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Global Music Politics: Whose Playlist for Troubled Times?

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‘IMAGINE’ THIS

Think about a piece of music that you consider “political” and why.

FROM THE ‘AGE OF AQUARIUS’ TO THE ‘ANTHROCENE’

Our new age, which the United Nations recognizes as the Anthropocene, has seen a confluence of planetary emergencies, measured in geological time (millions of years), experienced in social time (centuries if not decades), and communicated in computerized time (fractions of a second). With the accelerating degradation of the natural world as a visual backdrop, a new genus of political movement has also come of age, on the streets and online: Black Lives Matter and Me Too; Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados in Spain, and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey; the School Strike for Climate and Extinction Rebellion. These have all been active in recent years, along with various other anti-government, pro-democracy protests, as well as populist platforms identifying with the right.

The performing and audio-visual arts, and music in particular, are inseparable from these trends—the arts have always been intertwined with politics. Musicians engage with current events at home and abroad as creative artists and citizens, according to their own consciences. States and multilateral institutions commission, co-opt, and program a variety of music for diverse agendas. Musicians make music “political” through beats, rhythms, the sound mix, collaborations across

genres, innovations, and retrievals of older traditions, with and without overtly political lyrics. Musicians have also been organizers of media spectacles for social causes, as when Irish rock star Bob Geldof assembled global celebrities and “world music” exponents for the 1985 Live Aid concerts to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia, broadcast live on satellite television.

Making, distributing, and consuming music has been big business since the start of the recording industry, with techno-commercial stakes intersecting geopolitical and cultural vested interests. These interests have taken on digital networked dimensions that span the globe. Much of the world hears and accesses music nowadays through digital devices and Internet distribution channels that are owned and controlled by the age’s new “major labels”: live-streaming and recording conglomerates that provide “unlimited” access to a vast range of music, new and old. Access and delivery are premised on “cloud” archiving and digital automation of our “likes” and other online listening habits. Musicians, like politicians, are increasingly beholden to these individualized *and* planetary algorithms to reach their publics.

‘12XU’

Making music has been an integral part of all human societies and continues to thrive without the web’s streaming services and their automated “recommendations.” Musics are embedded in everyday life, spiritual contemplation, and displays of sovereign power. Music making encompasses the whole world, as a “global” activity, despite the predominance of Western, English-speaking pop and classical genres in music research and marketing. The traditions and innovations of world-majority populations in other languages and musical idioms, commercially

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tagged as “world” or “global” music, are now increasingly accessible through the latest technological shifts in how music travels.

Those who “make it” in the Western-dominated global music market—such as musicians of the Tuareg peoples, like Mdou Moctar, with their electric guitar-driven Saharan “desert blues”—follow in the footsteps of African musicians whose global influence predates the shift online, and whose work is still audible today. “Discovered” and then promoted by the distribution power of Western major labels and music streaming affiliates, feted at festivals such as WOMAD, non-Western musicians who have walked the politics-music tightrope include the Nigerian afrobeat trailblazer Fela Kuti and the former UNICEF goodwill ambassador and Senegalese tourism minister Youssou N’Dour, whose trilingual hit (lyrics in French, English, and Wolof) with Neneh Cherry, “7 Seconds,” made him a household name around the world in 1994.

Seemingly apolitical, “soothing” musics from beyond the West carry their own political loads. Global bossa nova hits of the 1960s such as “*Garota de Ipanema*” (“The Girl from Ipanema”) vibrate with shifting sex-gender-race dynamics through their refashioning of the instrumentals, vocals, dynamics, and rhythms of the Afro-Caribbean samba. Originating in northeastern Brazil, the samba had traveled to Rio de Janeiro and then to Hollywood, personified by Carmen Miranda. Bossa nova presaged the multiracial musico-cultural vision of the *tropicália* movement in the 1960s, led by musicians who spent years in exile. Some returned to hold political office in post-dictatorship Brazil; Gilberto Gil, who served as minister of culture under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, is a case in point.

*Porousness between the political
and the musical is the rule,
not the exception.*

‘WHAT’S GOING ON’

Protest marches include music, and musicians take part in protests. Powerbrokers borrow from conventional playlists when programming music, while others look to control what new music is deemed acceptable for domestic and foreign policy purposes. Artists are not always in charge of these decisions. But how (any) music “works” in political ways—or, conversely, how (any) politics works in musical ways—is neither straightforward nor one-way.

First, consider the connotations and associations accompanying any music that becomes part of official and spontaneous public performance, rituals, and institutions recognizable as “high” politics. A piece of music, even a broad genre or spectacle, can become associated with moments of sociopolitical transformation or geopolitical tension. In these scenarios we can hear how musical works become politicized. As they hit the airwaves, social media platforms, and television screens, they resonate outward. Nina Hagen’s (“East German”) punk rendition, with additional German lyrics, of the Frank Sinatra crooner classic “My Way” in concerts celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 epitomizes such moments. The zeitgeist opened up with the collapse of the Soviet Union is often evoked through a playlist that includes hits from American (Bruce Springsteen) and German (the Scorpions) musicians.

The sound of many voices in the streets during the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement belting out “Do You Hear the People Sing?” from the musical of Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Misérables* is a more recent example. In 2022, the furor around the exclusion of Russia and the eyebrow-raising voting that saw a Ukrainian act win the Eurovision contest in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine encapsulated how porousness between the political and the musical is the rule, not the exception.

Second, musicians can become identified as politically significant as their music making comes to represent a formative event in the timeline of a nation, community, or region. One example is the Egyptian contralto Umm Kulthum (also rendered Oum Kalthoum), whose influence as a proponent of the *maqam* scales that form the basis of Arabic music making has been immeasurable, not only for Egyptian nationalism and its geostrategic role under President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, but also for Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian diasporas around the world.

Younger generations, born during or after the Lebanese Civil War, make another genus of multicultural popular music, on their own terms. One such group is Mashrou’ Leila, whose music defies easy categorization, challenging sectarianism and sex-gender stereotypes from “traditional” to “modern” Lebanon. The 2013 track “Lil Watan” evokes the Lebanese national anthem as it fuses

Western and Lebanese pop influences, while pushing back against the classical maqam-based melodies and vocals that Kulthum represents. Others embrace older musico-literary conventions while reshaping them. With the use of video montage, musical sampling, street art, and spoken word for the album and film entitled *Intersection* (2018), Lebanese musician and visual artist Tania Saleh celebrates how musicians, artists, poets, and writers have contributed to the cultural and religious (Christian, Copt, Muslim, and Jewish) diversity of the Levant.

'BORN IN THE USA'

Third, artists make explicit their social and political commitments through transformative musicality. The political message that “first generation” rap and hip-hop musicians like Public Enemy voice and sound through tracks such as “Fight the Power” is also a musical message: rhythmic delivery layered with sampling mixes that revolutionized American popular music through sonic juxtapositions.

Jay-Z repositions and samples from Paul Anka’s rendition of “My Way” (1974) in his “I Did It My Way” (2002), sounding the color bar that underwrites American public life and culture. By sonically impersonating and challenging racist stereotypes of hip-hop culture through his rhymes and the layered juxtaposition of rap beats and bass lines with Anka’s “My Way,” Jay-Z reimagines, in another idiom, the same song that Nina Hagen performed in 1989, in a way just as politically charged.

A fourth aspect of this music-politics intimacy is audible when powerholders deploy a work, a musical tradition or contemporary genre, or even an individual composer or artist for a strategic purpose. Powerholders can also seek to repress or silence music, if not reinvent a whole tradition. Governments have meddled in the arts both overtly and covertly throughout history. Sovereigns employ and favor musicians and composers; newly independent states and authoritarian leaders co-opt and champion traditional schools of music, folk but also classical, for national identity agendas. Digital networks, public or privately owned, are distribution channels in these overt and covert political maneuvers that now can make their way into commercial streaming playlists.

The same work, genre, countercultural movement, or “scene” can become attached to

competing political agendas and ideologies. These uses straddle the spectrum from public glorification to censure, physical harassment, legalized persecution, and enforced complicity. In one of the most chilling cases, the Nazis appropriated the musical oeuvre of Ludwig van Beethoven alongside that of the openly anti-Semitic Richard Wagner, while labeling the work of Jewish musicians and African American jazz as “decadent.”

'BACK IN THE USSR'

Stalin’s meddling with the life and work of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich is another example of state intervention in music. Shostakovich’s case is all the more poignant given the “Soviet” connotations that his work has acquired for concert programming and some publics in the post-Soviet Baltic states since then.

Wagner’s deeply contested place at the top of the classical art music hierarchy is also a matter of ongoing debate, given his posthumous contribution to Nazi ideology and public pageantry. Wagner’s work is informally banned in Israel, and Argentinian-Israeli conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim encountered raucous protest and public condemnation when he brought the overture to Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* to Israeli audiences in 2001. Barenboim has argued that a musician’s work can transcend associations with the most troubling political convictions and historical events.

Times change, as do public attitudes toward a musical work, musician, or musical culture or scene. The US State Department now embraces hip-hop, a global cultural export, as a twenty-first-century tool for cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, controversy continues over the CIA’s covert funding of an earlier project, the Congress of Cultural Freedom, during the Cold War and its “culture war” that pitted the aesthetic politics of (capitalism’s) “artistic freedom” against (communism’s) “socialist realism.” In another version of cultural diplomacy, the “Brit Pop” nation-branding of the Labour governments under Prime Minister Tony Blair at the turn of the millennium saw a generation of British musicians leveraged to succeed the global cultural legacy—and foreign-exchange value—of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other British Invasion bands from the 1960s.

Promotional exercises abroad can also coincide with public disapproval (as was the case with British punk bands in the 1970s) or government

crackdowns at home. Subcultures such as heavy/death metal and punk have been targets for authorities nervous about their influence on youth or public morals. But musicians straddle the demarcation lines between public acceptance and disapproval in ways that defy pigeonholing. Local contexts combine with global trends, such as the rise of religious fundamentalisms and culturally repressive governments. In Indonesia, punk scenes that embraced left-wing political agendas in the face of the religiously conservative governments of recent decades now include musicians who have rediscovered Islam. Heavy metal in Brazil has become a means for progressive expressions of political dissent in recent years, while Chinese punk scenes are subjected to social censure at home and stereotyping as inauthentic copycats abroad.

'ROCK THE CASBAH'

Do-it-yourself digital networks of music making, distribution, and fandom persist despite the inroads of commercial music streaming platforms into how much of the world hears, finds, or is "recommended" any music or performing artist. In this techno-economic context, it is a truism to observe that music and politics, like money and politics, are interconnected domains of power and influence. But there are heated debates about whether this relationship is a good thing for music as art, the aesthetics of Western tonality, or classical canons that populate the world's music streaming playlists. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II encapsulated such discussions in the song "Do Re Mi" from their 1959 musical, *The Sound of Music*, in which Western tonality as a particular progression of sounds is presented as a "very good place" to "start at the very beginning." Politics, however defined, does not always map so directly onto a musical work. Music works on multiple levels—emotional and political—along multidirectional trajectories of taste, marketing, digital networks, and educational and historical context.

Consider the case of one of Beethoven's best-known tunes, his setting of Goethe's "Ode to Joy" in the final movement of the Ninth Symphony (premiered in Vienna in 1824), which the European Union adopted as its anthem. In 2019, at the opening of the European Parliament in Brussels, a group of British members, from the

Brexit party that campaigned for the UK's withdrawal from the EU, staged a protest. At the opening bars of the "Ode to Joy," they stood and turned their backs to show their opposition to the EU's "federalist" project.

Wendy Carlos's synthesizer arrangement of the same movement, and the scenes it accompanies in *A Clockwork Orange*, Stanley Kubrick's 1972 film adapted from Anthony Burgess's novel, take this Beethoven work into multiple other dimensions from its regular programming in concerts commemorating the reunification of Germany or its role, since 1972, as the European anthem.

'YOUR REVOLUTION'

A comparable moment of anthemic music becoming a political lightning rod took place at the Mexico City Summer Olympics in 1968, when track and field medal winners Tommie Smith and John Carlos, with heads bowed, raised their fists in the Black Power salute on the podium as the US national anthem began to play. This public protest, televised live around the world, still resonates

through the global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement after mobile phone footage of George Floyd's murder by police officers in 2020 circulated online.

Between these two globally transmitted events, American football player Colin Kaepernick took a knee before games throughout the 2016 season, also as the national anthem began, to protest police killings of unarmed Black people. In these instances, both the "Ode to Joy" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," recognized by millions around the world, triggered and sounded political rifts.

No national anthem is neutral, nor is it supposed to be. But these tunes and their lyrics are in constant flux, as malleable as they are hard-wired, emotional crucibles for the "imagined community" of the nation-state. The avant-garde electronic composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and rock icon Jimi Hendrix intercepted these associations in two distinct ways in the 1960s. Stockhausen's pioneering electronic work *Hymnen* (German for *Anthems*) remixes dozens of national anthems at the cusp of recognition, from "The Star-Spangled Banner" to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the UK's "God Save the Queen," Germany's multiple anthems, and those of newly independent African nations, while the recurring chords of the Soviet (now Russian)

Commercial streaming technologies work to shape taste.

anthem resound as a “red thread” throughout the work. *Hymnen* still generates controversy about its political intentions, if not its artistic merit. Hendrix effected something comparable in his electric guitar improvisation on “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock, a performance that has listeners still debating what he was trying to say with his sonic transformation of the national anthem at the height of the Vietnam War.

There are also silences: what is implied, unheard, or unsung; what arrives in our “feed”; what music streaming algorithms “tag” for our recommended listening, or not. One anthem that Stockhausen did not include in the American suite in *Hymnen* was the Black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” composed between 1900 and 1905 by the brothers James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson. On the annual Juneteenth commemoration of the ending of slavery, Black communities and musicians, including global stars like Aretha Franklin, have sung this anthem recalling the history of enslavement and racial segregation underscoring “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.”

HAVE YOU HEARD?

Black South African musicians, such as singer Miriam Makeba and jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela, earned enduring global influence as they negotiated the complexities of life under apartheid, exile, and international careers as artists and activists. Makeba’s lifelong commitment to ending apartheid resonated with African American movements for social justice, and she paid the price with exile. She toured with Harry Belafonte to raise funds for civil rights causes, and promoted post-independence cultural and political agendas.

Ostensibly nonpolitical lyrics, such as those for “My Way,” can become a political vehicle, refashioned or performed in ways that outstrip the manifest content or redefine the social context, like Stevie Wonder’s “Happy Birthday.” Makeba’s hit “Pata Pata” (“Touch Touch”), released in 1967 and televised on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, works on similar levels. Singing in Swahili, Xhosa, and Sotho, Makeba is making a subtle point about the cultural and sexual politics of representation as much as she is evoking joy and fun.

Makeba’s contemporary, Nina Simone, was famously upfront about her political convictions, and eloquently vocal about the racial politics of the music industry and the education system. Simone’s back catalog—from “Mississippi Goddam” to

“Young, Gifted and Black”—reveals the depth of her political commitments, but so do her versions of the European music-theater repertoire and popular classics.

Simone is “musicking” politics through rhythm, beats, arrangements, and her keyboard playing and vocals. Listen, for instance, to her take on the repertoire of composer Kurt Weill and playwright Bertolt Brecht, such as the “Alabama Song” from their biting German political satire *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). Presaging Nina Hagen, Jay-Z, and others by some years, Simone also transports much-covered classics like “My Way” into another political sphere. With roots in gospel, blues, and Western classical repertoires, she embodies an understanding of how politics is always at work through “organizing sound,” as composer Edgard Varèse cryptically defined music.

In 1966, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Miriam Makeba, Langston Hughes, and many other Black cultural and political leaders were invited to Senegal to take part in the first Festival mondial des arts nègres (World Festival of Negro Arts). Hosted by one of the newly independent African nation-states, whose first president was the poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, this festival underscored the decolonization period in which African cultural leaders worked with African Americans to promote Black and Pan-African cultural and historical affiliations.

In South Africa, at the height of apartheid, such cultural exchanges became much more fraught. Here, too, musicians made their own way, recording and touring along the fault lines of “art for art’s sake,” cultural appropriation controversies, and international boycotts. Paul Simon’s album *Graceland* (1987) is inseparable from the contribution of the all-male a cappella group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, which introduced the world to Zulu vocal styles like *isicathamiya* and *mbube*. The hit track “Homeless,” cowritten by Simon and the group’s founder, Joseph Shabalala, and set to a traditional Zulu wedding song, became an anti-apartheid anthem. But copyright and attribution issues that disadvantaged the South African musicians, and controversy about their crossing the boycott line with Simon, are still palpable today.

In their 1975 track “Johannesburg,” Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson prequed the *Graceland* album. South African artist William Kentridge presented a contemporary, post-apartheid collaboration with Black South African musicians and

artists in his life-sized, multiscreen, multimedia procession, *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015).

INTERSECTIONS

Even in a “free” music-streaming context, we need to talk about the role of censorship. State sanctioned and other forms of music-silencing include both self-censorship and public stigmatization. The arts are continually on powerholders’ cultural and political radar. Certain songs were pulled from American radio stations in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, from Carole King’s “I Feel the Earth Move” to John Lennon’s “Imagine.” Bands such as Rage Against the Machine and a number of hip-hop artists were also taken off the air.

In 1999, performance artist and spoken word poet Sarah Jones found herself on the wrong side of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with “Your Revolution,” in which she pays homage to Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1970). Jones’s dissing of the sexism and violently masculinized tropes of what she calls “hip-pop” includes explicit references to female sexuality. Her allusions are part of the Black cultural practice of signifyin’, albeit from a woman’s perspective, in an idiom known as wreckin’—all part of hip-hop as music making, poetry, politics, and public culture. Jones eventually won her appeal against the FCC ban on First Amendment grounds.

In the 1970s, Fela Kuti and his countercultural challenge to Nigeria’s military rulers centered around the Kalakuta Republic, the compound in Lagos in which he and his family lived. Fela, whose afrobeat melded the Nigerian popular music form of highlife with American funk and jazz, was a world-renowned musical and political dissident who took risks. His 1977 track “Zombie” encapsulates these provocations: over 15 minutes long, with a lengthy, slow-build introduction based on a repeating guitar riff and rhythmic pattern. Fela’s lyrics, in Nigerian pidgin English, are part of his musical refusal to be silenced, referring to the military rulers as zombies. The track ends with a saxophone passage that imitates a military bugle call—the sound of British colonial forces concluding this satire of postcolonial dictatorships and their codependencies with their former ruling powers and contemporary allies. The military response was to Fela’s challenge swift and brutal: burning his compound, confiscating his

recordings and instruments, subjecting him to physical assault, and murdering his mother.

REPRISE — 1812 AND ALL THAT

In 1872, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky premiered his *1812 Overture* in Moscow to commemorate the Russian defense against Napoleon Bonaparte’s French forces sixty years earlier. It begins with a traditional Russian folk song, “U Vorot,” and climaxes with simulated explosions and a merging of the French “Marseillaise” and what was then the Russian imperial anthem, “God Save the Tsar.” Though *1812* is an example of explicitly commissioned political music, Tchaikovsky leaves the options open in the overture’s emotionally charged yet inconclusive ending. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which led to Russian conductors, pianists, dancers, and concerts featuring Russian composers being canceled, albeit briefly, in the West, is a reminder of how the relationship between a political moment and a musical work, even this kind of “warhorse,” can resonate through different timelines and political spaces.

Contemporary streaming platforms and music-sharing apps may seem to have the edge with their algorithmic cornering of the music market. But musicians continue to exercise their creative and political agency. The question is whether publics can break out of the “walled gardens” of habitual, now automatically generated listening preferences that commercial “service providers” offer. Throughout history, musical works have escaped being completely instrumentalized by one political or cultural agenda or another. More music catalogs are becoming available, and online. Yet algorithmically driven playlists and live-streamed distribution of both new releases and back catalogs are double-edged trends—not only for artists, but also for individuals, communities, and nations.

Commercial streaming technologies work to shape taste in ways that powerholders may look to deploy for any number of agendas. In 2012, members of the punk performance collective Pussy Riot were imprisoned and banished in a violent assertion of the Russian state’s prerogative to decide whose music matters, how it should sound, where it can be heard, and for what purposes. And as Pussy Riot members continue to be persecuted, as do other musicians around the world for their own political commitments, we, as audiences, may find ourselves accessing and enjoying, even dancing to, a work that was political at its inception or becomes so by force of circumstance.

OUTRO

“Fortress Europe,” a track by the British music and community collective Asian Dub Foundation, was a hit in club scenes across the UK and Europe when it was first released in 2003. This track captures the group’s commitment to decolonizing how music is made and experienced through their live performance and production values fusing dub, reggae, and house-inflected beats with classical traditions such as maqam and raga. In the collective’s own words, “political frequencies” are at work not just in the lyrics but also in the mix: made for dancing *and* politicking.

PLAYLIST

More Sweetly Play the Dance, video, William Kentridge (2015)

“Imagine,” John Lennon (1971)

“Medley: Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In,” The Fifth Dimension (1969)

Tristan und Isolde, “Prelude and Liebestod,” Richard Wagner (1865)

“Anthrocene,” Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (2016)

“What’s Going On,” Marvin Gaye (1971)

“Rock the Casbah,” the Clash (1982)

“Afrique Victime,” Mdou Moctar (2021)

“The Girl from Ipanema,” Stan Getz, João Gilberto, Astrud Gilberto, Antônio Carlos Jobim (1963)

Tropicália ou Panis et Circencis, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, Os Mutantes, Gal Costa, et al. (1968)

“Inta Omry” (“Enta Oumri”), Umm Kulthum (1964)

“Lil Watan,” Mashrou’ Leila (2013)

Intersection, Tania Saleh (2018)

“Do You Hear the People Sing?” from the musical *Les Misérables* (1980)

“My Way,” Nina Hagen (1985)

“Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away,” Pussy Riot (2012)

“Homeless,” Paul Simon, featuring Ladysmith Black Mambazo (1987)

“Johannesburg,” Gil Scott-Heron, Brian Jackson (1975)

“Happy Birthday,” Stevie Wonder (1981)

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Gil Scott-Heron (1970)

“Your Revolution,” Sarah Jones (1999)

“Born in the USA,” Bruce Springsteen (1984)

“Back in the USSR,” the Beatles (1969)

“Zombie,” Fela Kuti (1977)

“Fortress Europe,” Asian Dub Foundation (2003)

“Pata Pata,” Miriam Makeba (1967)

“12XU,” Wire (1977)

“The Star-Spangled Banner,” Jimi Hendrix (1969)

“Lift Every Voice and Sing,” Aretha Franklin (2017)

“I Did It My Way,” Jay-Z (2002)

Hymnen, Karlheinz Stockhausen (1965–67)

1812 Overture, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1872)

“March from *A Clockwork Orange*,” Wendy Carlos (2000)

“My Way,” Nina Simone (1972)

“7 Seconds,” Youssou N’Dour and Neneh Cherry (1994) ■