

# THE SOUND OF RECONCILIATION? MUSICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL HARMONY IN THE SRI LANKA NORWAY MUSIC COOPERATION (2009-2018)

**Solveig Korum**

University of Agder (Norway), Faculty of Fine Arts, contact: [sk@kulturtanken.no](mailto:sk@kulturtanken.no)

## **Abstract**

This article presents findings from the Sri Lanka Norway Music Cooperation (SLNMC, 2009-2018) launched immediately after a twenty-four year long civil war in Sri Lanka. The project responded to a stated need of rebuilding a fractured society and re-establishing relations between Sinhala and Tamil populations of the island. The SLNMC comprised school concerts and public concerts, music education, heritage documentation and digitalization, in addition to skill training for musicians and technicians, festival organizers and other actors in cultural life.

The article offers a critical phenomenological approach to the concept of *harmony*, where both phenomena of musical and socio-cultural harmony are displayed and discussed in relation to each other. I set out to investigate whether harmony in the SLNMC was a taken for granted, 'dead metaphor' or an actual creative and impactful tool for implementing musical activities in a post-war context. Theoretically, my point of departure is Howell's conceptual investigation of harmony in multicultural musical projects (Howell, 2018) and specifically in the South-Asia context (Howell, 2019). I have combined elements from her framework with Sykes (2011 and 2018a) as well as insights from my own research data to present a schema of three musical and three socio-cultural definitions of harmony paired and discussed in relation to each other. In conclusion, I argue that attention to various types of musical and socio-cultural harmony can cast new light on existing art for reconciliation-practices as well as generate fresh and fertile views on how to conceive, implement and assess such initiatives in the future.

## **Keywords**

Sociocultural processes, Harmony, Sound, Sri Lanka, Reconciliation

According to Lakoff & Johnson ([1980] 2003), metaphors are neither merely illustrative, nor purely poetic ways of designating a phenomenon, but they have materialistic consequences and are of key importance when we try to make sense and acting in the world. 'Harmony' is one such concept, frequently employed to illustrate how the world is supposed to be. Originating from the musical field, the metaphor is commonly – and often uncritically – claimed to designate ideal relationships in the sociocultural realms. It is frequently connected to a multiculturalist conception of unity in diversity, of respect and acceptance of cultural differences in society.

In this article, I critically explore how the metaphor of 'harmony' has played out in the Sri Lanka- Norway Music cooperation (2009-2018, hereafter SLNMC). Launched immediately after a twenty-four year long civil war in Sri Lanka, this development-funded project responded to a stated need of rebuilding a fractured society and re-establishing relations between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil ethnic groups who had fought for decades. The study offers a critical phenomenological approach to the concept of harmony, where both phenomena of musical and socio-cultural harmony are displayed and discussed in relation to each other.

I set out to investigate whether harmony in the SLNMC was a taken for granted, 'dead metaphor' or an actual creative and impactful tool for implementing musical activities in a post-war context. I have divided my findings into six categories, namely three musical and three socio-cultural notions of harmony, with pairs corresponding to each other. I argue that attention

to various types of musical and socio-cultural harmony can cast new light on existing art for reconciliation-practices (such as the SLNMC) as well as generate fresh and fertile views on how to conceive, implement and assess such initiatives in the future.

Before unpacking the metaphor and sharing my analysis, I start by giving some basic information about the SLNMC. Secondly, I present my research profile and methodological reflections prior to an overview of relevant literature crossing the disciplinary fields of musicology, applied ethnomusicology and sociology that I have used in the conduct of this study.

## ABOUT THE SRI LANKA NORWAY MUSIC COOPERATION

In 1983, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil militant organization, waged a secessionist nationalist insurgency to create an independent state of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of Sri Lanka. This claim led to a civil war that lasted until May 2009, when the LTTE was eventually defeated by the Sinhala military during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (Sorbo, Goodhand, and Klem 2011). UN has stated that between 80.000 to 100.000 people died in what is one of Asia's longest modern wars (Charbonneau 2009). Immediately after the end of conflict, the international community poured in development funding to the island. Donations mainly went to rebuilding of physical infrastructure and basic services to the population, but also aimed to support social and religious reconciliation between the previous belligerents. Between 2009 and 2018, through several successive project periods, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) annually invested 211,000 USD (NOK at rate 9.4 to USD) in the SLNMC. They contracted Concerts Norway (hereafter CN), a Norwegian governmental music organisation, as the main responsible project owner, who again made sub-contracts with the local partners in Sri Lanka. The goal was to "... stimulate the performing arts in Sri Lanka, *thus contributing to the peace and reconciliation process*" (CN 2011). The programme included two flagship-festivals in Jaffna (situated in the mainly Tamil-populated north) and in Galle (in the Sinhala-dominated south), school concerts with Sri Lankan and international musicians, public concerts, open workshops, university masterclasses, international tours, study trips, training of sound engineers, regional exchange and last but not least; collection, documentation and dissemination of Sri Lankan folk music through a newly established Folk Music Conservation Center in Colombo. The project formally ended in 2018.

## RESEARCH PROFILE AND METHODOLOGY

The motivation behind this current study stems from my professional experience and background. As a previous employee of CN, I have been involved as a project manager in a range of music cooperation-projects with countries in the global South. At the end of my working period in CN, I sensed a growing discomfort with the notion of 'harmony' in the SLNMC. Phrases such as "bringing together individuals and groups of different origin and working for peace and harmony" and "Harmony: Unity in diversity!" appeared and reappeared in project documents and media reports that we released. On the outside, it all looked great, but inside the project, the term was understood in ambiguous ways. In 2010, in Oslo, I recall a group of low-country Sinhala Buddhist drummers and mask dancers from southern Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup> were scheduled to share stage with Tamil singers and dancers residing in Norway. As

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<sup>1</sup> The *yak tovil* tradition presented by this ensemble includes mask dancing and drumming to eradicate illnesses brought on by demons (Sykes, 2018: 21, Kapferer, 2005). The conducted several performances in Oslo, for example at the International Museum of Children's Art and at the Museum of Cultural History in addition to an outdoor concert at Oslo City Cultural Night along the prominent Aker river.

organizers, we were happy to offer a Sri Lankan cultural evening in the name of reconciliation; yet after the Tamil troupe had performed and the joint ceremony was over, they did not stay back to watch the Sinhala artists. For them, performing and then leaving was a way of respecting the organizers, while at the same time marking no will to communicate with and reconcile with the Other (Tamil vocal teacher in Oslo, personal communication 2018). I could have cited many such incidents in Norway and in Sri Lanka, both self-experienced and situations shared by informants in research interviews. I will come back to some of them in the findings section. Yet, my purpose of bringing the topic up here is to pinpoint some tensions of the SLNMC that sparked my interest in conducting this study.

My research data consists of field observations, interviews<sup>2</sup>, program documents, reports, media clips and other written sources documenting the activities and musical choices of the SLNMC between 2009 and 2018. Through these sources, I sought to identify the discourses and actions of harmony in the SLNMC. Framing my study in a postcolonial context (McEwan 2019) and being conscious about my white, Norwegian middle-class background and the values, positionality and limits attached to that, I explicitly sought knowledge about the perception of harmony as an interrelated term in a cultural context (elaborated in section 5.3). Furthermore, it seemed obvious to involve the Sri Lankan stakeholders and participants in the *whole* research process, both as contributors of data as well as fellow investigators. In February 2018, we held a research forum in Colombo where my Australian colleague, Dr. Gillian Howell and I presented our preliminary findings from the SLNMC and asked practitioners, musicians, students and senior academics to share nuances and constructively discuss elements from our research that they would perceive differently<sup>3</sup>. I have also exchanged full text drafts with Sri Lankan academic colleagues and participants of the SLNMC in the process of writing this article. I do not claim this as a comprehensive study of harmony in the SLNMC, as I am well aware that given feedback is conveyed with a particular cultural backdrop consisting of a certain set of expectations, values and beliefs (Bass 2013: 17). I nevertheless hope that this article, by unpacking key significations of the harmony-metaphor in the SLNMC, can contribute to increased conceptual clarity and fruitful reflection on praxis.

## RELATED RESEARCH

Before moving on to unpacking the harmony-metaphor, I will share a brief overview of what previous research says about harmony and its link to conflict transformation and reconciliation processes.

Academic interest in musical harmony as a combined metaphor cum tool in processes of conflict transformation is not new (Skylstad, 1993 and 2008; Levinge, 1996; Cohen, 2005). In this last decade, the concept has however received increased research attention, with Urbain's *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics* (2008) as a monumental contribution, crossing the disciplinary fields of musicology, ethnomusicology and sociology. Already in its title, the book plays with the fundamental concept we are here grappling with. Yet, instead of unpacking and problematizing the metaphor itself, it provides

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<sup>2</sup> I was in SL with the sole purpose of conducting research for my PhD for a total of five months between October 2017 and March 2019. My main body of thirty-four informants consists of people who, in various ways, have been connected to the process of conceiving, implementing and reporting on this project. This choice is justified by empirical evidence that organizers are the key shaping force of music interventions (Howell 2018: 300). They are, however, not the only influential party, hence I have also included some participants (music teachers, music students and musicians) and other people from the Sri Lankan community with various links to the project.

<sup>3</sup> The forum was conducted on February 27<sup>th</sup>2018 at the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute in Colombo from 9 am to 3.30 pm.

informative and thought-provoking frameworks about music and empathy, music and its value in cross-cultural work and questioning music as a “universal language” (Cohen 2008, in Urbain: 26-39). The accounts of music’s link to politics and music as a tool for reconciliation in South-Africa (Gray, 2008: 63-77) constitute valuable inspiration for my subsequent analysis. Furthermore, Bergh (2010) eloquently writes about music in/ as conflict transformation to improve relationships between in and out-groups, yet he does not pick apart the harmony concept itself when analyzing his rich data sets from Sudan and Norway. Numerous studies about music and/ in /as social action have been published lately by members of the recently established SIMM<sup>4</sup> research network, where Geoffrey Baker is one of the founding members. In his study about El Sistema in Venezuela, one of the world’s most hailed and influential classical music education systems, Baker (2014: 208-209) argues that this organization is a prominent example of how the harmony-discourse masks power:

The rather sinister idea of tuning up children to a single voice is hard to square with claims for democratic functioning, because democracies are not harmonious: they are diverse and discordant (...) The dream of a society that sings in unison, perfectly in tune, evokes the (mono) culture of conformity typically found in cults (Baker, 2014: 208).

Hence, the notion of harmony itself is pulled forward, discussed and challenged. Baker draws on scholars such as Jorgensen (2004) and Broyles (2012) to illustrate his point that not everyone must be fully in tune to achieve harmony: It is indeed of uttermost importance that the jarring notes also find their space in harmony. Last, but not least, one of the latest issues of the journal *Music and Arts in Action* is a special collection of articles that deals with keywords for music in peacebuilding. Here, Howell’s (2018) heuristic framework of harmony evoked in the context of conflict and social division offered important input for my analytical work. Howell proposes five core categories of harmony as (1) as order; (2) as balance; (3) as blend; (4) as moral behavior and (5) as conflict-avoidance, categories I will return to in my next sections.

To sum up learnings from the literature, one can say that mixing up the musical and sociocultural concepts of harmony up can at best be dismissed as a romanization. At worst, it can block genuine attempts of communication between people. Unless the concept is understood and integrated in all its complexity, poorly thought through attempts to create harmony can be counterproductive and even harmful (Cohen 2008, Harwood 2017).

## **HARMONY: UNPACKING THE METAPHOR**

Metaphors are created when a term is transferred from one system or level of meaning to another. Yet, “metaphors are not only ornamental aspects of language, but also frame our thinking and doings in important ways” (Alvesson, 2017: 487). Metaphors are current in all kinds of languages, in all layers of society and fields. Yet, there are fields where the metaphors clearly have a more severe impact than others. Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 243) highlights the distinction between seeing a military attack as a ‘rape’, a ‘threat to our security’ and ‘the defense of a population against terrorism’ and, in a recent personal communication (23.08.2019) about metaphors in international aid and development, Desmond McNeill argues that the most frequent metaphors in development assistance lead to unjustified optimism; an optimism described as ‘culpable’ because it can foster bad policies and subsequent material practices on the ground.

When we transfer a metaphor directly and uncritically from one field to another, metaphors can give us tunnel vision. Instead of triggering creativity and encouraging counter-thinking, they

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<sup>4</sup> The Social Impact of Making Music (SIMM) is an independent international scholarly association founded in 2015 at the University of Gent, Belgium. It includes a wide network of academic researchers and practitioners in the field of music and social research who meet regularly for symposia and conferences (SIMM 2019).

limit us by the fact that we give them a self-evident, literal meaning. As my research subsequently shows, the discourse of harmony in the SLNMC in some cases falls into this category, notably when it is referred to as something uniquely positive, easy and pleasant. Yet, I would also argue that the harmony-metaphor in the SLNMC is not definitively dead; I would rather (re)define it as *frozen*, justified by the fact that a conscious use of this metaphor still seems to have a vast potential. By engaging in a (self)critical and reflexive process, by questioning harmony’s very foundations, my aim here is to *defrost* the metaphor to lounge its critical potential for conflict transformation and reconciliation.

## FINDINGS: HARMONY IN THE SRI LANKA NORWAY MUSIC COOPERATION

In this section, I present three musical and three socio-cultural definitions of harmony and establish a link between them based on activities and experiences of the SLNMC. Emerging from a grounded theory perspective based on my research data in dialogue with the above-mentioned literature, I have placed them in corresponding pairs that eventually constitute the structure of my analysis. These pairs are the following:

Types of musical harmony	Corresponding sociocultural model	SLNMC examples
Consonant (Western) harmony: “chords pleasing to the ear” (Shenasi, 2015: 12), “when notes blend together” (harmony, n.d.)	Harmony as sociocultural <i>blend</i> (Howell 2018: 5) where individuals or groups interact and blend in varying degrees with other individuals or groups (see also Barth 1969, Jenkins 2011: 1-19)  Harmony as <i>conflict avoidance</i> : Glossing over difference (Howell 2018: 6, Leung et al. 2002)	Jaffna and Galle Music Festivals (JMF & GMF)
Dissonant (Western) harmony: Dissonant chords and notes foreign to the chord; which nevertheless forms a musical whole (Cohn et al. 2001)	<i>Critical engagement</i> with the Other (Higgins 2008, Gottesman 2018), educational dialogue and <i>reflexive inquiry</i> (Freire 2000, Reardon and Snauwaert 2011): Willingness to see, hear and interact with the Other.	University Musical Meeting Spaces (UMMS)
“Musical giving”: Folk culture and ritualistic events where the harmony-conception is linked to the <i>function</i> (not primarily the sound) of the music.	Circulation of <i>gifts</i> between humans and gods (Sykes 2018a) to create harmony as <i>cosmic balance</i> (Howell 2018, Brindley 2012:16).	Folk Music Conservation Center

## “AN EASY-LISTENING, PLEASING SOUND”

### THE CONCEPT

*Music Land* is the name of a Disney classic from 1935. The short movie shows a map of Music Land before zooming in on the Land of Symphony. This is a classical-themed kingdom, where the princess, an anthropomorphized violin, gets bored with the slow ballroom music and sneaks out from the castle. Close to the Land of Symphony, across the Sea of Discord, lies the Isle of Jazz. This jazz-themed kingdom, with lively music and dancing, is led by the mighty King Baritone (sax). One day, his son, Prince Alto (sax), decides to cross the Sea of Discord and falls in love with Princess Violin. The story ends happily with a wedding presided over by a double bass minister, as the citizens of both lands dance on the newly built Bridge of Harmony and a rainbow with musical notes appears in the sky. This little gem of a cartoon exposes a condensed version of how we generally understand harmony, both in musical and sociocultural terms. In music, harmony, i.e. playing more than one note at the same time, is what gives richness and

texture to the music. Harmony is usually understood as chords pleasing to the ear, relying on a presumption of sweetness and pleasantness (Shenasi, 2015). By combining intervals in a scale “understood not as a series but a structure” (Cohn *et al*, 2001: 1), numeric proportions make the music appear blended and balanced. This is referred to as *consonant* sound.

A corresponding view within the sociocultural realm is a vision of harmony as *blend* (Howell, 2018: 5) i.e. a mix of diverse elements, such as different social roles, ethnicity, beliefs and opinions, towards a functional whole. This functional whole rests on notions of inclusion and multiculturalism, yet the obstacles to those ideals are manifold. I will come back to them in the discussion of my SLNMC example below. Harmony as *conflict avoidance* (Leung *et al*, 2002; Howell, 2018: 6) is also a relevant term as it implies that individuals subordinate their personal interest to those of the collective. Here, conflict is seen as a source of social disturbance rather than a constructive human process (*ibid*). This may contribute to uphold a certain intercourse and order, but as Leung *et. al* (2002) suggests, it risks creating a superficial type of harmony only, leaving unresolved disputes and emotions bubbling under the surface.



FIGURE 1: Stage performance JMF 2013 (Photography by the author).

### JAFFNA AND GALLE MUSIC FESTIVALS

The SLNMC sought to create blended harmony by staging a multicultural festival, alternating between Galle in the (mainly Sinhala) south and Jaffna in the (mainly Tamil) north. This was multiculturalism at display with a strong symbolic effect: Pictures and live images from JMF and GMF went viral all over (and beyond) the island; yet due to unprocessed emotions and many things left unsaid, there is reason to question whether this model can actually lead to a just and sustainable peace.

The example I cited in my methodology section about the Sinhala and Tamil performers sharing (but not actually *sharing*) stage in Oslo can also be linked to this point: While the framing of the event was done in the name of harmony and “blend of cultures”, what actually took place on stage that night was the diametrically opposite. All groups came, they did their musical parts, but the Tamils did not stay back to watch the Sinhala group perform. The musicians did not talk to each other, they did not socially mix, they only played their parts in the harmony show staged by the organizers (project manager notebook 2010; Tamil vocal teacher in Oslo, personal communication 2018).

Even though a stated intention of the JMF and GMF was to celebrate diversity, and that this was applauded by many, they also had to face a contradiction; the paradox of identity (Orjuela 2008: 51). After the war, there was a strategic need to name oppressed groups in order to fight subjugation. This “strategic essentialism” and has been criticized by postcolonial academics such as Spivak (1990) and Bhabha (1994) who says that this entails a risk of reinforcing stereotypes, not eliminating them; because the “... the subordinate group typically mobilizes around identity categories, which the dominant group has made salient” (Orjuela 2008). When naming and creating “boxes” for these groups in the setting of JMF and GMF, nuances seem to have been lost and instead of emphasizing the potential fluidity of the performer’s identity, a static version was confirmed.

Furthermore, the conditions of multiculturalism also, to a large extent, seemed to be defined by the majority, in this case the Sinhalese. In spite of Tamils (and other minorities) being involved, this sometimes appeared to be more for the sake of checking boxes of representativity rather than a genuine concern of blending the groups. Howell (2019) made the following observations during GMF in 2016, when she attended the joint rehearsals and performances of a female *thappu*-ensemble from Kilinochchi (north) and a traditional drumming ensemble from the national Performing Arts Academy in Colombo (south):

The Kilinochchi group played a traditional Tamil drum, the *thappu*, traditionally played by a historically low-status caste. The young women (and one man) in the Kilinochchi group danced while playing. The Colombo group played a more diverse range of drums from the up-country and low-country traditions, including practices that enjoy significant state sponsorship as a ‘national’ representative artform of Sri Lanka. Therefore, there were some differences in the status that the wider social context attached to the groups’ instruments (...) the Kilinochchi group did not travel with their own artistic director, while the artistic director of the Colombo group assumed a directorial role of the rehearsals and performance. The Kilinochchi group deferred most artistic decision-making to him, apart from their own drumming and choreography (...) there were moments of interaction and pairing taking place between the Kilinochchi and Colombo drummers, which could be said to be subverting the conventions of their performance traditions by mixing the distinctive Sinhalese and Tamil sounds together. However, it was a relatively superficial type of blending, highly suitable for a national festival but not attempting to signify a deeper form of exchange. (Howell 2019: 9-10)

Howell highlights how decision-making was dominated by the Colombo group’s artistic director; how it was colored by the fact that the rehearsal space was the Colombo group’s home base (and that the Tamils had to rehearse in a corner of the main room when they wanted to work on their own music) and how much of the performance time and the physical space on the festival stage was occupied by the Sinhalese drummers, something that do not suggest an equal or perfectly harmonious status between the two, even if this was the apparent intention.

### “OH, THAT JARRING SOUND”

The violence of a civil war represents a human experience beyond apprehension. In this context, relying on an easy-listening version of the harmonic metaphor is almost like a mockery of the people affected by the conflict. The wounds are so deep, the trauma so profound. Even though it can function as a temporary relief; the artists and the audience truly seemed to enjoy joint musicking and dancing during the first editions of the GMF and JMF (confirmed by informants ASR, JRdS, SS and others during field interviews in 2017 and 2018), it seems obvious that a different kind of engagement with each other is needed to create more profound harmony and sustainable reconciliation after such dramatic events. My next section will introduce the reader to a notion of harmony that can potentially address these traumas. A *dissonant* understanding of harmony carries the prospective to name and integrate individual and sociocultural tensions and use them to improve relations between people from previously belligerent groups.

## THE CONCEPT

In music there is not only consonant harmony; there are also dissonant chords where other, more complex intervals are used to create a jarring sound. The dissonance is produced by the simultaneous vibration of the air column at two frequencies that are not harmonically related – a timbral alternation. Dissonance adds richness and powerful tension to the music, but too much of it might make the piece hard to relate to. Finding the right balance is a fine task, frequently explored by avant-garde composers or by free jazz musicians, who commonly subvert the chords. There is also a distinction to be made between dissonant chords and notes foreign to the chord, a differentiation that gradually came to permeate Western compositional practice and music theory from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Cohn *et al.* 2001: 4). The tension these elements adds to the music can immediately be heard by the listener, yet if their intended effect is to be understood, it somehow requires an awareness of the norms with which they conflict. The concepts of “harmolodics” introduced by saxophonist Ornette Coleman exemplifies this approach in the sense that he refused to relate to *one* tonal center, where tonal limitations, rhythmic pre-determination and harmonic rules would prevent music’s free expression. According to him, music in its free form holds the potential to heal suffering and pain: “when you are depressed, music seems to be a very good dose of light” (Coleman, 2008: 1:15-1:43). In the following, I will assess how this type of musical harmony eventually propagated light in the SLNMC.

## UNIVERSITY MUSICAL MEETING SPACES

When a listener encounters an unknown musical expression, or a musical expression disliked, this can cause irritation or resistance. Yet, it can also lead to curiosity and an aim to explore and accommodate new expressions. Sociocultural relationships can be experienced in the same way. When we dare to deal with those unfamiliar sounds; dare to accept confusion, anger and resistance, it can indeed open us up to new perspectives and creative solutions we did not previously imagine

The University Musical Meeting Spaces is an SLNMC initiative that embodies such an understanding of harmony. The UMMS was launched in the last phase of the SLNMC as a direct consequence of an external evaluation report by Rambukwella & Fernando (2014). They recommended a more clear-cut vision of reconciliation activities as regular *meeting spaces* between citizens, hence the following was conceptualized by the SLNMC stakeholders in 2016: Selected undergraduate music students from four universities in Sri Lanka were scheduled to meet several times per year, alternating between four campuses in Jaffna, Kandy, Batticaloa and Colombo<sup>5</sup>. The host university was in charge of facilitating the meeting space and finding accommodation for the students, all of which, including food and transport, was paid for by the SLNMC. The meeting space itself comprised of a combination of lectures and a joint workshop based on a new theme each time. Examples of such themes were “life cycles” at Colombo University of Visual and Performing Arts in October 2017 and “festival songs and rituals songs” at the Swami Vipulananda College of Music and Dance in December 2017. The students were given ample time to socialize in between the work sessions and each weekend included one or several excursions in the city where the workshop was held. In Jaffna, for example, the students visited the renowned Hindu Nallur temple and in Colombo, they saw different landmarks of the capital. Cultural learning and friendship formation were at the center of the UMMS, something that, according to Howell (2016 and 2018) facilitate that reconciliation and harmony can be achieved. Through relationship molding and a recognition of what each individual/ university group brought to the table, the students found new ways to (re)harmonize.

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<sup>5</sup> Colombo University of Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA), Jaffna University, Peradeniya University (Kandy) and the Swami Vipulananda College of Music and Dance (SVIAS, Batticaloa).





Steadily built on repeated encounters between young people eager to learn and share, musical skills and ample space for socialization, the UMMS stands out as a fruitful initiative of the SLNMC to promote in-depth, lasting relations in Sri Lanka post war.

### MUSICAL GIVING AND RECEIVING: A SRI LANKAN TAKE ON HARMONY

This study about harmony in the SLNMC furthermore requires a critique of what we frequently term standard harmonic theory. Referring hitherto to a Western viewpoint with distinction between consonant and dissonant musical harmony, there is reason to question the relevance of this in the Sri Lankan context. Notwithstanding the fact that both Western classical music and Western popular music are present in the musical culture of the island, there seem to be an imbalanced cultural dominance of Western harmonic language when dealing with harmony overall. It is timely to raise questions about colonial/ postcolonial agency and heritage in harmony and how it might color such a project for reconciliation.

#### THE CONCEPT

Harmony may in fact be more than how the music actually plays out. This is not to claim that the sound has no significance; it does, but definitely not in the same way that we would evaluate it in the West. In Western harmonic language, we often speak about music as in or out of tune, yet this conception of “in tune” does not appear as particularly relevant to Sri Lankan traditional musicians who historically have operated according to a different system; a system that puts music's cosmic *function* and notions of *giving and receiving* first. The *berava*<sup>6</sup> drumming, for example (thoroughly discussed by Sykes 2018a), has ritualistic functions where music is used to get rid of evil spirits, sickness or to evoke blessings from the divine. It follows very distinct and complex patterns of grammar (Peiris 2018; Sykes 2018b, 2018c) that need to be carefully respected to achieve the desired purpose. In these rituals, the verbal or semantic aspects of the performance matter more than the actual “sound”, but if the drum syllables or words are not pronounced (sounded) right, they lose their sense; they are incorrect. It literary makes sense to claim that the “devil is in the details” here, since any misperformance of the music risks angering the gods, i.e. creating disharmony: “the aesthetic or artistic symbolic processes are valued in accordance with their capacity to achieve balance and harmony in their formation or dynamic by means of their orientation to the Buddha Teaching” (Kapferer 2011: 132).

When we engage with Sri Lankan music on such ontological level, we also discover the importance of (percussion and voice) recitation in the Tamil *koothu* tradition, presented by the SLNMC on numerous occasions. These dance dramas, generally depicting scenes from ancient Hindu epics or Christian stories, are performed in village settings with no amplification technology used. The *koothu* artists are trained to cultivate the distinct sound of their own voice, employing no other singing technique than a high pitch in order to reach the entire crowd. For an untrained ear, the singing- and musical side of *koothu* can appear loud and monotonous, yet it holds very specific functions in the sense that it serves as communication and contributes to tying the audiences and deities together. It is entertainment, ritual harmony and historical awareness combined.

In this sense, both *berava* rituals and *koothu* performances serve as a harmonic *gifts*; tools to bring humans closer to the gods, and also communities closer to each other, since the gifting of

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<sup>6</sup> *Berava* is a caste which is considered as a low caste in Sri Lanka. Even if the rituals originally emanated from this caste, the drummers participating in these rituals today do not necessarily belong to the *berava* caste and Sri Lankans do not use the word ‘*berava*’ when naming the performance or the drummers. The performance is commonly referred to as ‘Sinhalese traditional drumming performance’, yet I consider this to be of too little academic precision in this article.

musical blessings have historically happened across lines of ethnic and religious enclaves in Sri Lanka (see Sykes 2011 and 2018a for useful accounts about this).

### THE FOLK MUSIC CONSERVATION CENTER

Contrary to the music and identity-episteme current in today's ethnomusicological and socially related music research, Sykes (2018a) contends that music in its essence is not about an internal self or a property of one's own community; it is rather a gift *from* the gods or *to* the gods; from one community to another:

Once we define some music as things that originated with and can (or must) be exchanged with nonhumans, and one we accept sonic efficacy as ontologically valid, certain musical traditions that the identity paradigm construes as belonging only to one ethnic or religious group emerge as having multi-ethnic or multi-religious history (Sykes 2018a: 48).

This is not the same as avoiding identity politics or denying the origin of a musical system. Based on Reed (2010) and various Sri Lankan sources (Kulatillake 1976 and 1991; Suraweera 2009), Sykes traces an authentic Sinhala musical style back over thousand years, clearly noting that it is *not* Tamil or Indian. Yet, he also contends that it is a “deeply heterogenous tradition that shows countless interactions with non-Sinhalas over the centuries” (Sykes 2018a: 35). The problem, according to him, arises when “music is conceptually taken out of exchange and reformulated as identity” (Sykes 2018a: 57). This has happened a lot over the years in Sri Lanka: The berava drumming, for example, has been appropriated by the Sinhala rulers to elevate Kandy as the cultural capital of the island and used to propagate the idea of an authentic Buddhist culture. Similarly, some Tamil musical expressions have been dismissed as “Indian”, to say that the Tamils do not really belong on the island (artistic director of SLNMC, personal communication, 2017).

The Folk Music Conservation Center (FMCC), founded in 2011, set out to document, digitize and disseminate the variety and interconnections between the folk cultures of Sri Lanka. The center was based on an idea that musical roots play an important part in fostering pride and dignity among people of a *nation* (former CN Head of international projects, personal communication 2018, my emphasis), i.e. not only among members of distinct communities. As we have previously seen in this article, this same justification was also evoked when referring to the music festivals in Galle and in Jaffna. Why and how, in terms of harmony, was the FMCC initiative different from these festivals that also featured the traditional folk music and dances of the island? One key to interpretation here may be the how we understand and eventually emphasize the music and identity-episteme. In concerts and festivals, Sykes contends (2018a: 187), (cultural) “groups are defined first by difference and then put on stage and told to interact”. He continues:

While inter- ethnic collaborations through music are positive in the that they show to the world that supposedly opposing groups can respect each other enough to play music together, such collaborations may simultaneously project seemingly essential, insurmountable differences between them, even as they harness music to transcend those differences. The link between music and identity is part of the problem not the solution (Sykes 2018a: 186).

The FMCC was envisaged to accentuate the joint trajectories and similarities between many expressions of Sri Lankan music and dance. Its collection aimed to emphasize sameness in Sri Lanka rather than the division lines of its people. Digging into these archives and an interview with its chief producer Dilip Kumara (interviewed in Colombo, November 2017) reveal that this ambition largely seems to have been met: The employees of the archive have interviewed tradition bearers, documented ceremonies and rituals from all regions of Sri Lanka and have also released several documentaries about the same. The basic collection now amounts to more than 17TB of sound and video material and is still growing. The FMCC is in fact the only

SLNMC activity that has sustained after the end of contract with the Norwegian MFA in 2018, as the Sri Lankan Ministry of Culture has mobilized funding for its continued life and work. In March 2019, the FMCC released the CD “Sannaada” (translates as “music”, but in a slightly broader sense than “sangeethaya”), where ten contemporary composers were encouraged to dive into the recordings of the FMCC. The process gave birth to ten pieces of newly made music, named by themes that can unite Sri Lankans across ethnic, religious, urban and rural boundaries<sup>7</sup>. In this album and its accompanying booklet, we can spot referential bridges between the material itself, its historical and contextual roots and its relevance for us today. Sometimes, these links are obvious, sometimes they appear to be more hidden; it is up to the listener to interpret the current signification of the music.

Regardless of which group you belong to, folk music and dance are rich expressions of joy and sorrow, hopes, aspirations and disappointments. This intangible heritage is closely related to routines of work, to religious rituals and key events in life such as birth, marriage and death. Folk music and dance also emphasize links between humans and nature, between earthly and heavenly forces, and in this sense, I argue that the FMCC seen through the lens of harmony as giving and receiving, harmony as *cosmic balance* (Brindley 2012, Howell 2019), offered more than a minor contribution to reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that the metaphor of harmony is so little problematized may indicate that it has become a “dead” – taken for granted – metaphor that have lost its creative and imaginative meaning. Yet, my mapping and subsequent analysis of this metaphor has shown signs of possible internalizing and defrosting of the metaphor for implementing musical activities in a post-war context. It may have the potential to be a creative and impactful tool given the right circumstances.

The metaphor seems most fruitful for peacebuilding when stakeholders and participants engage with its critical potential and recognize the role of tension in both musical and socio-cultural harmony. Another relevant link between musical and sociocultural harmony, is the Sri Lankan “gifting” between communities and gods; emphasizing human links to nature and to a greater cosmos. It accentuates the importance of tuning in and turning towards and listening to each other to recognize that we share fundamental histories, conditions and challenges.

No matter which of these harmony-notions we choose to rely on, one primary condition for harmony as a living metaphor is certain: In order for harmony to function as a creative and impactful tool for musical activities in a post-war context, the *relational* aspect of the notes, the chords, the beats – the people – must not be ignored. We must exist in critical, yet compassionate, relation to each other; not in isolation, nor merely beside each other.

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<sup>7</sup> “The villager’s life”, “King of the Water”, “Mother”, “Earth and Freedom” are examples of titles from this collection (Folk Music Conservation Center 2019).

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