue. I was wondering if it was something you had encountered it in the project, not just with torture survivors but in these other regions where is music became symbolic of different fighting factions, to the extent of being used to humiliate prisoners of war for example and I wondered was it an issue coming up in any of your projects?

LIS MURPHY: Particularly with the Freedom from Torture project, we have a way of working there where we have a clinical psychologist working with us during the sessions, so it's myself and another musician, and two refugee musicians, and Freedom from Torture have the confidentiality of their clients and so we are only informed of certain things that would effect a particular session or that we need to be aware about of a particular person who was there. Because we are using music, if it had come up into the sessions, with the particular projects we were running, we would have been made aware of it. In terms of work elsewhere, my experience is mainly in Bosnia, and a little in Palestine, and it is not something I have come across yet, but it is also not something we have done any research on or asked questions about, so it

might be with other members of our team internationally they may well have come across that.

FLOOR: I would just like to bring everybody's attention to the Royal Philharmonic Society's honorary membership awards this year. If you hadn't noticed, the Royal Philharmonic Society awarded five honorary memberships to people in different parts of the world who have made a huge difference to their different societies often through difficult conflict situations through music. One was in Afghanistan, and hello Jemima, it is Cathy here, and that is Ahmad Sarmast who runs the Afghan Institute of Music, which is Afghanistan's first Music School; quite an achievement considering that music was banned during the Taliban. It was very interesting hearing Jemima talk about the manifestation of popular music which is absolutely fantastic, but very sad to see that people are having to leave the country to make a career in music and also that there are death threats for women. The work that Ahmad is doing in the school will hopefully start to change the situation in the country because he's tackling that kind of thing head-on, working with the Ministry for Education. Jemima probably knows much more about this than I do; I was in Kabul for five days, but I have spoken to Ahmad quite a lot. Part of his work is to try to get music to be accepted as a profession. Because at the moment intellectual property, the fact that musicians should get paid for what they do, is far from being accepted. The other thing that he does in his school is he's aiming to have 50% girls, 50% boys and 50% war orphans, so that is something that is bubbling around in the background that can hopefully change the situation that Jemima was talking about. One of the other people who won one of these awards was Armand Diangienda from Kinshasa, who set up a Symphony Orchestra from scratch, I think over the last ten years. If you look at the Royal Philharmonic Society's website and put in "music transforms lives", you will see little videos of the work of these two people in their countries. When I heard him speak, the story he told that there were no instruments, and they actually had to make their own and when the violin strings broke they had to improvise using bicycle brake wire, until it started cutting the children's fingers. It actually makes you realise just how powerful music is and the difference it makes to people in difficult situations.

FLOOR: Could Lis take us back to the remarkable ensemble piece, which I thought was amazing, and could she tell us a little bit more about the way in which that was put together, the words and music, the instruments, how you got all those performers together, how much rehearsal was involved, and what went into making that terrific piece?

LIS MURPHY: That performance you saw there was celebrating International Peace Day last year, September 21st, so this was the second year of the project. The first year was in 2011. We started with six taster sessions with separate men and women's groups because Freedom from Torture were very clear about the fact that the initial thing that we had to do was create a safe environment that people would feel comfortable in. It was felt that because some of the women had experienced sexual violence it wouldn't be appropriate to have them in a room with men. Freedom from Torture were also very kind of cautious and a little bit sceptical about actually whether anyone would perform or not at all. We always had it in mind and we were sure it was going to happen, we just didn't know how.

So the first exercise was just very much around singing songs that I have learned and loved from different cultures. Emmanuela is a really important part of the team because she not only acts as an interpreter in Swahili, Lingala and French, but she also has the musical background and culture from some of the areas that the people we are working with are from. We also have a Cameroonian musician who acts as an interpreter. So we would start off by bringing songs and we would encourage the group to bring songs that they would like; this is quite often how Musicians without Borders works, in drop-in centres and so on. We will get people to write down their songs, we will find them on YouTube, listen to it, try and learn it, bring it back, and get them to teach us phonetically the words and then learn it as a group, maybe just the chorus. Then, once the group has become a bit more comfortable with each other, are responding better to instructions and participating musically, or just with percussion and a little bit of singing, we will then start the creative process.

We will do a lyric-writing session where we talk about any themes, we invite people to sing about anything they want to sing about. In the first year it was very much about love, hope, positivity and joy. A couple of people were religious as well, so there were songs about God. Then what we would do is take those ideas and then start to work on melodies, take the shape of the language and then play things, ask them if that what they were wanting; do you want it fast or slow; structure it, asking people to write poems that would thematically match with another song, part of which had already been written, and then bring that together. Our job as facilitators was to try and generate as many creative ideas from the participants and then we will bring all those together and put it into a structure that makes sense musically and really work on the performance.

With that one, it was really quite last minute; by the time of the performance we didn't have the arrangements clearly defined. We had sort of rehearsed but not really. We didn't know who was going to turn up, at what time and which week, sometimes one person would be there but not in the next week. We had to have a Plan B and Plan C if they weren't there. The key thing was, that on the day people watched me and I would mouth to them what was coming up and we would keep fingers crossed and hoped that it works. I think that piece we are pretty proud of it. There are quite a lot of different languages. We think about every single individual in the group and what their contribution will be, either by writing lyrics, or by singing a solo, by introducing a song, by a percussion solo, by having their language represented – that is really important.

FLOOR: I really appreciated your talks, both of you. I'm again lobbing in an idea, partly inspired by what Stephen said this morning, and some of the things you said which I have written down, for example things like you said, Emmanuela, "taking the toxins out of me"; Lis said "music that takes you into a different zone". The idea that the body is screaming out, traumatised. I'm interested in this idea, maybe it can be discussed later, the comparison between music and medicine. There are debates about proactive intervention as opposed to a reactive medicine. The opportunity to actually intervene early, compared with actually dealing with the symptoms and the damage. Music follows on a bit from what I said yesterday about words and about maybe communicating people on a different level in a different zone. This idea that maybe music has something that words don't; diplomats don't, politicians don't have

the language to be able to intervene and to relate to people on a totally different level in a totally different zone but proactive, not reactive early intervention.

IAN RITCHIE: Thank you very much for that. Just finally, Jemima, did you want to say anything about the different art forms that you have experienced? Your own specialism of visual art, of music as well. Are there different art forms that naturally come to the fore in different situations, as far as you can tell, country by country? Or are all art forms equally valid?

JEMIMA MONTAGU: Well I think that one of the things that we grapple with in our work at Culture+Conflict is that the role of culture and the different manifestations of cultures, different forms of culture, work very differently obviously in different places and we often look at what you might call a spectrum between the sort of social or functional value of art, obviously the very, very powerful therapeutic role it can play in certain instances. To the role of art as something that is more about every day experience. It is about participating, international culture, it is done, you might say, in an art for art's sake approach. In all art forms you get both things. But I think the therapeutic role of the arts is a little bit easier to track and identify in forms like music and theatre. It's slightly less easy, say, in the visual arts where objects are open to interpretation in different ways. But it is less obviously a form that you construct as a therapeutic tool.