## Activity 3 – Music and Conflict

Initially, the idea that music can contribute to conflict may seem counter-intuitive. After all, music is often conceived of either as *entertainment*, and therefore not 'serious' enough, or as *art*, and therefore too removed from 'ordinary' life, to generate conflict. Sometimes music is believed to be (quite literally) harmonious! Nevertheless, music has a powerful role to play both in generating, and in transforming, conflict.

One of the key features of music in this regard is its use as a means of self-identification. Just as people who like opera or hip-hop music tend to identify themselves as 'opera aficionados' or 'hip-hop lovers', they also tend to identify with others who also like these genres. This tendency to group ourselves around certain characteristics has wider cultural significance as well. Particularly where divisions in ethnicity, language, religion, or culture have resulted in tension between groups, choosing one kind of music over another can signal one's membership in a particular group and, consequently, the exclusion of others from that group.

On the other hand, studies have shown that participating in music with others—whether this means performing or listening—can make us feel more together, more 'in tune', with others. There are a variety of potential reasons for this, but here I want to highlight two: entrainment and empathy. Entrainment refers to the ability of humans to synchronise our movements to external rhythms: for instance, by tapping our feet or clapping along to a beat. When this is done in a group it can enhance feelings of synchronicity. Empathy, on the other hand, describes the capacity to feel or understand another person's experience by placing oneself in another's shoes. Preliminary results from empirical studies on music suggest that exposure to music from unfamiliar cultures can change the cultural attitudes of people who are disposed towards being empathetic. In other words, music has the potential to help people understand different cultures and experiences.

It is these capacities that suggest music also has a role to play in the transformation of conflict by bringing people from different backgrounds together. This role has been actively studied in many parts of the world, from Northern Ireland to South Africa and from the Middle East to Australia, where some composers have combined music's potential for communicating remorse with its capacity to bring people together in order to create what we are calling 'apology songs' as a means of transforming conflict. This exercise looks at a specific work composed as an 'apology song' and examines it as both an opportunity to enact an apology in performance and to create communities wherein issues of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation can be worked out.

## Kerry Fletcher, "Sorry Song" (1998/2008)

In Australia between the late nineteenth century and the 1970s, many thousands of Indigenous and mixed-race children were removed from their homes and their communities—sometimes by force—and sent to live in residential schools or with white families. At the time, these removals were often justified in terms of child welfare, but the belief that mixed-descent children could be assimilated into white Australian society led to widespread racial profiling. Many children were abused or mistreated, and, in some cases, children were raised in purposeful ignorance of their heritage and families. Now commonly known as the "Stolen Generations", the survivors have sought recognition of their experiences and compensation from the Australian government.

In 1998, Western Australian composer and Indigenous rights activist Kerry Fletcher wrote "Sorry Song" as part of a wider racial reconciliation movement in Australia. She makes the connection between "Sorry Song" and the reconciliation movement explicit in her declaration that the song is 'dedicated to all First Nations people whose lives have been affected by the policy of Indigenous Child Removals'. At the same time, it is written 'on behalf of all of us whose hearts ache when we think of the pain those children and communities suffered and the pain which they still endure today.'

The original version of "Sorry Song" had three verses and a chorus, in which the painful experiences of the Stolen Generations are acknowledged, and singers express a desire to apologise for the past. In 2008, the National Government in Australia finally made an official apology to the Stolen Generations. In recognition of that act, Fletcher added a fourth verse and a modified chorus that look to a better future for a united Australia.

You can find the lyrics and a copy of the score here: http://www.sorrysong.com.au/music

In addition to reading the lyrics, you can watch a video of a performance of the song by community choir Madjitil Moorna that took place in Perth, Western Australia as part of the celebration of the National Apology on February 13th, 2008. The video is available on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKHExD3slR4

## Tasks

**Task 1:** Look at the score and lyrics:

1. How do the words and music interact?

2. For what kinds of performers would this be appropriate music? Think about this in terms of vocal range, rhythmic or harmonic complexity, and overall difficulty.

3. What is the message of the song? Do you think it is communicated effectively?

4. If so, what are the means of communication? If not, what would make it more effective?

**Task 2:** After watching the performance, consider the following:

The musicologist Nicholas Cook has suggested that the nature of choral performance, with its concern for blend and synchronisation, is an embodiment of harmony and community. Keeping in mind the ideas of entrainment and empathy described above, how might this performance of "Sorry Song" be interpreted as such an embodiment physically? And symbolically?

**Task 3:** Finally, imagine that you are a musicologist interested in assessing how a piece of music such as "Sorry Song" affects how people feel about racial reconciliation in Australia and design a research project that studies these effects. As you think about this project consider the following questions:

1. What methods (analysis, reception studies, ethnography, etc.) could I use?

2. Who or what would make a good source of information?

3. Where and how could I gather information: primary sources (score analysis, interviews with participants or the composer, surveys of racial attitudes), secondary sources (newspaper reviews), others?

4. What are the most important questions to ask?

5. How would I assess my results?