

Music-Induced Ethnocultural Empathy: Promoting the Power of Ethnocultural Empathy through Jazz and Film Music

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Abstract

"I believe that all people are in possession of what might be called a universal musical mind". These words from the musician Bill Evans present an idea analogous to Noam Chomsky's "universal grammar theory" in linguistics. At least, we could recognize the existence of a human "universal aesthetic mind". As Western societies today are experiencing widespread changes due to globalization, migration, modernization, and rapid digitalization, it is crucial to strengthen interethnic bonds. Moreover, the quest for peaceful coexistence and strong intercultural relations in modern multicultural societies is a prominent political priority in the West today. Music provides communicative possibilities between listeners and gives a basis for common attention and experiences of deep emotional involvement and intimacy. This could terminologically be related to both empathic affordances and social bonding, as well as cohesion. Could artistic creations in the form of organized sound (music) in various forms contribute to the facilitation of ethnocultural empathy? Jazz already represents a cosmopolitical reality through its origins and synthesis, while film music probably is one of the most common forms of musical consumption today. Furthermore, film music could be considered as a contemporary classical and universal artistic tradition appearing in multimedia contexts. The article investigates and discusses whether ethnocultural empathy already is aestheticized and institutionalized in the great worldwide "databases" of jazz (history) and film music. Finally, two musical examples serve as an illustration of how jazz and film music could contribute to ethnocultural empathy.

Keywords: ethnocultural empathy, empathic affordances, jazz, film music, universal aesthetic mind, cosmopolitanism

Introduction

"I believe that all people are in possession of what might be called a universal musical mind. Any true music speaks with this universal mind, to the universal mind in all people. The understanding that results will vary only in so far as people have or have not been conditioned to the various styles of music in which the universal mind speaks. Consequently, often some effort and exposure is necessary in order to understand some of the music coming from a different period or a different culture than that to which the

listener has been conditioned” – Jazz pianist Bill Evans (cited in *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*, 1966).

We live in an age where the internet and international communication are taken for granted (Clarke et al., 2015). Today's society enables large amounts of information dissemination. The internet and communication technology enable interactions of several different cultures at the same time. Not the least, the rapid development and speed of innovations in new music technology enables a musical update of older musical traditions (Ruud, 2016, p. 294). Technological development creates arenas for complex exchange of cultural information. As Bandura (2001) points out: “The evolving information technologies will increasingly serve as a vehicle for building social networks” (p. 29). In this way, music can represent a form of social capital translating into increased social interaction (Ruud, 2016, p. 108). The Russian (cultural) developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky has pointed out that people are rooted in their cultural context. However, this context is constantly changing, and as the plastic human brain, the ecological circumstances are dynamic as well. Ongoing extensive technological innovations and globalization make more intense multicultural musical experiences possible. Music from various cultures creates opportunities for *cultural hybridization* that can lead to adjustments in attitudes towards one another (Knudsen, 2010). This article investigates and discusses the following question: Is it possible that, and eventually how can music evoke and induce ethnocultural empathy?²

In general, and in accordance with broad literature (Clarke et al., 2015; Li et al., 2023; Marsh, 2019; Miranda & Gaudreau, 2020), music is something that operates in a social and cultural context. Nevertheless, as the orientalist Edvard Said remarks, it is also an art form that undeniably is based on individual performance, reception or production (Said, 2005, p. 12).

As Clarke et al. (2015, pp. 61–62) point out:

Music is a source of intense experiences of both the most intimate and solitary, and public and collective, kinds – from an individual with their smartphone and headphones, to large-scale live events and global simulcasts; and it increasingly brings together a huge range of cultures and histories, through developments in world music, sampling, the re-issue of historical recordings, and the explosion of informal and home music-making that circulates via YouTube.

This article aims at exploring and illuminating intercultural communicative and empathic affordances of music. With emphasis on two selected examples of music, derived from and operating in various contexts, the article interprets jazz and film music as potentially powerful tools in disseminating ethnocultural empathy and intercultural identity.

Theory and Key Concepts

There is no strict consensus about the nature of empathy (Rasoal et al., 2011). The historical and central psychological concept of empathy was coined by Edward Titchener in 1909 (Cuff et al., 2016). For instance, Krueger (2013) understands empathy broadly as an essential capacity to immediately take part in other people's thoughts, feelings and intentions. Thus, empathy can be considered a form of intimacy involving perceived caring

² The term ethnocultural empathy is used synonymously and interchangeably with interethnic empathy throughout the article.

and sharing of experiences (Rasoal et al., 2011), as well as understanding in the moment. Both the intentional element in perception and perspective-taking is emphasized. Furthermore, empathy is often detached from any form of reciprocity in physical and social interaction. This means that empathy could be a mere aesthetic projection, as originally understood by the philosopher Theodor Lipps (Zahavi, 2010).

A Universal Empathy Mechanism

According to psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, empathy is a scientifically measurable trait (Clarke et al., 2015). Thus, the concept of empathy can be operationalized and used in psychometric research. Modern brain imaging techniques make it possible to measure how people respond to musical stimuli. Mirror neurons are a type of brain component (discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti) that appears to play a role in movement mimicry and imitation of emotional patterns (Gazzaniga et al., 2009). The mirror neuron system (which consists of a collection of nerve cells in the brain) has been linked to empathy, imitation, and understanding the actions of others (Heyes, 2010; Molnar-Szakacs & Overy, 2006). Listening to music enables different forms of synchronization and movement imitation in humans (Iacoboni, 2009; Wilson & Knoblich, 2005). These specialized neurons and neural pathways (the network or circuit of the mirror neuron system) testify that one can become emotionally “infected” by being exposed to music. This can happen via various mechanisms such as synchronization and “entrainment” (copying gestures) or through musical elements such as dynamics and harmony. Entrainment involves keeping the beat, which implies motor coordination of movements between listeners and the music, as well as temporal coordination in the listeners’ responses (McGuinness & Overy, 2011). A possible mechanism in a musical context is that sound waves and observed gestures activate the mirror neuron system, which further creates emotionality and higher-order emotional responses such as empathy (Molnar-Szakacs & Overy, 2006, p. 3). Empathy can therefore be described as a higher order mental process or a complex emotion.

One gateway to the understanding of empathy in developmental psychology goes through the concept of Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM refers to the representation of the mental states of others, despite our personal states of mind, through our own conceptual system (Gallese, 2001). The capacity for *mentalization* – as an imaginative cognitive process – is considered a key element in empathy responses. ToM can also be understood as the ability to understand people as conscious and acting creatures with feelings, intentions, perceptions, and desires (Allesch, 2016).

Music and Ethnocultural Empathy in Modern Contexts

Through music,^{3,4} people can experience strong emotions. Sometimes even the boundaries between subjects can break down, and music enables transition into an *overlapping*

³ I will not give a formal definition of music, but one possibility is understanding the phenomenon in accordance with the composer Edgard Varèse as organized sound, or rather as an event characterized by the dynamics between (organized) sound and silence (cf. John Cage).

⁴ It is important to recognize the phenomenological nature of meaning (both as a concept and perceived reality).

intersubjectivity characterized by deep (mutual) empathy. According to McGuiness & Overy (2011), inspired by the music sociologist Tia DeNora, it is more appropriate to call this experience “co-subjectivity”. DeNora understands co-subjectivity as “the result of isolated individually reflexive adaptations to an environment and its materials” (cited in McGuiness & Overy, 2011, p. 255). In general, aesthetic impressions and narratives can be related to the initiation of empathic processes (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007) and might even predict more tolerance in communication (Laird, 2015).

According to Koss (2006), empathy enables us to build bridges between “radically different subject positions, both within and across historical periods and geographical zones” (p. 139). In this sense, empathy through music (in social contexts) can be thought of as an impetus for laying the foundation for peaceful multicultural coexistence in modern societies. If music can help to promote ethnocultural empathy, i.e., that the musical experience can help to internalize and tolerate cultural expressions from other contexts, this can be argued to strengthen the foundation for peaceful multicultural coexistence. In other words, it is important to be exposed to so-called “parasocial contact”, or to be stimulated by musical impressions from a so-called “out-group” (Harwood, 2017, p. 18).

Music can communicate emotions effectively in a way language often cannot. As Klempe (2016) indicates, music is perhaps a more honest form of expression than other communication forms. This often makes music less ambiguous than language when it comes to interpreting emotional communication. These properties make music effective for communicating emotions and more complex emotional or conscious states such as empathy.

Ethnocultural Empathic Affordances in Music?

The popular interdisciplinary concept *affordances* (Gibson, 1986/1979) concerns what the environment can afford an individual. One such affordance in a musical setting is *meaning*.³ Nevertheless, how music mediates meaning depends on both the cultural context and the individual respondents. Ethnocultural empathy recognizes the heterogeneous nature of empathy across various culturally based understandings of the concept (cf. Rasool et al., 2011). According to Wang et al. (2003) ethnocultural empathy includes cognitive, affective, and communicative dimensions. This variable can be measured psychometrically with the 31-item questionnaire called the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy consisting of four sub-domains: empathic feeling and expression, empathic perspective taking, acceptance of cultural differences; and empathic awareness. There are multiple ways to engage in *intercultural musicality*. For instance, «Rich intercultural music engagement» (RIME) is a formalized method for promoting intercultural bonds (Li et al., 2023). In this context, music works as a tool for interethnic social connectedness or reduced cultural bias. Exposure to musical stimuli from other cultures serves as a tool for activating emotions and associations that could increase positive attitudes towards other people of various backgrounds (Harwood, 2017).

Musical Interpretations

To illustrate the potential ethnocultural empathic affordances of music, I have chosen two music pieces (sound demonstrations) associated with real historical figures geographically located outside of the Western hemisphere. These two persons are respectively the last Chinese emperor Puyi, as well as the Congolese resistance hero and anti-colonial activist

Patrice Lumumba. Both musical pieces are available in digital media (e.g. on Spotify and YouTube). The first example is a composition by the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto (1952–2023) from *The Last Emperor* merging Western and classical sound elements with Eastern music traditions, thus representing both a fusion of and tension between Western and Eastern musical elements (Ni, 2021). The other example is a composition from the Norwegian musician Alfred Jansons (1937–2019), even more likely to be perceived as an “ambivalent” soundscape. In both cases I will emphasize cultural-contextual features in combination with selected musical observations.

Example 1: *First Coronation* (1987) by Ryuichi Sakamoto⁵

Bernardo Bertolucci's film *The Last Emperor* (1987) is a powerful example of how music can be used to build bridges between cultures and provide the audience with an empathetic entry into a foreign story. The music intentionally represents a blend of Western and Eastern music styles (Ni, 2021) as the film's entire soundtrack was composed by Sakamoto, David Byrne, and Cong Su. This collaboration of Japanese, Western, and Chinese musicians speaks for itself as an expression of cultural crossover (Yu & Ahn, 2025). The music distinctively combines diverse cultural expressions, making the audience able to feel both at home and alienated simultaneously, potentially producing potent ambiguity or even ambivalence (Ni, 2021). Even though *The Last Emperor* could be considered a Western production, scenes are also filmed in China (some remarkable scenes were filmed in “The Forbidden City”). The film was awarded for its sophisticated cinematography (Cheng, 2019).

First Coronation is an orchestral piece by Sakamoto containing pentatonic tonal structures characteristic of Chinese and, in general, Eastern music (Yu & Ahn, 2025). This tonal structure is used in various film scores, such as exemplified in the piece *Hero* (by Hans Zimmer and John Powell) from *Kung Fu Panda* and might serve the purpose of evoking Eastern cultural associations. The use of modal scales (e.g. pentatonic scales) gives an Eastern “color” that reinforces the sense of cultural identity and probably evokes “exotic” aesthetic sensations. By synthesizing Western orchestral classical music with Chinese instruments in *First coronation*, the soundscape reflects the film’s intercultural context and potentially serves as an aesthetic expression of ethnocultural empathy.

Through the mix of the foreign (Chinese instruments, pentatonic scales) and the familiar (e.g. Western harmonica, lyrical melodies), the music opens up various reflections and interpretations, which in combination might contribute to a sensation of ethnocultural empathy. These soundscape dynamics make it easier for the audience to empathize with Puyi's life and thus experience a form of intercultural empathy. In general, *The Last Emperor* demonstrates how film music can function as an *aesthetic space* where different musical languages meet and merge. And if empathy is not the ultimate result, at least we can expect a degree of curiosity about “The Other”.

⁵ Ryuichi Sakamoto (1987). *First Coronation* [Soundtrack]. Virgin Records Limited. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib84zmd5J48>

Example 2: *Patrice Lumumba* (1966) by Alfred Janson⁶

In the jazz composition *Patrice Lumumba* the dramaturgical element is salient. In this experimental and complex piece, the title and context themselves frame and set the premises for the interpretation of the music. Even though this is a mere soundtrack (without moving image), it arguably serves a narrative function. *Patrice Lumumba* is truly a modernist, dramaturgic and modal piece containing elements from hard bop, associated with protesting against injustice, and representing a call for freedom. Even consisting of only three instruments, the soundscape feels chaotic, and impulses from the Afro-Caribbean tradition are noticeable. Modal jazz is related to improvisation and musical freedom (see Stevenson 2016), and fits into a narrative of liberation from various forms of oppression (Monson 1998). These aspects can relate to concepts such as emancipation and empowerment, and at the core of the “jazz narrative” (or simply jazz history) lies the concept of freedom (Monson 1998; Stevenson 2016).

The piece *Patrice Lumumba* is interesting both in terms of its musical and political referential content. In 1960, the Democratic Republic of the Congo gained independence from Belgium. Lumumba was assassinated by his political opponents in the Congo in 1961. There was political unrest in many parts of Africa in the wake of liberation, and this turbulence created new dynamics in geopolitics. The sensation of stress, pain or suffering is probably prominent throughout this piece. For most Western listeners who are informed about the context, a probable perception is that Lumumba is a messenger of peace and was unfairly treated. In other words, we could feel empathy with Lumumba and African populations' efforts for liberation. The probable intention of evoking interethnic empathy is even more probable, given the fact that Alfred Janson described himself as a “soft socialist” and admitted to extensively apply political references in his music (Guldbrandsen 1994).

As a concept, jazz is commonly linked to a cosmopolitan declaration of freedom and generally a universal ideal of freedom (Feld 2012; Monson 1998; Stevenson 2016). The metaphor of freedom and liberation has been part of the essence of jazz since its origins and cannot be separated from its socio-political context. Not only are artistic autonomy, creativity and freedom essential, but also a form of cosmopolitan vision of freedom through jazz practice (Feld 2012; Saul 2001; Stevenson 2016) – referred to as a universal musical mind by the pianist Bill Evans (Bill Evans Archive, 1966). The term cosmopolitanism refers to a cosmopolitan attitude in which cultural diversity is not only tolerated but seen as a resource. Music itself can be conceptualized here as a cosmopolitan medium that provides space for cultural dialogue and hybridity (Stevenson, 2016), symbolizing (political) liberation and emancipation (Monson, 1998).

Prospects for Music-Induced Ethnocultural Empathy

Language and music are universal cultural-cognitive entities in human history (Huron, 2001; Miranda & Gaudreau, 2020). One of the reasons why music exists is probably that it contributes to social cohesion by promoting altruism and solidarity (Huron, 2001). Music is a source of transcendence for many people (for example, in religious contexts) and can help

⁶ *Portrait of a Norwegian Jazz Artist – Erik Amundsen (2006). Patrice Lumumba [Soundtrack]. (distributed Gemini Records, recorded 11.04.1966). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMAg69CusT4>*

build empathy and break down barriers. In this perspective, it makes sense to talk about the role of music in social and public (community) health. At a time when musicology, and the social and cultural study of music, has become far more aware of what can be seen as essentializing and romanticizing tendencies, it is still not uncommon to find claims about music as a “universal language” that can overcome (or even transcend) cultural differences (Miranda & Gaudreau, 2020).

Huron (2001) suggests that music, often unlike verbal interaction (or “speech acts”), can reduce the level of conflict between people. Music can thus signal security and serve an adaptive function. In evolutionary terms, music can contribute to team spirit, cooperation, and coordination. Accordingly, music might help promote solidarity and altruism between people belonging to a group. This could contribute to more efficiency in the social community that binds people with a common identity against a potential opponent or enemy (Clayton, 2016). An adequate degree of ethnocultural empathy is necessary for peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. For example, people who have experienced war and insecurity can communicate their feelings through music. Current migration flows make cultural understanding a relatively central theme in public media discourses. When the multicultural complexity is emerging and we observe challenges to the prevailing institutional framework in society, Slobin (2003) argues that people are reaching for dynamic musical movements.

Music also conveys important cultural characteristics through its traditional symbols and collective identities (Elliott, 1990). As a universal medium, music can potentially mitigate conflicts and hostility between groups. Music possesses the potential for shaping emotions in ways language cannot, and an aesthetic understanding of different types of music can form the basis for communicating, negotiating, and sharing identities across cultures. However, effective cross-cultural communication is conditional on mutual respect, trust and curiosity between the cultures in question. Music has the potential to improve interpersonal interaction and can thus be considered a key resource in society. For instance, music anthropologist Steven Feld promotes the concept of “musical citizenship” to address themes such as social conscience, social responsibility, injustice and oppression (Ruud, 2016, p. 292). According to Ruud (2016), “Feld’s appeal was to search for the musical expressions of marginalized groups in society,” (p. 292). Indeed, music can be good for both societal and subjective well-being.

“Musicalizing” Culture

Inspired by Klempe’s (2016) interpretation of “the musicalization of language”, we can consider a process of musicalizing culture in the previously presented cases. Intercultural music engagement (Crooke et al., 2024) could operate both consciously and subconsciously, while ethnocultural empathy recognizes the heterogeneity of cultural customs on the planet. This is important as the merging of psychology and music is more commonplace than ever in the fact that new streaming platforms constitute one of the most important forms of musical consumption today.

Bill Evans’ idea of a “universal musical mind” can be seen in the light of Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar: All humans have an innate capacity for language. The key point from Evans is the importance of being *conditioned*. As aesthetics and artistic media, musical expressions conveyed through both jazz and film music can contribute to the experience of

meaning. Therefore, we can suggest an existence of a “universal aesthetic mind” that enables shared understanding through artistic expression.

Music, Empathy and Intercultural Tolerance

In a contemporary context characterized by globalization, migration, and digitalization, modern societies face challenges related to intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence. Ethnocultural empathy, which involves the ability to understand, respect, and respond to emotions and experiences across cultural boundaries, represents an important capacity for humans to navigate in these complex environments. Music constitutes a unique medium for such processes, as it can function as a universal language for emotional communication. Empathy can function as a source of ethnocultural “bridge-building”, interaction and contact. Studying ethnocultural empathy appears increasingly important in ethnically heterogeneous societies to promote communication but also achieve greater degrees of cross-cultural congruence in therapy or research (Rasoal et al., 2011).

In film music, so-called empathetic sound is referred to when there is a strong correspondence between sound effects (including music) and moods in the film scene. Film music, marketing (advertising) and therapy are areas where music is used strategically to influence people to develop certain attitudes or promote certain types of behavior (see Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). The film medium can be argued to be “ubiquitous”. Arguably almost “everyone” consumes it, and one might consider it one of the most important aesthetical export articles of Western civilization. Film music appeals to a wide audience through its connection to narratives and visual media. It has a special ability to generate emotional resonance, and acts as an aestheticization of empathy that is institutionalized in global media.

Film music enables the communication of cultural information and emotional expressions across language through common and potentially universal musical idioms. This genre of contemporary art music is available for broad groups in the public and is daily consumed through television, cinema and digital platforms (e.g. as mere individual listening practice music on Spotify). Film music also serves as a cosmopolitical commodity because people take part – consciously or not – in various cultures by consuming this musical form.

Limitations and Interpretative Extensions

Dynamic social impact theory claims that repeated exposure between ethnically diverse groups could limit hostilities. This theory claims that repeated experience with individuals from other cultures weakens the basis for polarization in the long run. This occurs through a gradual or dynamic process where traditional attitudes are softened (Latané, 1996). Therefore, it is conceivable that experience with the music of foreign cultures can provide better cross-cultural harmony in the long run, not least through mediation of empathetic responses from musical experiences. In this regard, the metaphor of “the global musical village” (inspired by the media theorist Marshall McLuhan) applies. Musical stimuli represent a potential for empathic affordances. As music supplements the dramaturgy in a film, it *affords* the opportunity to engage in a scenario. The two examples discussed show how both jazz and film music might serve as a medium for ethnocultural empathy. However, one obvious limitation is certainly that cultural exchange does not automatically imply intercultural empathy and connectedness. Cognitive aspects of attitudes and prejudices, and so on, are also of interest when it comes to the degree of failure or success in predicting

interethnic empathy. Whether we can realistically predict convergences or divergences between members of various cultures is another question not addressed in this article. In this regard, the author of this paper also represents a Western bias, accentuating the importance of recognizing the potential influence from the cultural background of the observing interpreter.

Conclusion

Music represents an important ethnocultural empathic affordance through its intersubjective function and universal nature. As various music expressions and styles constitute cultural products, communicating complex information and storytelling with music might enable the facilitation of empathy across cultures. The contemporary multimedia setting characterized by hybrid identities and glocalization enables the fusion of genres and musical traditions in a historically dominant Western context.

Merging cultural psychology and musicology gives new opportunities for the social sciences in the digital era. This article argues for the understanding of jazz and film music as empathic affordances. The internet and available platforms such as YouTube or Spotify provide a unique database for engaging with other cultures musically. The cosmopolitan associations in jazz and the universality of film music represent two different and powerful ways to build bridges between cultures through music.

Music emerges as a potentially powerful catalyst of ethnocultural empathy, for example through the cultural-historical references in jazz, as in the case of the piece *Patrice Lumumba*, or as in intercultural film music, where cultures blend in the case of *The Last Emperor*. Through its narrative functions, music can promote ethnocultural empathy in film and other multimedia. We might conclude that a degree of motivation and openness is necessary to achieve an ethnocultural empathic response. And as Bill Evans points out in the introductory quote, the quest for a real understanding of various types of music relies on both effort and exposure.

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