

Has music ever significantly changed the course of history?

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You connect your headphones, turn on your favorite song, and let the music flow through. What do you feel? Does what you hear compel you to dance or make you sad? Music has been with us since the beginning of human history (Zimmer, Mithen). It has an undeniable effect on individual and collective behavior, both physically and mentally (Kent). In turn, music is often shaped by current events (Ahmed). Think of how rock and folk music from the 1960s were shaped by the anti-war protests of the time. While it is undaring to think of history shaping music, it is rare to consider the inverse. The idea that music may have had an historical impact poses a complex set of questions that evinces music's hold over us.

To explore this proposition further, we will first establish what we mean by music and history. Both may feel like intuitive notions, but upon closer analysis, both have nuances that merit further exploration. We will then examine a few commonly cited examples of music having a strong influence on historical events, deconstruct that influence, and analyze what they reveal about the power of music to shape the course of human history.

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of music, as this essay is an exploration of history, we will use the definition employed by musicologists, since their cultural and historical focus aligns with this essay. This definition describes music as an organization of sound around musical elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and form, all used as expressions to convey emotions or aesthetic experiences ("Music"). To analyze music to this extent, musicologists strip it down to its purest forms: sound, lyrics, or their combination (Sullivan) and explore both its composition as well as its performance (Treitler). In this definition, songs and musical theater would be considered music. Speech, noise, or silence, on the other hand, would not.

As for history, the common view sees history as the all-inclusive series of past events ("History"). History can cover many areas, such as social, political, and economic (Carr). Historians look at history critically in an attempt to explain causality between key events and subsequent outcomes (Arnold). History is often described metaphorically as a river, in which events carry humankind onward; indeed, this image is embedded in the phrase "the course of history."

Three aspects of this view of history are worth addressing. The first is the assumption

that historical events can have multiple outcomes. This distorts the metaphor of the river, suggesting that, at any given moment, history can split or diverge and follow a different path. The making *of* history, or a change *in* history, can only happen when there are multiple possible futures, with only one possibility playing out. “The future has yet to be written,” so the saying goes. This view also necessarily rejects determinism which states that everything is inevitable and “what will happen has already happened” (Stanford).

A second assumption is that it is possible to intuit “what could have been” if different events had occurred. Unfortunately, because we are unable to predict the future or change the past, we cannot conclusively prove what would have happened otherwise. If Hitler had not been born, would the forces of history still conspire to create another fascist leader in post-WWI Germany? To overcome this, the burden is on us as historians to show beyond reasonable doubt a strong causal relationship between an event and the subsequent path of history.

Finally, even if we agree that the future has not yet been written, and the choices I make today can still shape the path my future takes, there remains the question of significance. We seek “significant change” in the course of historical events. I chose to eat Chinese instead of Italian yesterday, steering reality down a different path, but is that really changing “the course of history”? Implied in this phrase is History with a capital “H,” meaning the history of humankind, not my changing cuisine preferences. As such, we will say that for a decision or event to “significantly change” history, that decision or event must affect a significant portion of the world’s population.

With these definitions in place, we can now examine the power of music and whether that power is sufficiently consequential to actually shape history. We will do so by considering (i) musical pieces that musicologists have deemed as most important, (ii) examples of music credited with influencing societal changes, and (iii) music’s role in shaping social movements such as the American Civil Rights movement and anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Musicologists will often create lists of musical pieces and songs that they assert have had the greatest influence on history. Such lists for classical music might include Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 or Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (Morris). These claims are usually based on a piece’s influence on musical history, each chosen because of how it diverged from the then-popular forms, introduced new concepts to the norm and helped develop new genres. Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, for example, has been described as “the greatest single step made by an individual composer in the history of the symphony and the history of music in general” (Lang 763). However, changing the history of music does not equate with changing History with a capital “H”. The creation of Symphony No. 3 did not impact a significant portion of the human

population. If Beethoven had chosen to become a painter, we would still have had the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the invention of the light bulb. And so our quest continues.

Musicologists will also note music's role in and influence on social trends. For example, Gregorian chants were a tool for Pope Gregory to unite the various churches throughout Europe into a single identity, requiring clergy to "only perform Gregorian chants in their services on pain of death" if they did not comply (Wilson 10). A more recent example is *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky, a work widely described as ushering in the modernist movement. It was 1913, a time of great change and uncertainty: World War I was imminent, and industrialization and new innovations were transforming both the world and how we viewed it. *The Rite of Spring* forced its audience to confront this new, emergent world using a musical style that had never been heard before. To the traditional ear it was incredibly jarring, assaulting the senses with machine-like sounds and inorganic cadence that included rhythm breaks, drill rhythms, and hammering, a portent of the violence to come (Benjamin).

There is no doubt that *The Rite of Spring* was a pivotal piece of music. However, the direction of causality is unclear: was music what caused social change, or did change in society shape the music? It feels much more intuitive to state the latter. Without the modernist movement, it seems logical that we would have no *Rite of Spring*. But if Stravinsky had not worked out his masterpiece, the forces of technical progress and social change would have still conspired to create the world we know today.

Given this example, we are hard pressed to say that these compositions had any power to change history. Rather, it's more reasonable to say that music both reflects and incorporates ideas of its time, serving as an essential medium through which historical epochs express their dissonances.

Finally, we will examine music's influence on social movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Civil Rights Movement was a fight against segregation and discrimination ("Civil Rights Movement"). So-called Jim Crow laws prevented Black people from taking part in a society within which they were promised equality. The system of oppression created by centuries of subjugation made it difficult for Black Americans to break out of pre-established prejudice. The Civil Rights Movement resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which abolished the Jim Crow laws and banned all forms of public discrimination.

Historians often credit music as a tool indispensable to the cause. Martin Luther King, Jr. called songs the "soul of the movement" and said they inspired, mobilized, and gave a voice to the movement (Shelton). Freedom songs were not created strategically *for* the movement but

were a natural product used to convey frustrations and ideas (Reagon). The most famous example, “We Shall Overcome” was sung during marches, sit-ins, and rallies. The simplicity of the lyrics made it easier for everyone to understand the message, relating to the fight on an emotional level. The song appeals to universal values of truth, freedom, faith, and justice, making it relatable to many, including those who were opposed to the movement. Protestors, activists, and leaders performed these songs to unite and stand up for justice in the face of bigotry (Reagon).

Freedom songs served to spread the message across all who were oppressed . They sustained their resolve and faith in the movement. They channeled their behavior – even when people were assaulted and imprisoned, the lyrics provided hope, reinforcing the resolve to protest (Reagon). They also brought other allies and advocates into the fold. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the landmark legislation on August 6, 1964, he used the phrase “We Shall Overcome” in his speech to emphasize its message (Adams). Ultimately, freedom songs served to unite a large population into a force that was able to drive change on a large scale.

The Civil Rights Movement is not the only case for this example. Music was pivotal for the 17th-century Diggers, a protest movement in the U.K. whose anthem, the “Diggers’ Song,” was carried by Quakers into the New World, and for the French Revolution, which many historians consider the birthplace of the modern protest song (Pilhofer). In these examples, we can see the power of music – an ability to unify, to spread ideas, to exhort and strengthen resolve, that can channel large populations into a social movement. As Martens summarizes when examining the role of music in history: “Music exerts its influence on the historic event principally as the carrier of a thought” (196).

We have established that music is a medium for ideas, and that ideas have the power to change the course of History. However, we still have one last hurdle. There are, of course, other mediums for ideas, such as books or plays, which may cast doubt on the claim that history would have gone down a different path if not for the music. Fortunately, there are four aspects of music that, combined, make it a unique medium for transmitting ideas.

First, music can trigger an emotional reaction. It is an emotional agent, operating directly on the senses or indirectly through the mind (Juslin and Västfjäll). Said Aristotle: “Such is the power of music. One might take thought for a year without obtaining the results it obtains!” (Martins 214). Second, music often contains lyrics that capture ideas that shape people’s thinking, unlike paintings or other visual arts which are more abstract. Third, music is accessible. You need not be literate to hear and understand words and lyrics. Music is also difficult to censor – in periods of history when books were banned, music conveyed ideas,

stories, and messages. Finally, music is active and participatory. People sing, and their minds and hearts engage. Music unifies (Tarr).

So although music is not the sole medium through which ideas are conveyed, it is unique and, for certain points of history, was the primary or sole vehicle through which ideas were transmitted, creating social movements that ultimately changed history.

In conclusion, ideas can change the course of human history, and music is a unique conveyor of ideas. In this sense, music does indeed have the power to change the course of human history, and has played a major role in critical social movements.

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