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Deep Listening: *Musicking* and Peace as Practices of Relationship

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Abstract

This paper is written from a dual perspective — the author being both a policy researcher at the World Future Council and a professional musician. Building upon Arthur Schopenhauer's view of music as a *universal language*, it argues that music-making is inherently a practice of relationship, capable of fostering connection across difference. Utilising Christopher Small's concept of *musicking* as a verb, the paper reflects on music's effects on social interaction, empathy, belonging, and community — through an interdisciplinary lens spanning embodied musical experience, contemporary Indigenous worldview, aesthetic and sociological frameworks, and empirical insights from neuroscience and psychology. Special focus is given to the teachings of the *Moriori* people of Aotearoa New Zealand — who practise peace as *deep listening* and view artists as intrinsic to this process, as illuminators of truth and agents of community healing. While acknowledging ever-present contextual caveats of power and agency, the paper calls for greater recognition of the arts — and their powerful capacity to foster safe, non-violent communities within education and community-building policy.

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1. Introduction: Two hats, One Thread

I was approached to contribute to this journal in a dual capacity: as a Senior Researcher at the think tank the *World Future Council* and as a professional musician. Considering Arthur Schopenhauer's view of music as a "perfectly universal language" (Schopenhauer 1909: 331), I was invited to reflect on how music transcends boundaries, and what insights this may offer for the teaching and practice of non-violence.

I relish the chance to connect these worlds, having always worn two hats—though for a long time I believed I had to keep them separate. Research was for the mind and music for the heart, and *professionalism* reigned on all fronts. In recent years I've developed a more holistic understanding. Creative and integrated approaches are desperately needed if we are to foster sustainable peace; but an age-old question remains: how, in practice, do we move minds and hearts?

A first step lies in the language we use. For me, music is not a static object; it exists through the actions that create and engage with it. Following Christopher Small, I use the verb *musicking* for taking part "in any capacity" in musical creation or performance, including listening (1998: 9). This terminology moves us beyond reified views of art, acknowledging that in many cultures the concept of a *musical work* does not exist—only singing, playing, listening, and dancing (Small 1998: 11).

A *silver thread* runs through this paper—a metaphor I elaborate in Part One, where I examine musical universality across lived experience and aesthetic theory. This thread visualises *musicking* as a *practice of relationship* and, as we will see in Part Two, through the time-tested insights of the Indigenous *Moriori* people of Aotearoa New Zealand, peace can be viewed in a similar way. How peace and music as practices of relationship flow into one another provides the foundation for Part Three, which presents musicking as a potential facilitator of empathy, transformation and non-violent community — while acknowledging the contextual caveats and agency that shape its effects in Part Four.

I build on these ideas through an interdisciplinary lens—the silver thread in this case weaves together four interrelated strands: embodied musical experience; contemporary lived Indigenous worldview; philosophical, aesthetic, and sociological frameworks; and empirical insights from neuroscience and psychology.

So, in the words of William Shakespeare, "If music be the food of love, play on" (1602: Act 1, Scene 1).

2. Part One: Musicking and the Silver Thread — Experience, Universality, and Aesthetic Theory

Lived Experience - the Silver Thread

Standing on thousands of stages over the years, I've thought deeply about what it is that makes music a great *mover*. For me, there's nothing quite like the rush of hitting the sweet spot on stage — a moment when I feel, with such certainty, that the room is with me. Pure, shared energy.

I've long visualised these moments as the forming of a silver thread—a normally invisible strand that can appear between every human being. It's not always easy to spot, but once you see it, you cannot *not*. On a side note, I've honestly no idea why the thread is silver — so if you'd prefer to imagine it as green, blue, or rainbow-coloured, please be my creative guest!

I realised while writing this article that years ago, as a young street musician, I had already written the silver thread into lyrics:

> "There's a power to standing still
> As the minions rush by in search of their next big thrill
> There's a power to the momentary seam, the in-between.

Some of the most powerful moments of *silver-thread connection* I've experienced were as a busker. In my early-twenties, fresh out of a Master's in Global Studies, I supported myself by playing for passers-by on the streets of Berlin. Back then, in the golden age of street music (when people still carried

cash and owned CD players), the money was fantastic and the experience was, on the good days, electrifying.

At times, I could see the process begin a few hundred metres off. I'd watch an unsuspecting soul get wind of a note in the air, pause in their step — in the latter years look up from scrolling — and, as if drawn by static electricity, *stop*. Solo voyagers or entire parties interrupted their plans to gather for minutes, or even hours, to listen and vibrate with the music I had the privilege of creating. When listeners moved on, often without saying a word, there was a look of shared meaning and experience — and perhaps even the purchase of a CD, extending the silver thread beyond its current and precious ephemerality. I offer these early reflections as a lived response to what philosophers and scientists alike have sought to articulate and explain — that musicking, somehow, creates something between us.

Schopenhauer and Universality

So how does my experience of making and sharing music relate to aesthetic theory, in particular the thoughts of Arthur Schopenhauer? When reading Schopenhauer, I concur with Michel-Antoine Xhignesse "that his influence lies more in the gist of his theories rather than in the particulars" (2022: 39). Much of Schopenhauer's thinking feels abstracted from the modern-day realities of creating, performing, and experiencing music to me—yet I still get the sense that he understood something innate about the universality and power of art.

Schopenhauer revered music. In *The World as Will and Idea* he stated:

> "Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctiveness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself" (Schopenhauer 1909: 331).

My first reaction to these words was, predictably, to feel very flattered. Ego aside, however, Schopenhauer's belief in music's ability to reach something

essential in us, as a type of universal language, is something I see mirrored in my own experience. I've seen many a silver thread form without a common spoken language and across all kinds of cultural, and societal differences—and this process can, most definitely, affect how we feel.

Evolutionary Science on Music's Universality

The contention that music is both universal and deeply affecting is echoed in neuroscience and psychology. Nearly all of us can hum a tune or, at the very least, feel vibration.

A 2019 study by Samuel A. Mehr et al. asserts that, "music is in fact universal: It exists in every society (both with and without words) [and] varies more within than between societies" (2019: 1). Similarly, Schulkin and Raglan explain that humans probably sang before speaking in syntactically guided sentences (2014: 1). They cite Rousseau's idea that our first language was song — likely learned from the birds (2014: 9). They describe music as "like breathing — all pervasive," a core human experience shaped over thousands of years of neurobiological development (2014: 1).

They continue:

> "The neural correlates of musical exposure and practice indicate that music affects a broad array of human functioning, and that our cortex is built to receive music, process it, and change based on this exposure. … These neuronal changes demonstrate the importance of music to human functioning and how broadly it impacts our structural anatomy, as well as our behaviour and social functioning in the world (Schulkin and Raglan 2014: 9).

These reflections point to something fundamental in the act of music and its ability to affect social interactions. In Part Three of this paper, I return to examine how musicking, transformation, empathy, and non-violent community-building coalesce. But first, I turn to a remarkable example of a

living cultural ethos—where the arts and non-violence are deeply embedded as everyday practice.

3. Part Two: Moriori Teachings — Deep Listening and the Art of Peace as a Verb

So now to put on my other hat in life — as a Senior Researcher for the Hamburg-based think-and-do tank the *World Future Council* (WFC). The Council was formed in 2007 to safeguard the rights of future generations by identifying and advancing future-just policy solutions.

One of our flagship initiatives is the *World Future Policy Award*, which celebrates exemplary policies addressing humanity's most pressing challenges. In 2024, our 13th award cycle highlighted a wealth of impactful policies for non-violence and sustainable peace — one of which was the *Moriori Peace Covenant*, an Indigenous customary law from the Chatham Islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, or Rēkohu.

Though their extraordinary story remains relatively unknown, Moriori uphold one of the world's oldest unbroken covenants of non-violence. The intergenerational knowledge they share adds, I believe, a vital dimension to this analysis of music's universality and its power to connect us — offering key insight into how the arts can be integrated into a deep practice of sustainable peacebuilding and cultural resilience. It is essential that such time-tested wisdom does not, as in so many cases, remain peripheral.

An Extraordinary Commitment to Peace

To understand Moriori insights on peace and the arts, it is necessary to briefly dive into their history. The Moriori Peace Covenant, or *Nunuku's Law*, emerged in the 15th century when Nunuku-Whenua, a spiritual healer, forbade killing and established non-violence as essential for survival (Brett 2015: 135). Located 800km off New Zealand's east coast, Rēkohu's harsh and isolated environment necessitated sustainable approaches to social harmony and resource management (Brett 2015: 135). Previously a martial people, like the Māori with whom they share Polynesian ancestry, Moriori

embraced the Covenant as customary law, literally setting its provisions into stone (World Future Council 2024).

Their commitment was severely tested in 1835, when Rēkohu was invaded by two Māori tribes — Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga (World Future Council 2024). Initially welcomed and aided by Moriori, the Māori response turned to brutal violence (Davis/Solomon 2009). Moriori elders called a 'hui' (congress), where they decided to reaffirm the Peace Covenant (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 2), offering friendship and sharing of the island's resources (Hokotehi Moriori Trust 2005: 1).

This courageous decision, driven by a forward-looking ethos to protect values of peace for future generations, led to tragic loss of life. The population collapsed, and myths of inferiority and extinction were perpetuated to justify mistreatment and colonisation. Many died from *kongenge*, or death by deep despair (World Future Council 2024). Still, throughout this time, Moriori continued to pursue justice through non-violent means. Showing incredible resilience, from the 1980s onward, Moriori began a cultural revival. In 2020, after nearly 180 years, they received an official Crown apology — a landmark moment affirming the continued relevance of their Peace Covenant (World Future Council 2024).

Fascinatingly, Nunuku's Law has had a significant, yet often under-recognised, global impact on non-violent movements. The Peace Covenant influenced the *Parihaka* movement in Taranaki, Aotearoa New Zealand, where leaders developed novel strategies of non-violent resistance to colonial land confiscations in the late 19th century. This connection is notable, as Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga — the Iwi who invaded and enslaved many Moriori — were among the tribes that later established Parihaka (World Future Council 2024). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* was, in part, informed by the non-violent resistance at Parihaka. Gandhi's approach went on to inspire change on a global scale, including influencing Martin Luther King Jr (World Future Council 2024). It could be contended that the ripple effect of the Moriori ethos — anchored in empathy and non-violence — has proven itself empowering across cultures and continents. Perhaps there is something in

their practice of peace that functions, like art, as a kind of universally intelligible expression of our shared humanity?

Nunuku's Law Today: Non-Violence, Education, and Reconciliation

The Peace Covenant remains central to Moriori identity and daily life, informing their contemporary development and peacebuilding efforts (World Future Council 2024). The community is active in environmental conservation, amplifying Indigenous and non-violent perspectives in global fora, and education. This includes the establishment of the bi-cultural *Aotearoa New Zealand Peace and Conflict Studies Centre* and archaeological research at the *University of Otago* — both of which incorporate the Covenant into higher education (World Future Council 2024). These initiatives provide a model for how Indigenous peace practices and wisdom can enrich academic programmes.

As a living ethos, Nunuku's Law represents a holistic, society-wide approach to pacifism. It embodies principles of fairness, equality, and sharing of resources. All interactions are guided by the aim of enhancing each person's *mana* (honour), thus ensuring mutual dignity. In keeping with this ethos, Moriori continually ask: how can we, by listening to one another, find solutions that benefit all? (World Future Council 2024).

While acknowledging the inevitability of conflict, Moriori actively engage in forward-looking reconciliation rooted in inclusivity and consensus. Legal scholars in the fields of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), restorative justice, and interest-based negotiation recognise the Covenant's potential for broader application in legal systems (World Future Council 2024).

Crucially, Moriori emphasise that without meaningful reconciliation, the consequences of violence risk becoming intergenerational. They argue that reconciliation must balance peace, mercy, justice, and the illumination of truth in order to break the cycle of inherited harm (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 3). Here, the arts play an essential role — not as luxuries, but as lifelines.

Moriori and the Arts

In 2011, at the *Me Rongo Congress*, Moriori reaffirmed their ancient and unbroken vow of non-violence. The resulting *Me Rongo Declaration* formally articulated what had long been embedded in their intergenerational worldview. The Declaration underscores the vital importance of the arts:

> "We believe that creative people and cultures in our communities have the capacity to shine a light on truths and the potential for healing through the arts. Artists, poets, writers, musicians and those with the capacity of insight should be valued and respected accordingly (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 4).

As "treasures in our communities", illuminators of truth, healers, and connectors, Moriori believe that by valuing artists we strengthen the very soul of peace (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 6).

In keeping with their holistic ethos, Moriori also advocate for greater exchange between creatives and educators. Principle 11 affirms:

> "The promotion of research and deep discussion on peace and conflict resolution should be supported financially and philosophically so as to enhance its place in our academic and vocational arenas. Our poets, philosophers, teachers, wise elders and artists in general should be encouraged to join us in this endeavour (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 6).

Me Rongo

The strong connection Moriori see between the arts, healing, education, and peace can be more fully understood through their language. The Moriori term *Me Rongo* means *in peace*, and in conversation with Moriori, one quickly sees how deeply this concept is embedded in their worldview. The 2011 Declaration articulates the layered significance of the term:

> “It is used as both a salutation and affirmation. The word “rongo” also embodies other vital ingredients for peaceful living, as rongo means “to listen”. Me Rongo implies that in order to be in peace, one must also listen, and listen deeply and respectfully. This listening is not just amongst people but also incorporates a deeper listening to the rhythms and sounds of the living systems of which we are a part” (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 2).

The Declaration further explains that a collective can only function when all agree to share their “knowledge, energy and experience”, and that doing so “requires active listening (*rongo*) to the aspirations, concerns and needs of others” (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 5).

To complete the literary mandala of Me Rongo — poetically, the word *rongo* as a noun also means *song*. Thus, we can derive that to be at peace is to listen deeply, to share, and, through the understanding created, to make music together.

Deep Listening: The Sublime, and Creative Truth

When Moriori say *listen*, they mean holistically, and timelessly. As is often the case in Indigenous cultures, they see the past, present, and future of peace, ecology, the arts, and the sacred as intrinsically connected (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 4). Through a practice of deep listening, the song of nature is heard and revered — a point where common ground with Schopenhauer’s observations on *awe* and the *sublime* may be found. Alongside the arts, which he saw as offering a temporary release from suffering and a chance to mirror the world’s inner essence, Schopenhauer also viewed nature’s beauty as a means to forget individuality and experience oneness in exaltation (Shapshay 2012: 12–13).

As a composer, I relate to this. There are always different sources of inspiration to be found, but for me, being in nature is most definitely an effective catalyst for creativity. It enables one to stop looking forward for a moment and simply be part of what is. As Lord Byron put it: “Are not the

mountains, waves and skies a part of me and of my soul, as I of them?" (Byron 1812: LXXV). Listening deeply has enabled me, on occasion, to produce what I would deem very 'pure' compositions — pieces that almost *write themselves*. I am not saying they are cut off from reality — and I will elaborate further on the importance of context in art later — but in my experience, attuned to both Moriori belief and Schopenhauer, art can somehow help elevate truth and interconnectedness with the natural world. It makes a lot of sense to me that the more we communicate these inspirations, the greater the chances are for shared understanding.

Peace as a Verb – The Practice of Relationship

Perhaps the most crucial learning to take from Me Rongo is that for Moriori, peace is a *verb*. Through active listening, peace becomes a daily practice of relationship and a "...condition that needs to be constantly worked on" (Delegates of the Me Rongo Congress 2011: 4). This stands in contrast to the English definition of peace as a *noun* — a static state of tranquillity, security, harmony, or freedom from oppression (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Moriori insight helps us to deepen definitions — to consider what actions must be taken on the road to *peace*, and how we sustain it thereafter. The map to a time-tested daily practice of peace and non-violence is there, if we are willing to *listen*.

I ask myself: why is it that we regularly use the verb *to violate*, yet have no equally specific, commonly used verb for non-violence or peace? We can be *at peace* (a static condition) with someone, but why can we not *peace them*? Words matter. Language matters. And, in my opinion, Western culture has much to learn here.

Together, Moriori teachings urge us to reimagine *peace not as the absence of conflict, but as the presence of relationship*: with each other, with the planet, and with generations past and future. This is a revelation that, I believe, can feed into examining musicking — also a practice of relationship capable of creating connection across all kinds of boundaries.

Part 3 - From Vibration to Relation: How Musicking Cultivates Empathy and Community

Musicking as Relational Practice

So how do we join the dots between peace as a practice of relationship and the ways we share music with each other? Could the silver thread also be understood as a relational process – one that can potentially foster meaningful connection across difference? And what might this imply for integrating the arts more deliberately into education and policy aimed at cultivating a culture of non-violence?

Moriori teachings, Schopenhauer's reflections, and my own lived encounters with musicking all suggest that the arts are powerful social resources. Sharing art together is an inherently relational practice of negotiated meaning, where, as Small puts it, "everyone present bears some responsibility" – for "whatever it is we are doing, we are all doing it together" (Small 1998: 10).

Music as Social Glue: Psychology and Neuroscience

Music somehow acts as a social glue, with, as psychologist Jill Suttie describes it, "some special power to increase our sense of connection and help us affiliate with others" (Suttie 2018). Neuroscientific research supports this idea by showing how music's social valency is grounded in both biological and cultural evolution. Schulkin and Raglan explain: "The rhythmicity of the brain, along with the development of cognitive capabilities, illustrates clearly how inherent music is to our evolutionary and social success" (2014: 9). They emphasise that music enables distinct forms of social bonding and strengthens relational connectedness (2014: 1).

Findings from neuropsychology reinforce this. In a 2023 study on music and neuroplasticity, Zaatar et al. show that group singing or playing instruments reduces stress and increases positivity, engagement, connectivity, and endorphin levels (2023: 6). Strikingly, large-group singing with unfamiliar people was found to produce even stronger effects than smaller, familiar

groups, and overall "individual wellbeing and bonding increased dramatically when placed in a musical group" (Zaatar et al. 2023: 6).

Underlying these effects are chemical changes in the body. Dopamine is identified as a key component of music-related motivation and reward (Schulkin/Raglan 2014: 7). The deep evolutionary roots of this "ancient molecule" go back millions of years, and its regulation can be called "a fundamental event" for human behaviour (Schulkin/Raglan 2014: 7). Affective bonding through musicking is evident even in early childhood, drawing people together through what Schulkin and Raglan call a "chorus of expression in being with others" (2014: 2). From this perspective, music is not only something we listen to passively, but something that activates our innate social capacities.

Collective Transformation through Live Music

Musicking connects and transforms. During a concert something shifts, opens, and becomes malleable. Performance has always felt like an exchange of energy to me, never a one-sided affair — the silver thread goes both ways. At the end of my shows, I often step into the centre of the audience and sing a cappella, without amplification. People hum, clap, or stamp along, and it is striking how quickly a group of strangers gathers around the imagined campfire. This is collective intimacy, a feeling akin, I believe, to the Moriori understanding of peace — deep listening and the practice of relationship. Every time, I'm struck by this transformative power. As free jazz saxophonist Torben Snekkestad puts it:

> "And here we are into this, which is about human communication and relation; it is about all sorts of emotions and aesthetics you are negotiating when you are in that space. Not that it has to be about something in particular. It is a way of being together" (Hansen, Høffding, and Krueger 2022: 431).

Social transformation during live music events has been well documented. Durkheim's concept of *collective effervescence* describes "a group

experience of intense collective affect", often accompanied by the feeling of being "swept away" or "becoming one with the crowd" (Rickard et al. 2025: 17). During live music events, this effect is said to amplify music's social benefits (Rickard et al. 2025: 2). In a 2025 comprehensive evaluation of studies on live music, its unifying power, and its social outcomes, Rickard et al. give an example of a *conscious clubbing* event with no drugs or alcohol permitted, where one participant stated:

> "People come in in a very individuated state. And then gradually the interconnectedness occurs, the openness ... at the end of the event—it's an experience of euphoria. Because everybody collectively has opened themselves up, connected energetically (Rickard et al. 2025: 12).

Electronic Dance Music is described similarly as a "shared primeval-like experience," a reconnection with "the tribe" (Rickard et al. 2025: 12). A 2016 study furthermore found that people who attended live music events reported higher satisfaction with their relationships and community connection than those who did not (Rickard et al. 2025: 2–3).

These insights align with Victor Turner's concept of *liminality*, which I first encountered as an undergraduate. Since then, I have viewed performance spaces as liminal zones — "betwixt and between" places where "initiates," entering from the structured world outside, can grow, play, and change before returning to their ordinary social lives (Rickard et al. 2025: 18). Turner describes liminal zones as a "moment in and out of time", within which a sense of "communitas" can emerge (Turner 1977: 96). This "separation experience" can enable people to explore meaning and identity in their own lives and can be "supportive of diversity, sociality, and wholeness" (Rickard et al. 2025: 18).

Taking a different angle, Schopenhauer saw music as a form of escape from the pressures of the world. For him, aesthetic pleasure involved being "lifted for the moment above all willing … freed from ourselves" (1909: 505). Music can certainly provide moments of respite — a break from the daily grind, a chance to close one's eyes and simply take in beauty or someone else's story.

I'll never forget Radiohead in Prague in 2009, after "beaching around" in Greece and Italy for two months. Thom Yorke's vocal felt so ethereal to me that all I could do was sob deeply and dissolve into the moment. Many of us will likely recall similar stories where art *took us places*, gifting us temporary lightness, forgetfulness, even bliss.

The key point here, when we place Schopenhauer's insights in dialogue with subsequent theories of collective transformation, is that in that moment of Radiohead-induced awe, I did not escape reality — quite the opposite. What I felt was a more interconnected reality, perhaps even a sense of oneness. Within this state I was transformed, and I marvelled at the beauty of humanity.

Musicking as Empathic Practice

Recognising artists as healers, Moriori have long lived the connection between the arts, empathy, and reconciliation. So how does musicking help us to better "feel" the other?

I try to use my concerts as a platform to encourage compassion. As a younger performer, I quickly learned to utilise the transformative arc of a concert. Once the audience enters a relationship with me, and with each other, a shift towards "feeling into" one another and the world around us becomes palpable — and in these moments I'm able to address issues that might otherwise be difficult, such as having compassion for all refugees or climate-change-affected communities.

The linkages between empathy and musicking are deep and intriguing. The term empathy is rooted in German philosophical aesthetics. The noun *Einfühlung*, which translates as *feeling-into*, was originally coined to describe aesthetic objects and processes (Hansen, Høffding, and Krueger 2022: 422). Hansen, Høffding, and Krueger note:

> "It is in itself a source of fascination that empathy, which in our everyday understanding has come to indicate an ability

> to comprehend and live well with others, originally concerned processes of aesthetic judgment (2022: 422).

Interestingly, Schopenhauer also connected compassion – in his words "the one and only fount of true morality" – with a sense of oneness (Schopenhauer 1903: xvii). The German word for sympathy, *Mitleid,* translates literally as *with suffering*: the idea that I feel you because I am you. For Schopenhauer, this "suffering with another" (1903: xx) was an "antidote to egoism" (Schopenhauer 1903: xviii). In this way, we can interpret his insights as seeing both art and compassion as acts tied to a deeper interconnectedness.

These themes reappear in contemporary neuroscience and psychology. Paraphrasing a 2018 study by Wallmark, Choi, and Iacoboni, Suttie states:

> "Music is processed using the same neural architecture used for empathy and other social tasks, and ... likely 'piggybacked' (in an evolutionary sense) upon the neural systems that evolved to help us navigate our social world" (Suttie 2018).

In that same study, the authors describe musical experience and empathy as "psychological neighbors" (Wallmark, Choi, and Iacoboni 2018: 1). Analysing individualised listening, they introduce the concept of music as a *virtual social agent*, noting that the *other* does not need to be a person to evoke an empathic response — "it can be music" (2018: 16).

They elaborate:

> "Music is a portal into the interior lives of others. By disclosing the affective and cognitive states of actual or imagined human actors, musical engagement can function as a mediated form of social encounter, even when listening by ourselves (2018: 1).

Crucially — and with significant relevance for empathy and non-violence — Wallmark, Choi, and Iacoboni conclude that "if music can function

something like a virtual 'other,' then it might be capable of altering listeners' views of real others" (2018: 16).

These ideas resonate with my own experience as a songwriter. After moving from New Zealand to Berlin at 22 years old, I wrote songs about homesickness. Later, a fan requested one of these songs for their funeral; for them, the music offered peace and solace in their final days. Another song, written about a new and exciting love, became a source of empowerment for a young student living away from home for the first time. They wrote to thank me for the boost it gave them each day. Here, we see the *virtual other* in action: in neither case were the songs interpreted as I had written them — their meaning was co-created by the listener. And how powerful is that?

Belonging, Safe Havens, and Musical Community

Schopenhauer revered music as the highest artform in part because, for him, it existed purely in time rather than in space (Shapshay 2012: 16). The discovery of sound waves and the capturing of sound on physical mediums already complicate this claim, but I would go further and contest it based on lived experience: I see music very much as a *spatial art*. Musicking can create space — for regeneration, healing, understanding, and belonging.

Rickard et al. affirm that musical activities nurture a sense of belonging to a community (2025: 18–19). Musicking is recognised as a non-clinical method of addressing disconnectedness and loneliness, which are said to affect one in five people (Rickard et al. 2025: 20). In a world marked by political polarisation, online alienation, rising anxiety, intolerance, and conflict (D'Souza 2024), methods that strengthen communal ties are increasingly important. Coming home to the tribe and beating a drum together has perhaps never been *timelier*.

Rickard et al. highlight festivals as *safe havens*, characterised by "pervasive feelings of safety, trust, and respect," along with descriptions of *home* and *family* (2025: 13). For some participants, such spaces are described as their only access point to real safety. One attendee at a women's music festival put it starkly: "It's sad that we have to wait for a whole year to be free and respected for one week" (Rickard et al. 2025: 13).

Echoing theories of liminality, several studies note the freedom of identity exploration afforded by these safe musical environments — described as non-judgemental, tolerant, and socially supportive (Rickard et al. 2025: 13). Rock fans of the band *Phish* recount their experience as,

> “fostering a sense of community, not caring about what people think about you, respecting people’s expressions of themselves, respecting people’s space, watching out for each other, and maintaining personal boundaries (Rickard et al. 2025: 13).

Whether in *Kopinga Marae* (the Moriori meeting house on Rēkohu), at a festival, a living-room concert, around a campfire, or at home with a glass of red wine, musical spaces — and the belonging, empathy, and understanding cultivated within them — are powerful generators of community. Policymakers could benefit from exploring ways to amplify and support safe communal spaces well beyond traditional music venues.

Part Four: Messy Realities – May the Force Be With You

Context is Queen

As mentioned earlier, Part Four of this paper addresses a few important caveats. As a relational practice it is crucial to note that musicking is never context-free, inherently benevolent, or guaranteed in its impact.

Herein lies my strongest critique of Schopenhauer, who wrote of music: “In it we do not recognise the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world” (Schopenhauer 1909: 331). The claim that context and agency do not inform music-making is, in my view, rightfully widely disputed, as is the assumption of any hierarchy between and within artforms, and how they affect different people in different situations. As Small puts it: “Like all human encounters, it [musicking] takes place in a physical and a social

setting, and those, too, have to be taken into account when we ask what meanings are being generated by a performance (Small 1998: 10).

Returning once more to my Radiohead experience – as beautiful as it was - context was still *queen*. The summer air, being in Europe for the first time, and the youthful romance of it all were undeniably contributing variables. We experience music both collectively and individually — united through shared experience, yet internally applying, as in all aspects of life, our perspectives, emotions, cultural filters, and histories.

The German word for *performance* illustrates this point well — *Vorstellung* can also mean *idea*, *concept*, and *representation*. As performers or audience members, we are always representing ourselves. The very act of sharing music in any organised setting is instigated or arranged to some degree (Small 1998: 10) — it is not, for instance, the same as humming to yourself absent-mindedly.

Grounding musicking in context does not, in my mind, make it any less powerful. I contend art cannot ever truly separate us from our reality — and it is a good thing too. Otherwise, how could it inspire or strengthen us, or bring us to critical thought that might transform that very reality?

Messy Realities: Commodification, Industry, and Group Mentality

The first thing I jotted down when brainstorming this paper was that music is a force — like in *Star Wars*. It can be used for light or dark, depending on who is holding the *sabre*. Be it dualistic, having moved through the literature, I believe this metaphor is still useful for reminding us that musicking is "descriptive, not prescriptive" (Small 1998: 9). Yes, it can foster empathic community — but even unity can be co-opted as a tool of power, control, and manipulation. Music's innate power to move us does not automatically make it a force for light or dark.

Life for musicians and listeners is far messier than Schopenhauer's ideals. Today's music industry generates immense profits for streaming giants and major labels at the expense of most creators. Chronic financial insecurity and poor working conditions have real consequences for artists' mental and

physical health — and for their ability to find and share inspiration. Try telling an underpaid singer in an Irish pub, hit on inappropriately three times in the past hour, that performing *Wonderwall* for intoxicated football fans is a noble pursuit. It is not. It is labour — and much, much harder work than most people realise.

Similarly, the *age of the background playlist* contradicts Schopenhauer's ideal of music as "pure contemplation" (1909: 239) — in my view aligning more closely with Adorno's notion of "regressive listening," where "the standardisation of the cultural product leads to the standardisation of the audience" (Rekha/Linesh 2023: 833). If success in the system requires writing for the algorithm, the results are predictably monotonous — creating by number. Although writing at a very different time, in the shadow of Nazi Germany, Adorno's words "nothing which strikes the ear remains exempt from this system of assimilation" (Adorno 1938: 287) ring chillingly true in today's musical landscape — a "profit-driven structure" that reinforces dominant ideas (Rekha/Linesh 2023: 832). From this perspective, commodified, standardised musical forms risk fostering habituated patterns of response rather than critical engagement.

Dynamics of assimilation and a lack of critical thinking become even more concerning when paired with music's power to mobilise. We see examples of the *sabre* being used for questionable purposes all around us. Kid Rock performing at a Trump rally unites supporters in what I would describe as a deeply divisive ideology; the controversial lyrics of Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama* have been publicly utilised by white supremacists — and are still sung loudly and unreflectively in pubs across the globe; and the pervasive normalisation of misogyny in popular lyrics continues to shape cultural attitudes. Even football mobs show that chanting together can erupt into unthinking, destructive behaviour. Group mentality itself is not inherently positive and can develop into "negative social capital" (Rickard et al. 2025: 17). Rickard notes that participation in music events can also reinforce exclusion: for example, a Dutch folk festival appeared to strengthen in-group feelings of idealised national superiority at the expense of other cultures (2025: 11–12).

Heshmat observes that shared rhythms can bring people together "whether as a community or in preparation for a battle" (2024). Similar to the lightsabre, and while simplistic in its dualism, this statement reinforces how musicking, like any practice involving human agency, can serve any purpose along the spectrum from healing to harm — perhaps even concurrently. A strained Oasis cover, a pop-by-numbers track, or — even though it makes me cringe to say it — an AI-generated song, even if viewable as socially negative in many ways, can still *reach* someone. That musicking can *move* universally is, for me, a truth, but the ways in which it moves and affects us remain multifaceted and mysterious.

In aesthetic terms, I align more with Nietzsche, who saw art as "a powerful affirmation of life itself," "a creative force that embraced and celebrated life's struggles and chaos" (Murray 2025). Nietzsche understood art as deeply tied to the affirmation of existence even amid suffering. This, to me, is a view more grounded in lived reality. Musicking helps us connect to, engage with, feel, and understand life in all its colours.

Conclusion: The Practice of Relationship in Action

For me, it is comforting to know that when words are too hard, we can still hum with each other. The silver thread is there if we need it — a bridge of common vibration for our words to cross.

The scientific, Indigenous, and personal perspectives in this paper show how both musicking and being in peace are practices of relationship — with ourselves, with each other, with the natural world, and across time and existence. As a seasoned performer who has observed audiences from street corners to philharmonic concert halls, I know at a deep level that musicking can create a song of empathy, healing, and understanding. I have seen it move people time and time again, and I would encourage educators, academics, and policymakers alike to remain open to this kind of input.

A key takeaway from this paper is that if we are serious about building a sustainable, non-violent world, then Indigenous and intergenerational wisdom must not remain peripheral; they must shape our policies,

institutions, and education systems to a far greater degree. To gather in unity with one another — *Hokomenetai* in Moriori — we need to listen deeply to these insights and draw upon age-old practices of truth-telling and healing found in the arts, alongside future-focused Indigenous systems of alternative dispute resolution, conflict prevention, and environmental stewardship — approaches that have worked within their cultural contexts for centuries.

This paper has shown that musicking's power should not be romanticised and that agency, power structures, and context will always matter. Yet evidence suggests we can consciously direct the practice toward building non-violent community. Rickard et al. surmise that further studies in this field should "provide guidance to government and the music industry as to how this community asset can be optimized for social well-being" (Rickard et al. 2025: 20–21). They highlight the crucial role that live music events and community spaces can play in connecting marginalised people in meaningful ways, and argue that policymakers and educators can contribute to "the development of safe and well-being-enabling environments and systems" (2025: 20–21).

I would add, especially in the age of AI, that policymakers should prioritise artist wellbeing, so as not to trade depth, truth, and inspiration for commodification, monopolisation, and distraction. The evidence in this paper underscores that the arts are not simply an *add-on* but a central tenet of human social interaction — a truth that deserves far greater recognition in policy.

Personally, I yearn for a more regular communal practice of musicking—singing and dancing around the (metaphorical) fire, in sync with each of our beating hearts. Perhaps some eyes are rolling—what kind of Berlin hippy child from down under is coming up with this?!—but can you honestly say you have ever left a concert where you sang, clapped, or danced along without feeling at least a little more whole, a little warmer, lighter, or empowered? And could that warmth, openness, and shared energy offer a softer starting point for human interaction? If you have sung with someone whose political views oppose your own, are you not at least momentarily more able to see them first as a fellow human being—a being with vibrating cells, just like you?

In the spirit of Moriori wisdom, I hope this paper has invoked deep listening and encourages further holistic review of the various topics I have touched upon. To close, I'd like to give my inner 22-year-old street musician — who somehow found words for truths she did not yet know — the last word:

> "There's a power to that momentary grace
> When the song you've sung can't come undone and you see it on their face
> And the light goes green, their eyes they gleam, they've seen the in-between.

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