Music: The Power to Connect
Benjamin Bolden

Abstract: In this editorial the author discusses the power of music to connect individuals to heritage and culture familiar and foreign, to loved ones and strangers, and to aspects of self both known and unknown. These concepts are illustrated with narratives set in a community gamelan rehearsal, a Sikh wedding ceremony, and an impromptu family song writing session.

‘Music is an amazing human adventure and something that needs to be shared.’

– Chris Hadfield, astronaut and commander of the International Space Station (Music Monday, May 6, 2013)

Three years ago I was sitting on the floor in front of a bonang harung, an instrument of the Javanese gamelan, fabric-wrapped mallets in hand. The leader of the ensemble, Buana, was teaching us a new piece. With unflagging patience he moved from one player to the next, showing each of us what to play on the gender, kempul, kenong, ketuk and kempyang. We were a motley crew of novice gamelan enthusiasts: some music education graduate students, some school of music percussionists, a young professor and a student from across campus, a member of the community. Fortunately, we also had some ringers: Buana’s wife, Sinta, and their daughters Intan and Kashi.

Buana had travelled with his family from Indonesia to Canada to do graduate work. I can only imagine the tremendous challenges of this upheaval, the sacrifices made as this courageous quartet left behind everything and everyone familiar to forge a new life a world away.

A fringe benefit of the gamelan rehearsals, for me, was the chance to come to know this family, and see them in action: the teen and pre-teen daughters supporting (only a little grudgingly) their dad by boosting the numbers – and ability – in our little group. Sinta, their mother, was a godsend to me, unfailingly good-natured as she helped me with my disastrous lack of ability in remembering when to hit what.

Buana continued his travels around the ensemble, eventually kneeling down opposite Sinta, her instrument of metal bars, the slentern, between them. While she played her part, he played a counter melody from the other side of the metallophone. Buana pushed the tempo, and soon their mallets and hands damping the bars were flying as the intricate interlocking parts melded into a shimmering whole. One by one the other members of the group and I stopped working at our own instruments to gaze in wonder at the virtuosity suddenly on display. Buana and Sinta were locked in to each other, weaving their melodies together in a flurry of movement and iridescent sound. Buana was not looking at the metal bars, but gazing at his wife. Sinta looked up too, hands and mallet still flying back and forth. She caught his eye and grinned.

The tremendous power of the connection between them at that moment was riveting. I could not help but imagine how wonderful it must be for these two to seize this stolen moment and throw aside all the challenges and struggles – everything from unfamiliar academic bureaucracy to economic hardship to teenage daughter needs and angst – to re-connect simply and meaningfully to each other and to the heritage and traditions left behind all at once through the playing of music.

* * * *

Three weeks ago I attended a Sikh wedding ceremony, a brand new experience for me. One of my favourite moments was a ritualistic meeting of the families. The clans of the bride and groom faced off outside the temple. The leader of the ceremony called for the groom’s father to come forward and greet the father of the bride. As these two stepped out from their kin drummers – playing double-headed dhols – set to, vigorously beating an energetic Bhagra dance rhythm. The fathers threw garlands around each other’s necks then clasped each other in a welcoming bear hug. In a display of bravado the father of the groom picked the bride’s dad right up off the ground! This was repeated with mothers, aunts, sisters, uncles, brothers, and so on, all to the celebratory beating of the drums.

Later in the evening, at the reception, a duo performed on sitar and tabla while the wedding guests sipped cocktails and munched pakoras. I stood off to the side, watching them play. Despite the ambivalence of the cocktail crowd, the musicians were fully engaged. They weren’t playing for an audience; they were playing for each other. I sensed the music reaching a rhythmic structural climax, the instrumentalists moving towards each other, coming home from far-flung adventures to land with such satisfaction together on the first beat of the tala – the sam, the point of resolution. The tabla player smiled and caught the eye of the sitarist, nodding in appreciation of this powerful and immensely satisfying moment of synchronization.
Dragon Fire & Mighty B

If there is some trouble, some trouble that you see,
There may be a fire, some kind of mystery.

You need Dragon Fire and Mighty B, both have super powers.

Dragon Fire can electrocute! Mighty B's got mighty strength and

Many more powers to boast! If you are falling out a tree, scared of what you see.

Hi yi yi yi yee! Call quickly... Dragon Fire and Mighty B.
Together, we let our imaginations lead us into a super-hero world.
With sparkling eyes we launched into the challenge of building a song that could capture it.

Music is not only a medium for expression but also a powerful tool for cognitive development. Researchers have found that musical training can enhance verbal intelligence, spatial abilities, reasoning, and the rest is not nearly so exciting as music’s potential for connecting people. Just as music can serve to connect neurons within our brains, so too can it serve to connect people within our worlds. I am referring to music’s non-scientific power to connect — its spiritual power.

Three days ago I tried to interest my five year old in playing some piano. He humoured me for about five minutes then took off, with a burning need to dress up as a super hero. Defeated, I sighed and closed the lid of the piano.

Then I had moment of inspiration.

“Hey Max!”
“What?” (A muffled sound, his head thrust deep in the dress-up box.)

“How about we compose a song together, a theme song for...who are you, anyway?”

“Dragon Fire!” he responded, without missing a beat, somewhat surprised that I wouldn’t know this already. (Of course! How could I not realize that a small boy wearing blue long underwear, red briefs overtop, and a red turtleneck with paper taped to the front featuring a hastily scribbled yellow flame was anyone other than the mighty Dragon Fire?)

“Let’s write a song together about Dragon Fire!”

“Well...”

He glanced up the stairs, concerned no doubt about the hapless victims who would have to be left languishing in the clutches of the evil...

“OK.” He climbed back up on the piano bench beside me. I re-opened the lid, and we set to.

Together, we let our imaginations lead us into a super-hero world. With sparkling eyes we launched into the challenge of building a song that could capture it. We threw out words and ideas and sought sounds to match, bursting into laughter when the brainstorming (inevitably) turned ridiculous. We shared the excitement of stumbling across the lyric or chord or pitch that fit.

“Yes. No... Yes, Yes!”

Music has many super powers. One of my favourites is its power to connect. Music can connect us to heritage and culture famil-