



The Nile Project: Music making for peace in the Nile Basin Region

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ABSTRACT

The use of music in peacebuilding is a new and emerging field. Yet there is sparse empirical evidence on its outcomes. *The Nile Project* is a musical collaborative from East Africa that brings together musicians from all of the countries that border the Nile River and is aimed at finding a solution to the dire water crisis in the region. This study explored how musicians from *The Nile Project*, despite their linguistic, cultural, musical, and political differences collaborated to create a unified sound. Using a combination of qualitative and arts-informed research methodologies, original members of the collective, as well as the co-founder, were interviewed. Observations were also done of the musicians' rehearsals, performances, and classroom visits at two New England Universities and at their "gathering" in Aswan, Egypt. Findings suggest that an outcome of *The Nile Project's* work is that the process of making music with those from diverse musical traditions can act as a way to practice peacebuilding skills. The act of *music making* encouraged musicians to "bend" in effort to play together often altering or adapting their musical scales. This may have been a chance for musicians to embody "unity in diversity." This study seeks to add to the limited research on the use of music for peacebuilding offering the musicians' perspective, which has been identified as a need.

KEYWORDS:

Music; peacebuilding; water conflict; Africa; arts-informed research; Nile River

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PRELUDE

A GLIMPSE OF THE NILE PROJECT DURING THEIR 2016 GATHERING

On the banks of the Nile River, musicians from 11 riparian countries in East Africa work together to create and compose music. Sometimes it is effortless and new sounds are created. When Kasiva, from Kenya, sits beside Mekha from Nubia, they invent new rhythms: “Mekha, I love this rhythm! Ah...I wish I had like 4 hands to like play everything” (Girgis and Piñero, *2016 Nile Gathering - Musical Speed Dating*, hereafter MSD2016).¹ Commenting on the process, Kasiva shares, “With Mekha we tried fusing 6/8th from Nubia and 6/8th from Kenya and we came up with some very interesting rhythms. I didn’t know anything like that could exist actually” (MSD2016).

At other times, there were tensions. Rapasa, from Kenya, does not think that Kamal from Egypt, is listening and playing with him: “So..I couldn’t explain that. Do you see what is happening there? Do you understand? It is up, up. What you were trying to do there, I was missing that.” Explaining this interaction, he comments: “At some point, it was hard between me and Kamal. We couldn’t get along...until we discovered its up beat” (MSD2016). As two more musicians play, Msafiri Zawose from Tanzania exclaims: “It’s coming, it’s coming... give me time. I should create something that I feel..I’m not going to play the same as you do” (MSD2016).

These snippets of *music making* emerged from a residency program as part of *The Nile Project*, a non-profit music collective formed in 2011 to address the water crisis facing the Nile Basin region. Not only is there a shortage of water and a rapidly growing population, but the countries cannot agree on an equitable way to share the water (Noureddine, 2016). The project aims to “inspire, inform, and connect Nile citizens to help them collaborate on cultivating the sustainability of their river” (<http://nileproject.org/>). During the residency, musicians were either paired or put into small groups of people from different cultures, countries, musical traditions, and often political sides of the water crises. They were asked to share their musical traditions and encouraged to create something together. For some musicians, there were feelings of bias towards the other musicians, as they were on opposite sides of the political divide. As AlSarah shared: “We all come with our cultural baggage. I had my own prejudices that I needed to get rid of. They had prejudices that they had to get rid of. But that’s part of it. That’s part of becoming a band” (personal interview, April 14, 2015). AlSarah goes on to explain the reasons for tensions between her as Sudanese and her fellow musicians who are Egyptian:

Egypt and Sudan were under the same colonial rule. So the border between Egypt and Sudan were open until like 1950 something. So Egypt thought of Sudan as belonging to them. So it’s a huge point of tension for me with Egyptians usually. But not with these guys, because these guys are more educated. Also because I check all them, ‘Ah...don’t get aggressive.’” (personal interview, April 14, 2015)

¹ See at <https://youtu.be/THtnRv8V7-A>.

However, as the musicians begin to share their musical traditions, they find they have more in common than they thought. As Jorga shared in an interview, the gathering where they made music “was like a family reunion” (personal interview, April 15, 2015). As another musician and co-founder claims, a community has been formed (see **Figure 1**):

How can your community grow? I think that is a lot of the process that we’ve experienced. The grown sense of we and beyond that. The fact that when it comes to growing that musically. It is love; the collectiveness that we are reaching towards. Personally, that’s an on-going journey. The people on stage truly love each other – that kind of feeling of the cross-cultural experience. (Meklit Hadero, observation, March 30, 2015)²



Figure 1: Musicians play the stone passing game from Ghana at the 2016 Gathering in Aswan, Egypt. Learning to work as a group to accomplish a task.

Might this collaborative process of *music making* be an opportunity not just to create a new album and prepare for a tour that will encourage participation in finding a solution to the water crises facing the Nile Basin region, but be an opportunity to practice peacebuilding?³ John Morgan O’Connell (2010), an ethnomusicologist who has researched the impact of music on both war and peace, suggests that “music rather than language may provide a better medium for interrogating the character of conflict and for evaluating the quality of conflict resolution” (p. 2). A creative and strategic approach may provide a new way to address complex, international problems like the one facing the Nile Basin region.

In a world where conflict persists between people and nations, how can music be used to address conflict that crosses cultural, geographic, and political borders? Perhaps the collaborative act of *music making* with people on opposing sides of an issue can model new ways for addressing conflict. As Urbain (2008) proposes, “With

² Observations were done of *The Nile Project* during class visits as part of a residency program at two Universities as well as conversations during the Gathering in Aswan, Egypt. Unless otherwise noted, when “observation” is cited, it means that I took notes during these observations. Therefore, quotes were typed as the speaker presented and thus may not be verbatim.

³ Johan Galtung defines peacebuilding as a practice that addresses conflict by moving people into new thoughts, new speech, and new action (Webel and Galtung, 2007).

conflicts becoming more and more numerous and violent in our twenty-first century, it is to be hoped that (...) many more people explore the potential of music for peaceful conflict transformation” (p. xiv).

This article is a condensed version of a qualitative, arts-informed case study conducted on *The Nile Project*, which focused on how a group of linguistically, politically, and culturally diverse musicians collaborated to make music. After a brief introduction, an abbreviated summary of the water crises facing the countries in the Nile Basin region, and a closer look at the goals of *The Nile Project*, I will share some of the key findings from my study. Two research questions drove this study:

- 1) How did the musicians involved in *The Nile Project*, despite cultural, musical, linguistic, and political difference create and perform a unified sound?
- 2) What understanding can we gain from their process that may inform how music can be used in peacebuilding?

THE WATER CRISIS IN THE NILE BASIN

The Nile Basin region of East Africa is facing a water crisis. There is a limited supply of water and over 400 million people depend on water from the Nile River for their life and livelihood. Within the next 25 years, the population is expected to double in this region, creating a concern for the sufficiency of the water supply to serve all the inhabitants of the basin. Other mounting concerns are poverty, drought, growing agriculture and industry, all of which are exacerbating and accelerating the issue (Kameri-Mbote, 2007). The crisis in the Nile Basin is complex with no foreseeable solution. As the population increases, the limited water supply will become more scarce. This limited supply needs to be shared among eleven countries: Burundi, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; however, Egypt currently has 100% of water rights.

Egypt's rights to the majority of the water and complete control over the Nile River was granted by the Nile Water Agreement established by Britain under colonial rule in 1929. This policy bound all British colonies to refrain from any action that might affect flow of water to Egypt. Egypt is downstream of all other riparian countries and was given the authority to inspect and veto any projects that could impact their supply of water. Despite equal needs for water, Egypt was given twelve times the amount of water allocated for Sudan. In 1956, when Sudan gained independence from Britain, the 1929 treaty was revisited, but not changed in any way that benefited Sudan or the other riparian countries on the Nile River. The treaty also only included Sudan and Egypt, but left Ethiopia out completely (Kagwanja, 2007).

Solutions to the water crisis are not surfacing quickly. In 2006, in an effort to support collaborative efforts in the region, the countries formed The Nile River Basin Commission, but have yet to “develop the requisite capacity to restore confidence and end decades of frosty relations and palpable threats of what is widely spoken of as a ‘looming’ war for the Nile waters” (Kagwanja, 2007, p. 331). An international

treaty to govern water use, the Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement (NCFA), has been drafted, but it has yet to gain consensus (*The Nile Project*, 2014). Tensions and conflict escalated in 2013 when the Ethiopian government constructed the Renaissance Dam that diverted the Blue Nile, which Egypt fears will prevent expected water from reaching Egypt (Noureddine, 2016). This dire situation could lead not only to a humanitarian crisis, but to war (ibid). As Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said in 1979, “The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water” (Kameri-Mbote, 2007, p. 1).

Dialogue, negotiations, and cooperation among the nations in the Nile Basin are essential to finding a solution, but there is currently no means to accomplish this. Countries still harbor mistrust since the treaty of 1929 that gave the sole rights of the water from the Nile River to Egypt (Tawfik, 2016). *The Nile Project* was formed to address this crisis, hoping that music can act as a catalyst for change and a means for finding a solution.

THE NILE PROJECT

The Nile Project’s mission is to spur curiosity and encourage discourse, learning, and understanding in an effort to find an innovative and alternative solution to the water crisis in the Nile Basin region. Their aim is to “transform the Nile conflict by inspiring, educating, and empowering an international network of university students to cultivate the sustainability of their ecosystem. The project’s model integrates programs in music, education, dialogue (see **Figure 2**), leadership, and innovation to engage students across disciplines and geographies” (<http://nileproject.org/>). It seeks



Figure 2: Dialogue session at the 2016 Gathering in Aswan, Egypt. A talking stick is used in effort to ensure that only one person is talking at a time and that all are focusing on the speaker.

to encourage action from citizens, starting with the musicians who participate in music residencies. Mina Girgis, co-founder and CEO, explains: “We wanted to find a way to have all 400 million inhabitants of the Nile Basin be a part of the solution, not the load” (observation, March 13, 2015). This synergy of collaboration, curiosity,

and learning is intended to spread as musicians perform across Africa, the United States, and Europe with the goal of finding a solution to the water crisis in the Nile Basin region.

Co-founders Mina Girgis and Meklit Hadero developed the idea of *The Nile Project* to explore how modeling the collaborative process of collaborative *music making* rather than being directed by one leader, might inspire people outside of government to consider an “out of the box” solution to the crisis. There are multiple levels of the project (see **Figure 3**). On one level, the organization performs for the public with an aim to spur curiosity and then action from audiences. The second level is to inspire university students to find solutions through educational programs. This study focused on the first level, observing how *The Nile Project* musicians worked together to make music.

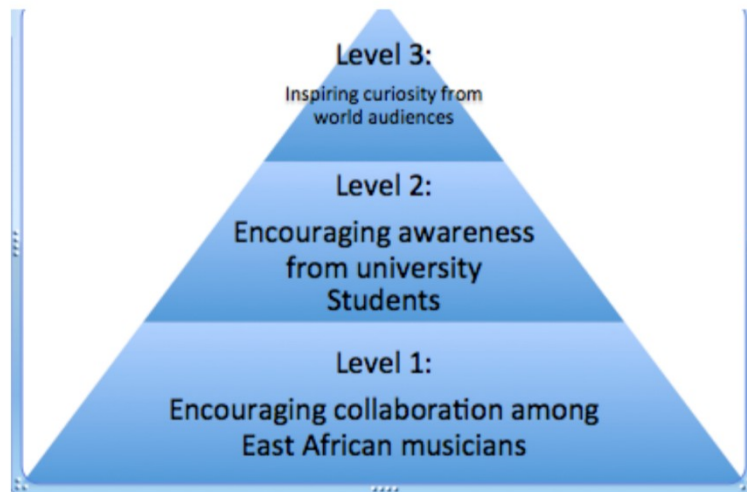


Figure 3: Pyramid figure demonstrates the different intentions of *The Nile Project*.

The project brings well-known musicians from all of the countries that line the Nile River to make music, prepare for a tour, and engage in dialogue on issues concerning the water crisis. This takes place at what *The Nile Project* calls a “gathering.” The gatherings allow musicians to engage with their fellow Africans as neighbors and colleagues rather than adversaries, sharing their musical traditions, and working together to create a unified sound (<http://nileproject.org/>). The first gathering took place in Aswan, Egypt in 2014 over the course of nineteen days. Musicians spent the first four days in workshops where they participated in dialogue and activities with various leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs with knowledge of the Nile River conflict (ibid.). The musicians were also able to share their music, instruments, and musical traditions.

Co-founder Meklit Hadero articulated the process by which the music was created. First, the musicians began working in pairs or very small groups where they shared instruments from their country and played for each other. After they had shared some of their music and traditions, they tried to combine their music. For example, one musician might sing a traditional song from their region and another musician would

explore how it sounded to add a rhythm from their region. When they had some sort of beginning to a piece, they switched the groups to generate more musical ideas.⁴ Later, the musicians moved into larger groups based on interest in a particular sound. Once something began to take shape, the musicians shared their work with the entire group and any other musician in the group was welcome to join if they thought they had something to add to the musical piece that was forming. In this final stage, a collaborative process began as other musical elements were added or taken away with decisions being made collectively, not by one leader.⁵ Although there was a music director, musical creation was not done top down, but was started with and from the musicians. Each pair or trio (which was intentionally grouped with musicians from varied countries), began the process and then presented it to the entire group to further develop the songs. Therefore, there was shared leadership, and the result was the inclusion of a variety of sounds for the album representing the varied sounds of the region. The next two weeks were dedicated to musicians getting to know each other and working to collaborate on an album.

Looking at the impact of the program on the water crisis was beyond the scope of this paper. I focused instead on the musicians and their processes with the intention of understanding how they might act to model the type of collaboration necessary to encourage cooperation on a larger scale in the region. I was particularly interested in looking closely at how the musicians worked together to create music to see if perhaps doing so was a way to practice peacebuilding skills.

PERTINENT LITERATURE ON MUSIC AND CONFLICT

Music and Peace - two of humanity's most profound expressions which, when combined together, constitute a formidable force for good.
(van de Dungen, 2008, p. xvi)

The use of music in conflict transformation⁶ and peacebuilding is a new and emerging field, but with limited empirical research (Grant, Mollemann, Morlandsto, Munz, and Nuxoll, 2010). As Peter van de Dungen (2015) affirms, music is an untapped and often ignored instrument for resolving conflict. Van de Dungen suggests that music, of all the arts, is unique in its ability to affect people emotionally and inspire deep and elevated thoughts: “It can stir the emotions as nothing else, inspire people to the loftiest thoughts and sentiments, and bring them together in indissoluble bounds” (p. xvi). O’Connell (2011) agrees, suggesting that the use of music in peacebuilding is nascent, but maintains its potential to transform conflict and “nurture inter-group understanding” (p. 124).

While there is only a small body of research on the subject, it appears that music may be a powerful tool for conflict transformation (Bergh and Sloboda, 2010; Lederach and Lederach, 2010; Opiyo, 2015; Urbain, 2015). Some key themes that emerge from research that are pertinent to the focus of this study, include music’s ability to

⁴ This information was gathered through an observation which was made at a class visit on March 30, 2015.

⁵ This information was shared on April 14, 2015 during a classroom observation by Miles Jay the musical director.

⁶ The term comes from John Paul Lederach (2003) as going beyond the resolution of the problem by creating new discourse and renewed relationships.

create bridges (Tan, 2014; Urbain and Opiyo, 2015) and encourage discourse (Jordanger, 2008; Riiser, 2010), which may foster new or transformed relationships (Lance, 2012; Shank and Schirch, 2008) and learning and understanding (Zelizer, 2003).

Some studies have demonstrated promising results of the use of music to contribute to peacebuilding efforts sometimes leading to healing and reconciliation (Cohen, 2005; Lance, 2012; Lederach and Lederach, 2010; Shank and Schirch, 2008). Although representing a particular discourse around a specific music genre, Shank and Schirch (2008) suggest that music, such as hip hop, can “wage conflict non-violently” (p. 222) in its capacity to encourage listeners to get politically active. Music has been shown to help build capacity, a necessary step for long term peacebuilding. For example, Jose Antonio Abreu’s El Sistema program in Venezuela has helped thousands of low income students and families with social integration and improved social and academic skills (Shank and Schirch, 2008). Cohen (2015) agrees that music can be transformative in its ability to promote healing, build bridges, and provide tools for non-violent change. Lederach and Lederach (2010) demonstrate the power of music to aid in “social healing” for people and communities that have endured unspeakable travesties. Healing and reconciliation, they argue, can occur through the use of sound and vibrations from musical processes such as Tibetan singing bowls, voices singing in unison, and drum circles.

Researchers who study what has been called “applied ethnomusicology” (O’Connell, 2010) are also contributing to our understanding of the use of music for both war and peace (Pettan, 2010a). Pettan studied The Azra Project and The Kosovo Roma Project, both musical programs intended to address the impact of war on the former Yugoslavia. Both, suggests Pettan, demonstrate how music can reunite communities. In the Azra Project, music was utilized to address the impact of the large number of Bosnian refugees relocated to Norway. Music was used to bridge the two cultures. The evaluation of the project revealed “movement toward strengthening Bosnian cultural identity among the refugees and toward nurturing mutual understanding with Norwegians” (Pettan, 2010b, p. 183). The Kosovo Roma Project sought to document, advocate for, and preserve the music of the Romani who were a model of both skillful musical and cultural adaptability in their ability to “cross musical and cultural boundaries” (p. 186).

There are a range of examples of how organizations have addressed music in conflict situations. *Music without Borders* (MwB) has been using music to address conflict since its inception in 1999 in places like war torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Rwanda. For example, MwB created the Mitrovica Rock School which brings together Serb and Albanian youth to make music together in effort to foster understanding and friendships despite the political divide (Hassler, 2010). In *Place of War (IPOW)* is a support system for creative entrepreneurship working with artist and organizations in places of conflict such as Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, and Latin America. In 2016, *IPOW* created “Voice of the Revolution”, which brought together 15 female musicians from areas of conflict to create and perform music (see <https://inplaceofwar.net/>). *Heartbeat* brings together Palestinian and Israeli youth for

dialogue and *music making* in effort to reduce prejudice, increase trust, and change attitudes about each other (<https://heartbeat.fm/>). *OneBeat* is a music organization that also focuses on the creation and performing of music as an act of social change. Their unique focus is to cultivate artistic leadership among their musicians, helping them to develop programs to take back to their communities (www.1beat.org/).

Sparse empirical research has been conducted on these socially active musical organizations. There is still a dearth of empirical data to support the impact of music in conflict situations (Bergh and Sloboda, 2010; Lance, 2012; Opiyo, 2015). This study was intended to fill gaps and offer more evidence, particularly of the participants' experience, which has been noted as a need (Berg and Sloboda, 2010).

NOTATION: METHODS

An arts-informed (Cole and Knowles, 2008), qualitative case study methodology was used in this study to explore how musicians create music despite musical, linguistic, and cultural differences. An arts-informed methodology was chosen in an effort to better understand the organization that used music in its processes. An ear for music was utilized on all levels of the research process. Music was the beat⁷ of this study: used in the language of the written text, the data collection, and in the presentation of the dissertation defense (Becker, 2016).⁸ At the heart of this study was my desire to hear stories from those most closely involved with *The Nile Project*; stories that can only be illuminated through qualitative methods (Glesne, 2011). The musicians' stories about their experiences in the residencies, where they created the music, and their work on tour performing and leading discussion workshops were central to this study. A qualitative methodology provided space for participants to share their voice as well as a chance for the researcher to see the musicians in their natural setting on and off the stage (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In-depth interviews of musicians and the co-founder and extended observations were the main forms of data collection in this study, which allowed the researcher to gain a "holistic" view and "thick description" (Miles and Huberman, p.10). I had one formal one-on-one semi-structured interview with the cofounder and various informal conversations. Three musicians participated in a one-on-one semi-structured interviews that included a musical exchange with me prior to our discussion. Musicians were selected based on their ability to speak English (due to constraints of finding translators in a limited time) and their participation in the organization since the first residency. Participants were from Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya, three of which are considered the main countries in conflict over water (Kagwanja, 2007).

⁷ A steady rhythm that keeps the whole band together.

⁸ To learn more about my use of an arts informed research method, see Kelly Mancini Becker (forthcoming in spring 2018), 'Beyond researcher as instrument-Researcher with instrument: Musicking in qualitative data collection', in *Creative Approaches to Research*.

THE PERFORMANCE: FINDINGS

“The music has evolved as the musicians have” (Girgis)⁹

Perhaps one of the most pertinent findings revealed in the data is that the act of *music making* among musicians with cultural, linguistic, and musical difference provided a unique platform to practice peacebuilding. Sometimes the music created by the musicians from *The Nile Project* was literally an exploration of conflict resolution. This excerpt describes one musician’s goal for musical collaboration shared by Caine (2014): “This is what I would suggest for this piece – that we have a conflict, and then all of us will keep on adding flavors from different cultures, but maintaining the water that flows” (Caine, 2014). In Caine’s analysis of the work of *The Nile Project*, he shares: “under this tree, they’re listening for what’s shared: conflict that resolves into harmony.”

There is a myriad of examples from the data that demonstrate how *music making* mirrors steps in peacebuilding. Creating one unified sound requires negotiating (decisions and sometimes sacrifices) between people with different backgrounds, musical traditions, and aspirations. The act of *music making* requires difficult decisions to be made among participants, since all ideas cannot be incorporated into the final piece. This means that some ideas (sounds, instrumentations) are kept and some are sacrificed:

So the idea that to learn something and to use it you must sacrifice something. Something must bend. But things that are bent and things that you sacrifice and give up, they don’t have to be forgotten. They don’t need to be ignored. They just need to be not necessary for that very moment within that one particular part of the fusion. It can come in another part of the fusion. To me it’s like...are we creating a soup or are we creating a salad? (AlSarah, personal interview, April 14, 2015).

In this excerpt from an interview with AlSarah, one of the female vocalists, she explains how *The Nile Project* creates a “fusion” or the melding of musical traditions and sounds in their music. AlSarah explains that the process was complex, emotional, and required compromise. Negotiating occurred as a result of the project; there were sacrifices and choices made. It required the musicians to *bend*, but not break. These choices might be frightening for some of the musicians who fear loss of their musical identity.

The notion of sacrifice, the giving up of something, perhaps the loss of musical identity is particularly poignant. For some of the musicians in the collective, their music is less known. For them, the sacrifice is greater because furthering their musical style is more crucial. Kasiva, the collective’s percussionist, believes her music is in the minority, so the development and furthering of a Kenyan sound was important to her:

Why are we borrowing stuff from S. Africa and we have 44 tribes with 44 or more, more than 44, as there are subdivisions of the tribes, with more than 500 traditions,

⁹ This quote was taken at a class visit at a New England University (observation March 30, 2015).

musical traditions? Why are we so eager to go and borrow something from other areas of Africa and outside Africa, even, when we haven't even exhausted what we have as a country? We don't have a sound as Kenya... and it's because we don't focus on our traditional tunes enough to study them and come up with a sound, like a unique sound?

A bit later in the conversation she shares:

So I was like, well let's see if we can actually like get a sound of a region and this is like a region that was taken; this is the Nile region. It's not necessarily east, west, north, south; it's the Nile region. (Kasiva, personal interview, April, 15, 2015).

Since the act of fusion may require losing some of that Kenyan sound she wants so badly to share, creating a unified sound of the region marks a significant sacrifice for Kasiva. However, despite this feeling of marginalization of her musical traditions, Kasiva aims for a unified sound with the project.

CHALLENGES OF MAKING MUSIC

It is evident that the process of making music with *The Nile Project* was not always easy. There were many challenges the musicians faced in the process. The following exchange between AlSarah and myself exemplifies the difficulty of making music with musicians who have different styles and traditions:

Becker:(Some may say) you can't compare what *The Nile Project* does with music with solving world problems.

AlSarah: Yes you can. Have you ever been with a musician in a room? It's just as personal. We can go to war over a wrong note.

(AlSarah, personal interview, April 14, 2015).

Not only does this quote reiterate how serious musicians take their music, but the use of the term war in this quote is noteworthy and mimics a theory by Pettan (2010b) that "music' and 'war' are increasingly join[ed] together in a variety of contexts" (p. 177). The conversation continued to exemplify the challenges in fusing musical styles. The tensions between her as Sudanese (who have been in conflict with Egyptians) seem to mimic the political struggle:

Becker: Like at that first residency, was there some opposition? Was there like...whoa...I don't want to lose this Egyptian sound?

AlSarah: There definitely was. There was a lean to take it to a more Egyptian side. And it was something I really hated, something about it. I'm not interested in coming here to make an Egyptian project. That's not why I came. I'm not interested in any one identity taking over. (AlSarah, personal interview, April 14, 2015)

Here, AlSarah reiterates the fear that the music they create may mimic what was happening politically, with Egypt having all the control and other countries marginalized.

The project also required musicians to play in alternative ways, often learning entirely new scales. In an observation of a class visit, Miles Jay, the musical director, explained

that some musicians had to completely change their style in an effort to make music together, which in some cases meant tuning their instruments to a new scale:

Miles Jay: We asked them to re-tune his instrument in an Egyptian way – and I wanted to ask you – how did that feel?

M. Bazibu: Imagine you play an instrument for sixteen years, and then you have to play a different scale?

He went on to explain how difficult it was for him. He described it as actually “disturbing” and that he felt very limited at first – “could not find his flow” – “It’s totally different”.¹⁰

MUSICAL CONVERSATIONS CREATE SPACE FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES

While there were challenges in creating and playing music together, for some of the musicians it was an opportunity to learn new things and play in new ways. For Jorga, the learning of new scales and styles offered him an opportunity to experience something new with his music: “I wanted to have this conversation between the Ethiopian and Egyptian scales” and he went on to explain that it was exciting for him to improvise from those two scales, creating space for new ideas. In the same discussion, Miles Jay explained what happened when the musicians used two scales from the different musical traditions. He described it as “filling in more holes” and allowing for a different way of interpreting the music. He suggested that it encouraged each player to play differently. He used the example of the Egyptian oud player who started to make “big jumps” in the music.¹¹ When learning to play new notes not typical of his scale system, Danny Mekkonen, Ethiopian- American saxophonist claimed: “When I was with Nedar, learning to hear those quarter tones was very difficult. And I really feel there were a few moments today where I just kind of opened up and reached a new place” (MSD2016).

This transformation, from a struggle to fuse towards an opportunity for the creation of something new, mimics the power of artistic approaches to peacebuilding (Galtung, 2015; Lederach, 2005; Shank and Schirch, 2008). As Lederach argues, peacebuilding requires a “moral imagination” and the vision of something new, like new relationships. The arts, he argues, are one way to model this type of “transcendence” (Lederach, 2005, p.4). As the negotiation between scales unfolded, as shared above, the musicians are not only encouraged to play in new ways, but there were “holes” created and thus more opportunities for something new to be discovered musically. As Miles Jay affirms: “If you engaged in the music of Uganda – adding a line here [which he shows on the board] you’d be listening in a whole new way”.¹² The process required both musicians to “bend” and alter their styles, but in the end, something entirely new was created through this type of musical collaboration.

¹⁰ This conversation was gathered in an observation of the organization at a classroom visit on April 14, 2015.

¹¹ This quote was also taken from a classroom observation on April 14, 2015. When quotes are used, it means that I took notes during the class visit, and they are as close as possible to verbatim.

¹² This conversation was taken from the same classroom observation on April 14, 2015.

This process of musical flexibility is something that could translate to politics according to Girgis. In a water panel discussion, Girgis explains the very intentional conflation of musical and political collaboration:

Facilitator: I wonder how you use music as a language to translate this issue [the water crisis] into music?

Girgis: For us we started from the point of view that Egypt has been the political power – (not just of the water, but culturally). We wanted to create a new paradigm so all the countries can be included. [To] translate these principles into our music. Participatory Leadership does not make one musicians higher or lower than others. We experimented with this idea. This participatory process, by giving each of the musicians to be the leader of their piece.¹³

It was essential that not one leader was identified in the creating of the music in *The Nile Project*. There were multiple leaders in each of the songs to ensure that that the process of *music making* did not mimic the current politics, but instead made way for a new way to relate. The act of *music making* appears to have created a unique opportunity for these musicians to negotiate and bend by balancing power dynamics in their music and practicing creating something new versus furthering old paradigms.

DISCUSSION

As I completed this study, I was left with one question: What is it about music that may make it so useful as a tool in peacebuilding?

MUSIC AS A UNIQUE PEACEBUILDING TOOL

In order to understand why music is a unique tool for peacebuilding, it is important to consider the particulars of music and *music making*. In an interview with Kasiva, she articulated her belief that the strength of music in this context (to address a water crises or a political issue) comes from the belief that all people relate to music:

It [politics] is all intertwined with the music. You know like, exactly as I'm talking – using these musical examples in relation to the problems on the ground. This is it – because people relate to music. People relate to things they can remember and songs are some of the most powerful ways of sending out messages or impacting [change].” (Kasiva, personal interview, April 15, 2015)

Cynthia Cohen (2015) argues that music is well-suited to aid in peacebuilding as it facilitates communication, empathy, and understanding (p. 26). John O'Connell (2010) suggests that music might be more effective than language for both investigating conflict and understanding a resolution. Language, argues O'Connell, limits interpretation, while music “liberates interpretation” and may allow for multiple interpretations of both war and peace (p. 2). Johan Galtung (2015) suggests creating music goes beyond literature in its ability to address conflict, “the art lies in being peace rather than just expressing and verbalizing peace” (p. 58). It would appear that some of the qualities inherent in music make it particularly useful in

¹³ This conversation was gathered during an observation of a water panel discussion on April 14, 2015. Notes were taken by hand and may not be verbatim.

addressing conflict, whether it is the emotional chord it touches in people (Dungen, 2015) or the way all people seem to relate to music (as Kasiva asserts). The act of *music making* may also encourage an opportunity to practice aspects of the peacebuilding process, which includes complex negotiating.

USE OF MUSIC TO EMBODY COMPLEX “NEGOTIATIONS”

The findings from this study revealed some evidence that the act of *music making* allowed for the musicians in *The Nile Project* to practice peacebuilding skills. The process by which this group of people with completely different musical traditions came together to create one sound, one song, one album could be a new paradigm for cross-cultural conversations and negotiations that encourage the practicing of peacebuilding skills. The negotiations that occur through the *music making* process, particularly when there are cultural differences, are complex and multilayered. As Cohen (2015) has argued, against common thought, music is not a “common language”. She claims that while some aspects of music share universal appeal, “musical traditions are actually more dissimilar than similar” because they are so contextual (p. 27). Cohen suggests that it is perhaps this aspect of music that makes it such an effective peacebuilding skill as it demands an understanding of music’s historical and cultural context.

To the general public, the notion of bringing a group of musicians together to make music may not seem like much of a challenge. This is what musicians do, come together with all their instruments and “jam,” which usually involves improvisation based on common chords or playing commonly known songs. However, in the case of these musicians, particularly those from Egypt versus other African countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, the musical languages that they speak are completely different. These countries have different songs, musical traditions, and musical scales. The musical scales used to play music in Egypt are very different from those played in Ethiopia or Kenya. They are essentially two different languages.¹⁴ These musicians would not be able to play together until one or more of the musicians changed *how* they played, altering the very core of what they do.

When the musicians from *The Nile Project* with their diverse musical traditions came together to make their first album, *Aswan*, what scale did the musicians agree upon? Would those from Ethiopia and Sudan play in the Egyptian scale? Changing scales would demand that the musicians deny their traditions and “musical language” in effort to play together. Using the scale in Egyptian music would produce a very distinct sound, which could result in the loss of identity of the other musical traditions in the project. As Alsarah claimed, she was not interested in making “Egyptian” music or allowing one identity to take over. Moreover, this relinquishing of their musical language would mirror the political relinquishing, giving Egypt control over both water rights and musical scales. This concession would not lend itself to positive feelings among the musicians or the potential for peacebuilding.

¹⁴ More research is needed to articulate the exact differences between the scales, but the concept is essential to the argument.

So how did these musicians negotiate through this challenge? They learned each other's musical language. What Jorga, the Ethiopian saxophone player, called a musical conversation between the various scales. By exploring this new space, something new was created. Tan (2014) noted a similar finding in her study of the *Breaking Down Walls* program that brought Muslim and Christian students together to make music. Tan suggested that after Christian students shared a song they wrote especially for the event, a "musical conversation" began. By developing new ways to "speak" to each other musically, the musicians in *The Nile Project* were able to accomplish "unity in diversity".

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Lederach (2005), in his articulation of what is truly necessary for sustaining peace, introduced the notion of "paradoxical curiosity" (p. 35), which resembles the concept of unity in diversity in its goal to embrace complexity and plurality, rather than binary solutions to conflict. As he explains:

[Paradoxical curiosity] approaches social realities with an abiding respect for complexity, a refusal to fall prey to the pressures of forced dualistic categories of truth, and an inquisitiveness about what may hold together seemingly contradictory social energies in a greater whole. (Lederach, 2005, p. 36)

In other words, paradoxical curiosity is the ability to be open to pluralistic solutions to peace that do not require concession. This concept is contrary to what is often done in conflict situations that habitually require sides to compromise, often leading to weak compromise or one side conceding (Tippett, 2012). Alternatively, Lederach recommends existing in complexity, in a kind of both/and instead of either/or space.

Paradoxical curiosity is exemplified in a story shared by Lederach (Tippett, 2012) in which a seemingly intractable situation in diffused in Nepal. In this case, various ethnic and political groups who needed to cooperate to divide the natural resources in the area developed a peaceful gathering where opposing sides could meet and dialogue. They developed a process where people from and within the groups in conflict could stay true to their groups' belief systems and cultures, but also work together. With a hint of creativity, they named the gathering after guati soup, the national Nepali soup (Tippett, 2012). This soup is made up of nine beans, each with its own process of fermentation. The beans are able to retain their own essence, but when combined, also create a new and delicious flavor. This metaphor mimics what the gathering sought to accomplish.

This notion of unity in diversity – and even food analogies – also appeared in the interviews with *The Nile Project* musicians. AlSarah compared their fusion to a salad, not a soup. For her, each piece is represented in the final product, but in smaller pieces. The sounds, like a salad, allow for each to be "tasted" and in some places combined for the perfect flavors. Upon listening to the music of *The Nile Project*, one might hear a distinct rhythm pattern from Kenya, an oud playing a recognizable refrain from an Egyptian folk song, or strings being plucked on an inanga from Rwanda. Each of the sounds has its moment to be highlighted in the piece, and is

recognizable, but then there are moments when they all blend to make a new and unique sound.

Perhaps this modeling of unity in diversity is just what is needed to find peace in the Nile Basin region where so many diverse cultures must co-exist. The common need for the water means they must be interdependent but in a way that they do not lose their own identities. Since music is an outward expression of a people used to express beliefs, histories and traditions (Urbain and Opiyo, 2015), it may help to accomplish unity in diversity in this region.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to find out what *The Nile Project* could teach us about the use of music to encourage collaboration among people with diverse languages, musical and cultural traditions, and perhaps political views. The findings provided some evidence that music, specifically *music making*, offered the musicians an opportunity to practice peacebuilding skills. The making of music encouraged musicians to “bend” in effort to play together in one song. Sometimes they had to learn other musical scales in effort to make music together and other times blend musical traditions versus keeping their tradition dominant. This may have been a chance for musicians to not only model ways that people from the region can collaborate, but also embody “unity in diversity,” further demonstrating ways that music may contribute to peacebuilding efforts.

A FINAL NOTE

At the start of each performance of *The Nile Project*, Sophie from Rwanda enters the stage alone. She plays the inanga, an ancient instrument from Rwanda. Sophie is the first female player to play the inanga in her country. As she plays and sings a haunting melody, one by one the other *Nile Project* musicians enter the stage to “The Welcome Song.” Kasiva moves to her drums; some of which are traditional ones from Kenya and some adapted by her own hand. Hani, another percussionist from Egypt, enters next. He may play the daff or riqq. Nader, from Cairo, next joins the musicians by playing the Kwala, or Egyptian style flute. Jorga, from Ethiopia, enters next and adds the sound of the saxophone. He often wears a scarf made by Kasiva’s mother, as a sign of their “solidarity” (observation, January, 16, 2016). Dina, a singer from Egypt, takes her place on stage next to Jorga, despite political divides between their two countries. When Selamnesh enters from Ethiopia, she adds her own flavor, with vocals in Amharic. As the rest of the musicians join, including the rich voice of AlSarah, in joy and collaboration, they create harmony from dissonance perhaps modeling a new *tone* for music and peace in the Nile Basin region.

Ya Abay Weha (Waters of the Nile)

By *The Nile Project*

Amharic

Ye abay weha motlo yefesal boy le boy
Minew behelme metah dehna
Ayedelehim woy

English

Year after year the Nile has
never failed to be a wellspring of life
If we have love and peace
it's more than enough for all of us

If our love is true and from
the bottom of our heart
the Nile is enough to sustain all of us

It makes no sense to say "let it be mine"
when we can all drink from the Nile
and satisfy our thirst¹⁵

عربي

امتلت مياه النيل
وفاضت على جانبيه
رأيتك في أحلامي يا محبوبتي
وتساءلت ان كنت بخير الليلة؟

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¹⁵ Ya Abay Weha (Waters of the Nile) performed by Selamnesh (Uganda): Original language: Amharic, 2014.

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