

Building Solidarity through Musical Improvisations: Let the Children Sing

Richard Dumbrill, Olivier Urbain and Bruno de Florence

Introduction

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, an intractable and seemingly endless conflict has engulfed the region that today covers what used to be Ancient Mesopotamia. Palestinians, Israelis, countless members of the Palestinian and Jewish diasporas, and the millions of citizens of countries considered as Christian or Muslim have to suffer to varying degrees from a prolonged fratricidal struggle. It is well known that political, strategic and economic factors are at the root of the violence, but religious, cultural and other factors shape people's sense of identity and cannot be ignored.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam were born in communities that used closely related Semitic languages, namely Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. They all look up to Abraham as their "Father." They all acknowledge the authority of the Old Testament and its values and principles. Nevertheless, people suffer and die every day from their ceaseless feuds. What can be done to stop the bloodshed?

For centuries, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and other minority societies of the Levant had lived in relatively peaceful cohabitation where each confession carried on with their daily life without much discriminative interference on each other's routines. From this point of view, the current violence (in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Afghanistan and Iraq among other places) looks more like a family feud than the disaster it has become.

Let us focus on the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, in which US Christians are heavily involved. Even though many musicians have tried to solve the conflict by creating music that expresses those common roots, like Yair Dalal (Urbain 2008) or by having people of different groups play European Classical music together (Barenboim and Said, 2002), those noble efforts do not seem to bear fruit.

The thesis of this paper is that reconciliation, if ever possible, should start in the realm of the unconscious common to the three groups, using improvisations that reach and allow the expression of the common humanity of the participants. Playing music which expresses strongly defined cultural constructions (Sephardic *versus* Ashkenazi music, Classical Arabic *versus* Classical European music) will not be able to reach beyond superficial differences. We must dig below these cultural constructs to find primordial sounds and rhythms, and linguistic utterances that go to the source, to the roots of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic.

A neutral but common musical basis would be fundamentally essential for the

bringing up of atavistic emotions hidden deep down in the unconscious. The usage of primeval phonations common to antagonists, in concurrent musical improvisations, would act as a desinhibitor bringing up these emotions - a fundamental phase in the understanding of differences which are the cause of conflicts. At present, the authors contend that there should first be a phase of *intra muros* empiricism which, if successful, should be continued with field applications to yield sufficient statistical materials for appropriate analyses.

We propose that a group of young children around the age of fourteen, and another group around sixteen, from each of the three aforementioned religious groups, be encouraged to perform directed vocal musical improvisations based on the usage of specific phonations common to the oldest linguistic roots with the effect that these could collectively bring up unconscious emotions to the surface, and therefore lead to a sophrological¹ means of connectedness and solidarity, leading to deep mutual understanding and with time, peaceful conflict transformation.

First, this paper will examine the socio-linguistic setting of the ancient people from which these different groups were born. Second the psychological dimensions of primordial sounds and rhythms will be explored. The third part will propose improvisational techniques for the experimental phase of a potential project.

1. Socio-linguistic Setting of Southern Mesopotamian Cultures

1.1. Language: the Common Roots of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic

Before explaining the reasons for choosing specific phonations to be used in the development of an improvisation system, it is useful to understand the history of the development of languages, generally, and in the Near and Middle East specifically.

The earliest known form of the written language is the cuneiform system written on tablets of fresh clay. It was used by the Sumerians. This system which consisted initially in the graphic stylisation of earlier pictographs may have preceded the Old Egyptian hieroglyphic script by a century or two and dates back to 3500-3200 B.C. However, it is contended that this system was probably not invented by the Sumerians but by an earlier culture which might have been indigenous to southern Mesopotamia and settled there before the Sumerians arrived, around 5000 to 4000 B.C. The cuneiform script was not devised for the Sumerian language but for another one unknown to this day. We know this because some Sumerian phonations (combinations of phonemes amounting to words) had to be adapted to fit with pre-existing signs. Had the cuneiform script been devised specifically for the Sumerian language such adaptations would not have appeared because they would not have been required. In the course of evolution both language and script became indissociable. As a result both the Sumerian language and its transcription grew burdened with all the

imperfections coming from compromises.

Sumerian belongs to the agglutinative linguistic group which is not indigenous to southern Mesopotamia. It is probable that the language Sumerians encountered when they arrived in southern Mesopotamia was Semitic.

The morphology of the Sumerian language appears to have been the consequence of lexical, grammatical and syntactical loans and compromises which would have come as a consequence of an exogamic (the custom of marrying outside the tribe) process that will be explained below. Sumerian as we know it today shows complex borrowings from distant cultures, such as 'Cro-Magnon' proto-European to 'Indus-Valley' Dravidian, to mention only two extremes, and thus a question is raised: is Sumerian really Sumerian? The answer is probably that it is not. However, for the sake of clarity we shall retain the term Sumerian to describe the language that was spoken and written in southern Mesopotamia, by the rulers, from 3500- up to about 2500 B.C.

1.2. Society: Immigration of Pre-Agricultural Cultures

The socio-cultural settings of linguistic developments are also important in order to grasp the crucial role of improvisations. Since it is generally well accepted that the civilisations which occupied southern Mesopotamia were among the oldest having some form of social structure organised around primitive agriculture, dating as far as 6000 B.C. and probably earlier, the problem is to determine if these people were autochthonous. The geographic location of these civilisations focusing around fertile arable land would have been either the consequence of autochthonous evolution or of heterochthonous immigration. As it is generally accepted that agriculture began around 8000 - 6000 B.C., it is more likely that the population of southern Mesopotamia would have been the result of heterochthonous settlements since the geography is not particularly well suited to pre-agricultural (gatherer, hunter-gatherer, semi-pastoral or pastoral) life, and that therefore the concept of a pre-agricultural autochthonous society appears difficult to imagine in this part of the fertile crescent, unless there had been climatic conditions differing from the present.

Pre-agricultural communities are not exogamous and therefore do not spread their language to surrounding groups: Exogamy only happens with the advent of agriculture when the concept is used for territorial gain and as a consequence becomes the agent of language propagation. Endogamic groups in pre-agriculturalist societies do not spread language because they have no economic reasons to do so: They marry between themselves and therefore retain their language within their group.

1.3. Shared phonology

There are basic linguistic elements which are sufficiently secure to build up

reasonable hypotheses about what would have been the oldest common phonational utterances of humankind, generally, and of the inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia, in particular, for the reason that the first sounds (phonation) emitted by humankind (which initially would have been the response to a stimulus) for the purpose of description, emotion, pain, pleasure, satisfaction, belligerence, etc., must have had the same phonational characteristics since as human beings, despite our various ethnicities, we share the same physical characteristics. This is also true concerning the organs necessary to produce sounds. Reflexive utterances coming as sound (phonational) responses to physical, or psychological stimuli would have been the basis for primeval phoneme differentiation.

Labial phonemes such as ‘*m*’ would have been associated with the female sex and the suckling of babies. These usually develop in phonations such as *mi*, *mama*, *mu*, and ‘*um*’ in Sumerian meaning ‘mother’. Sibilants such as *s*, *sh*, *ts*, and *z* are usually associated with danger and form sounds such as for the snake ‘*tsir*’ in Sumerian. This is also the onomatopoeic sound of the arrow in its flight, etc. Velars such as *kh* are common signifiers of fear or anger leading, for example, to Sumerian *khush* meaning ‘anger’ and also to *khul* meaning ‘bad’. It can also express astonishment, etc. In Sumerian and later in Semitic Akkadian many words are thus made from onomatopoeia. For instance, Sumerian *ka*, meaning ‘mouth’, is a good example as its pronunciation implies the full opening of the mouth; Sumerian *nag*, meaning ‘to drink’, when repeated is onomatopoeic of the sound of drinking; similarly, *shakh*, is the ‘wild pig’, to be feared and therefore Sumerian *shar*, meaning ‘king’, also to be feared; *nu*, and *la* are obvious negations that we find subsequently used in Europe and the Near East; *shum* is a ‘saw’ and therefore the verb, ‘to saw’; *dub* is a drum in Sumerian and so is *lib*, the heart that we find as ‘*lv*’, ‘*lb*’ in many languages. Most of the onomatopoeic values have been lost with time but many can be tentatively extrapolated.

The evidence of a script might infer the presence, and therefore the usage of either pre-existing phonational utterances construed by some as ‘psychogenetically linguistic’ or by others as extraneous to language. It is highly probable that the writing of pictograms and later logograms, or ideograms had been a process totally distinct from the evolution of the spoken language itself, but a question remains as to which would have first influenced the other, and when and how. Literacy might have come as a consequence of an irrational urge to transcribe an utterance graphically but it is also possible that it came from the need to describe an object or an idea to another person unfamiliar with the concept, or to leave (on some medium) the imprint of one’s passage, *i.e.*, a message for others to read later when they would come by.

But whatever the motivation, 6000 years ago, when a native drew a boar on the wall of a cave, it was certainly not with the idea of equating the drawing to the sound ‘*shakh*’, meaning ‘boar’, for example, but a child to whom the drawing had been shown would have probably shouted: ‘*shakh*’ or something to that effect, seeing it, in fearful astonishment as he recognised the dangerous animal. It is contended that harsh and guttural sound ‘*shakh*’ came

from the fear of an individual facing this, or other wild animals for the first time. Simplistically described here, this would have been the process by which drawings reproduced sound values. Ideograms, depicting an idea, a concept, would have needed a bit more thinking for their universal understanding but it is axiomatic that the process would have been similar to a straightforward sound to picture process.

1.4. The Curse of Babel: A Plethora of Semitic Languages

In the middle of the third millennium B.C., the oldest Semitic language, Akkadian took over the agglutinative Sumerian which remained present as a dead language as Latin is today. Akkadian presented all the linguistic advantages that Sumerian lacked and societies evolved exponentially as a result since there is always a direct relation between the evolution of a society and the morphology of the language used by that society. Then Babylonian sprouted under the rulers of Babylon and Assyrian under the kings of Assyria, in northern Mesopotamia.

These languages were sophisticated but were very difficult to learn because they relied on a complex syllabic writing system that the scribes, keen to protect their trade, rendered even more arduous. Although they were aware that a revolutionary alphabetic system had been invented in the early first millennium, they kept it secret. Indeed, it only takes a few hours (or days) to learn an alphabet and perhaps a bit more to dispense with scribes. However there was a far greater threat: With the alphabet, literacy and numeracy would become accessible to the people. This would cause revolutions and it did.

There was Phoenician, Aramaic, Ugaritic etc. Then came Hebrew which belongs to a sub-group also containing Edomite, Ammonite and Moabite. Hebrew became the language of the Jews, the language of monotheism, but more importantly the language for the worship of an invisible god. This was a revolutionary concept that distinguished Jews from 'gentiles.' As we know, this had tragic consequences. Centuries later, Aramaic became the language of Jesus; six centuries later Arabic became the language of *Muhammad*. Today the three monotheistic religions, all believing in the same invisible god, all three recognizing the importance of the same common book, and all three coming from cultures speaking Semitic languages with common roots, find it impossible to live together. Is the Babel story myth or is it reality?

The paragraphs above have shown how the oldest forms of languages share common phonations for the reason that these come from similar organs of the same humans. During the process of their development, languages are conditioned and vary from one another in relation to the environment and socio-cultural setting in which they develop. From this, we can derive that it is only recently, within the last thousand years, that most differences have happened to the extent that despite originating from the same roots, they now appear alien to each other. Thus the choice of common phonations stemming from the oldest known common sources, for the protagonists, was indispensable.

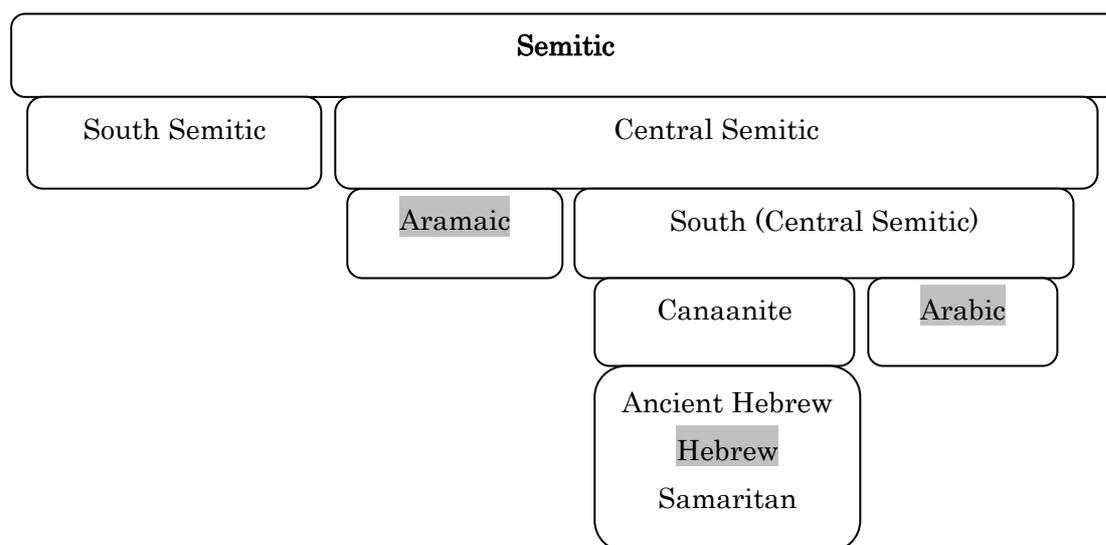


Fig. 1. Semitic Languages Family Tree (Ethnologue, <http://www.ethnologue.com>)

2. Far Below the Surface: the Psychological Setting

The human child is able to exchange sounds, dialectically, with its mother well before it has acquired any linguistic competence. The sounds coming from the mother are not random. They are intentionally directed (Elliot 1981) to the child and are mostly formulated as questions of an affective kind, *i.e.*, ‘Are you hungry? How is my little Darling today?’ etc.

In vague approximation, initially, the child will repeat these sounds. They will become more precise as its speech abilities improve. Some of the sounds the child hears become inscribed in its mind taking the form of ‘verbal residues’ or ‘acoustic traces’. They bring up two important phenomena (Weir 1962).

The first phenomenon is ‘crib-speech’, *i.e.*, the babble of babies muttering when falling asleep. Although sounding monologous, ‘crib-speech’ is in fact a dialogue mainly consisting of imperatives where both parts are narrated by the child.¹ (It is interesting to note that adults, also, may experience it when falling asleep). It makes little doubt that ‘crib-speech’ is part of a process through which the child’s linguistic competence develops.

The second phenomenon takes the form of ‘the little voice of our conscience’. This is the ‘silently heard’ admonition when one is about to do something one’s culture says it is morally wrong; or that vague feeling of doubt whenever one seeks self-gratification in a way one’s society disapproves. The voice in question is always associated with a sense of guilt.

It is our moral agency - our capacity for making moral judgments and decisions - which guides us through our daily life. There are two aspects of it. Firstly, it is auditory and results in introjections from the speech of our parents. Around the age of two, what were

initially auditory sensations acquire meaning and become actual voices. The strength with which this voice is internalised and becomes an interdiction or a censorship is ‘contingent’ *i.e.*, what might or might not happen independently of free choice. This explains why some individuals belonging to the same culture respond to it obediently while others are disobedient to it. Furthermore, it is generally recognised that a foetus from five months onward can hear and respond to sound. (Deliege and Sloboda 1996). Therefore, the aforementioned phenomenon of free choice may begin well before birth during the intra-uterine ‘hearing period’. This could explain the reason for the notion of the existence of an ‘archaic’ sounds repository common to humankind.

Secondly: The interrogative and frequent form in which the mother addresses her child has been discussed earlier. Having asked a question, the mother will pause as to allow for her child to answer. Even if the child is not yet able to do so, this pause has created a space in which a reaction is deposited and acknowledged either by an affirmative or another interrogative from the mother. Therefore the mother’s pause creates an absence allowing for the child to realise that it exists: Because of this pause, it knows it exists as it is the dialectic of absence and presence, both enhanced by the exchange of signifiers that allows for the child to formulate its own subjectivity.

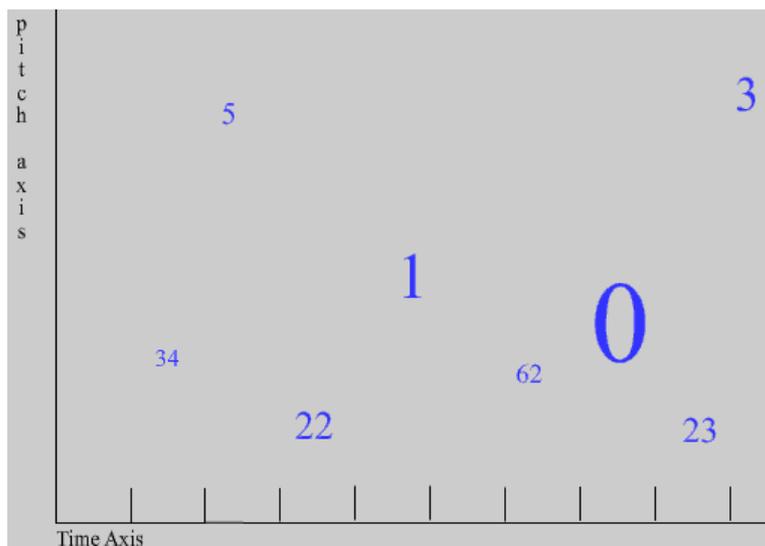
Whether spoken, written or gestual, language can be perceived as a mirror that mediates and supports our subjectivity. When that mirror is broken or damaged, our subjectivity similarly collapses or fades away and as a consequence, anxiety and its physical exteriorisation naturally emerges and leads to conflict and violence. Then, the question arises as to how, if at all possible, might subjectivity be preserved or restored had it been dissolved.

It is our contention that aural/musical artistic practice induces the expression of subjectivity for its participants. The usage of sound framed with aleatory parameters provides each performer with the responsibility of their own utterances: A truly subjective choice. The reason for this is that it emulates the imitation of the mother to child acoustic dialectic of the presence and absence. It is through on-going negotiation that each individual may create their own personal acoustic space thus also providing for the others to reciprocate.

The overall result, in the form of what musicology calls ‘sound-scape’, may well resemble the Babel cacophony, but with the difference that it would be a mutually agreed upon Babel.

3. Application: Numbers, Letters and Voices as Tools for Improvisations

3.1. The Numbers Of Babel – (Participants around the age of 14)



In its draft form, it consists in numbers in their ‘Arabic’ form, to be ‘sung-spoken’ (*Sprechgesang*’ as defined by Arnold Schoenberg in his *Pierrot Lunaire*) by a group of performers, in each performer’s native tongue.

The vertical axis represents pitch, the realisation of which is left to each individual performer. The zero axis origin may be considered to be at the top or the bottom.

The horizontal axis represents the time axis. Its zero origin is on the left. It will be up to the performers and the conductor to decide for the value of each division, whether it be bars or seconds or even minutes, or a mixture of any possible values. Each performer is free to ‘sing-speak’ the number(s) of each division at any time within the time segment allocated to it, and for any length of time, but not greater than that of the time segment it belongs to.

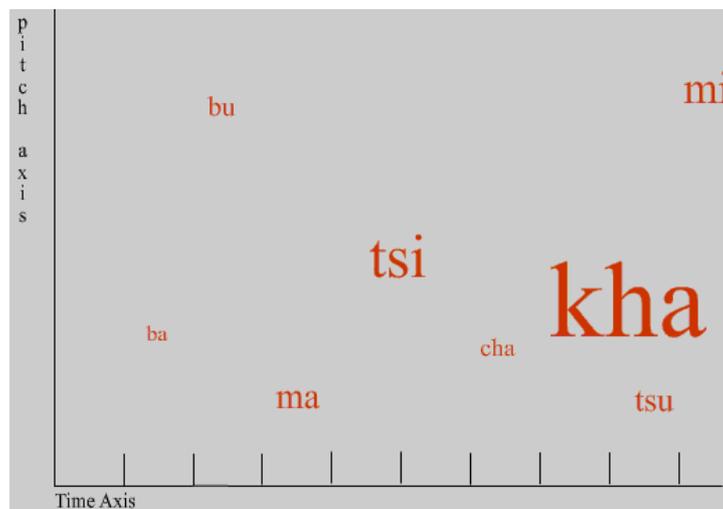
The size of the letters represents the dynamics, and it will be for each performer to decide what dynamics to give to any of the letter sizes. Each performer will have an individualised printout of this example score.

The role of the conductor will be exclusively restricted to time synchronisation or time coordination. He must not in any way show his own preferences. He will also be responsible for training the performers in the ‘sung-spoken’ technique. No special music skills are required for a performer to participate to the rendering of this work, except being able to read Arabic numerals.

There should be a wide linguistic diversity among the performers so as to maximise the Babel effect of this piece.

The affirmation of each of the participant’s subjectivity will manifest itself through the value they will give to the quantification of each of the parameters of the score, at any one time.

3.2 The letters Of Babel – (Participants around the age of 14)



This is a variation of the above, using labial, sibilant and velar phonations.

3.3. The Voices Of Babel – (Participants around the age of 16)

This piece is a group effort in capturing and transcribing rhythm, stress, and intonation inherent to the phonetic realisation of language or prosody. It is based on the premise that prosody is different for each language and for each cultural, geographical and historic area where it is spoken.

The group will record short sentences of no more than five seconds in duration, spoken in their native tongues by as many culturally different subjects as possible, using a digital recording device.

The recordings will then be transferred into a sequencer software. The group will then be divided into several sub-groups and each sub-group will create its own arrangement (from the same set of sentences), by lining up the recorded sentences inside the sequencer in a linear fashion so as to constitute a piece of a maximum duration of ten minutes.

Each sentence must be repeated between four and ten times so as to emphasize the effect of prosody. The sentences may overlap each other, but by no more than two seconds. Panning and volume will be decided by the participants. No special effects other than reverberation must be used.

For the actual performance, all of the arrangements of the sub-groups will be played simultaneously. Each sub-group may start the playing of its own arrangement at any one time, as well as pause and restart (from where it paused) at any time during the performance, which will have a maximum duration of thirty minutes.

A multi-speaker sound reproduction system will be preferred over the traditional two speaker arrangement. The making of this piece must be supervised by adults competent in

studio techniques.

Conclusion

The validity of the thesis of this paper needs to be tested in the field, by organizing improvisation sessions with children. One of the main challenges of musical and artistic activities bringing, for instance, Palestinians and Israelis together in order to promote reconciliation, is that the effects are not sustainable. As soon as the participants return to their respective communities, either suffering from oppression or living in fear of retaliation from oppression, the old habits and ways of thinking are quickly reestablished.

It is our greatest wish that some groups will pick up the challenge and try out the applications suggested in this paper. One could start with a very stable and safe environment first, outside of any conflict zone, and gradually move towards areas where people are victims of violence. By reaching deep inside our humanity, breaking through barriers of language, culture, politics and identity, it is possible to let our common human core express itself through primordial sounds and rhythm. It is suggested here that solidarity built upon those psychological building blocks will be sustainable.

Notes

1. Here the term is used in its etymological meaning: Greek 'sos' meaning serenity, harmony; 'phren', meaning spirit, consciousness; and 'logos', science, study.

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