

Chapter 7

“In Toronto, Iranians and Israelis Make Music, Not War”: Political Communication via Engaged Musicking

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ABSTRACT

Engaged musicking creates enjoyable, meaningful aesthetic experiences and strengthens citizen engagement in public policy. This case study of March 2015 Converging Paths concert in Toronto, organized by the Israeli-Iranian Musical Initiative, demonstrates how acting through this worldview included political communication as a key sphere of action. Applying Mannheim’s Documentary Approach, three interpretations are presented: The Objective Interpretation details what occurred. Subjective Interpretation presents analyses of organizer-composer-musicians’ explanations for why and how they constructed and communicated their alternative political narrative. Documentary Interpretation explains how organizers’ initiatives, including political communication, are consonant with efforts by critical communicators, conflict transformation through social change, audiotopias.

INTRODUCTION

A delighted audience at the Alliance Francaise Theatre in Toronto was treated to a concert unlike any they had heard before. But it wasn’t just the performance that struck a powerful chord. It was the players and their collaborative mission that made us all sit up a little straighter and offer a deliberately appreciative round of applause upon the concert’s last heartfelt note. (Birnbaum, 2015)

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In mid-March 2015, just about the time Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke to a joint session of the United States Congress about the “historic mistake” to be made in yet-to-be-finalized agreement seeking to end Iran’s capacities to build nuclear armaments, Israeli and Iranian musicians, founding members of the Israeli-Iranian Musical Initiative [I=I],¹ circulated a counter-narrative through a press release that announced that their first project would be a concert, entitled – *Converging Paths: A Concert of Music Inspired by Iranian and Israeli Cultures*. Scheduled to take place on March 31, 2015, the program would consist of premiere performances of compositions by I=I members, and improvised music-making by Iranian, Israeli and Canadian musicians.

One of the primary political messages was stated clearly by I=I member and co-author Noam Lemish in a pre-concert interview: “Israel and Iran are two nations in a state of diplomatic and political hostility. Yet, we believe that as individuals and communities, here in Toronto, we have the power to transcend this perception and present an alternative. Instead of conflict, our narrative is one of collaboration, dialogue and celebration” (Dietschi, 2015).

Unpacking the chapter’s headline title, quoted from an article that appeared in the online English version of *Haaretz*, an elite daily Israeli newspaper, serves as entrée to the complex, dynamic nature of political communication through music, exemplified by the case of the *Converging Paths* concert. To illustrate this complexity, we begin with brief analyses from perspectives of three mass communication professions.

Marketing-Public Relations

This headline appears to be a marketing success as it could advance ticket sales. Yet, ticket sales could not have been I=I’s motive in sending press releases to Israeli reporters, since *Haaretz*’s readers are unlikely to attend a concert in Toronto. Interestingly, in this regard, this article appeared online on March 25, a week before the concert, which by then was sold-out. Operationally, this suggests that the aim of I=I’s messaging, publicist, press releases, *Haaretz* headline and article and its redistribution globally via social media² served as modes of communicating political messages through publicizing a musical event that few if any of the readers would actually attend.

Journalistic Perspective

Haaretz’s article could be viewed, on the one hand, as a benign Arts & Entertainment-like human interest story of cooperation between musicians scheduled to perform music from one another’s countries in a context far removed from their cultural roots and realities of existential threats. On the other hand, media and conflict scholars could argue that, juxtaposed to near exclusivity of violence-centered conflict reporting, *Haaretz*’s article is an example of conflict-sensitive reporting on the full range of views and actions by citizens in societies in conflict, including those who advance alternative perspectives via, for example, such non-violent actions as music-making.

Interlocutors

If the intent of I=I initiators, musicians who performed and audience members in attendance was not only to enjoy the music but to be demonstratively “appreciative” of the counter-narrative performed by

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