

Is emancipation through music possible? You may choose to focus your answer on a single case study if you wish.

Throughout history, music has been used as a mechanism for change and to raise awareness of issues such as civil rights, women's suffrage and, recently, the #MeToo movement. Due to the accessibility of making music, a message can be delivered to many people through protest songs and other music. One might argue that it is possible for an oppressed group to be emancipated through music, a statement that I will explore in this essay.

A key example of this form of emancipation through music is the use of spirituals sung by slaves in America, in particular, the Deep South, throughout the 18th Century. These spirituals were religious folk songs, used to express hope and joy, and their Africanised Christian beliefs. In the book 'My Bondage and My Freedom' by Frederick Douglass, a liberated slave, he describes his experience of singing spirituals, particularly a repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan', and how this not only demonstrated the hope of heaven after death, but the collective wish for freedom and to travel to the north of the United States, where slavery had been abolished.

Spirituals incorporated elements of the slaves' culture from their countries of origin: through instrumentation, using panpipes, drums and balafos (a form of xylophone); the rhythmic syncopated elements; use of different modes; and the call and response elements of these spirituals. This is significant as often slave owners tried to strip away African culture from their slaves: an example is the renaming of slaves with traditional American names; or the enforcement of the Christian religion¹, to replace the traditional tribal belief systems the slaves previously held. One could argue that emancipation occurred through this music, as slaves gained the right and ability to celebrate their African culture freely; a right that had been limited in many ways through the history of slave labour.

Additionally, due to the repetitive lyrics, and the call and response style of the folk songs, with a leader improvising calls, and a group echoing or giving a response, the spirituals were picked up easily, and the message of hope for freedom could spread across the slave population. The extent of this prevalence is suggested due to the use of the spiritual 'Go down, Moses' as a secret code by Harriet Tubman, an ex-slave who aided thousands of slaves to escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Some have even interpreted that 'Moses' actually refers to Tubman in this spiritual². Again, it could be argued that this music enabled the emancipation of slaves, as it directly impacted the liberation of thousands, finally gaining the right to freedom, as expressed in spirituals they had sung.

¹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/slavery_1.shtml

² Jazz & Blues, Vulliamy (1982)

The influence of these spirituals, and the important musical elements which define them, continued after the abolition of slavery in America, in the 20th Century, with gospel and blues music. In New Orleans, a port city and ‘melting pot’ of different cultures, the jazz genre was beginning to form. Due to the continued segregation of white and African American populations, musicians of different races were rarely allowed to perform in the same public places. However, in Congo Square, in the city centre, musicians of all races were able to perform there, merging together different cultures and influencing the pieces each band was performing. This fusion led to the formation of Jazz, all with the same core elements, for example: an improvisatory feel and swung, syncopated rhythms, two features which can be traced back to spirituals. In this historical case, it is suggested that through defying the social expectations of segregation between the musicians of two different races, emancipation occurred through music. However, there was still bias towards white musicians, who were given more opportunities to showcase this new style of music, despite the collaborative nature of the fusion.

Another example of emancipation through music is during the women’s suffrage movement in Great Britain in the 19th and 20th Centuries, culminating in the right to vote being granted to all women over 21 years old with the Equal Franchise Act, finally resulting in equal voting rights for men and women in Great Britain. Protest songs played an important role in helping to spread the movement’s important message, with the Women’s Social and Political Union’s Anthem being especially significant. Composed by Ethel Smyth, ‘March of the Women’ encouraged women to ‘shout, shout, up with your song!’ and raise the profile of the issue. Interestingly, due to religious references, noticeable in the lyric ‘Thunder of freedom, the voice of the Lord!’, one could allege that this composition is influenced by the slave spirituals of the previous century. Despite the stark cultural differences, the hopeful tone and wish for freedom, and the simple melody and lyrics, which could easily be picked up by a large group of listeners, have a similar spirit and effect as the spirituals, and effectively conveyed the message of the Suffragettes.

The effectiveness of this protest anthem is clearly demonstrated when it is described how it was performed by suffragettes in Holloway Prison in 1912, serving time due to their public protests. Even during incarceration, the women still sang the song of the WSPU proudly, marching around the prison grounds whilst the composer watched from her cell, causing Sir Thomas Beecham, the prison governor, to feel deeply humiliated by this rebellious act. Beecham later described Smyth as ‘highly hysterical [sic]’, ‘neurotic’ and even ‘mentally disturbed’, although we now know that this was certainly incorrect: she was an intelligent woman who solely chose to stand up for her rights, both through her compositions, and through her actions as a suffragette; and many women in the suffrage movement were also dismissed as being insane and uneducated. This event strongly suggests that emancipation is greatly aided by music, and almost implies that musical performance could emancipate a group in occurrences such as the frenzy caused by simple singing.

My final example of the role of music in emancipation is from the recent women's rights protests, particularly those in South American countries such as Chile. In November of 2019, a Latin American feminist protest anthem called 'El violador en tu camino', translating to 'The rapist is you', rapidly spread across the world from sharing and posts on social media. First performed by feminist group Las Tesis on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the striking black blindfolds and green scarves (symbolising the campaign for abortions to be made legal) paired with the repetitive dance moves and chant-like lyrics helped others to notice and share the song. One may argue that this is similar both to the spirituals, with repetitive lyrics which are quickly picked up, and the suffragettes, with dance moves which could be seen as similar to the military-like marching of the WSPU anthem. However, one element which is strikingly different to these two cases is the violent and bold lyrics, describing without hesitation the extent of violence against women in Chile, and around the world. The song includes lyrics translating to 'Patriarchy is a judge who judges us for being born and our punishment is the violence you don't see' and 'the fault wasn't mine, not where I was, not how I dressed', repeated three times to emphasise that excuses made to justify femicide or sexual assault are completely unreasonable, something emphasised by the #MeToo movement.

A significant moment is around two thirds of the way through the song, quoting a stanza of the Chilean police anthem: 'Sleep calmly, innocent girl/Without worrying about the bandit/For over your smiling, sweet dreams/watches your loving cop.' This is notable as only around 8% of rapes are ever convicted in Chile, a statistic that arguably contradicts the reassuring tone of the stanza, and by quoting this, attention is brought to these injustices. The worldwide popularity of the anthem brought the issues that South American women face to the attention of millions, and the song was performed at women's rights protests across the globe, from London to Madrid, Bogotá to Mexico, each slightly altering the actions paired with the song, perhaps to emphasise their own particular issues. The repetitive elements of the song, and its ability to motivate a passionate crowd, greatly spread the message of how important it is to continue to campaign for emancipation of the oppressed, even in present day.

In conclusion, music can play a great role in the emancipation of oppressed groups, and occasionally can directly lead to emancipation. Compositions such as protest anthems do raise the profile of the issues they are tackling, and can play a large role in motivating a crowd, helping the movement to gain more momentum, as seen in the case studies previously described. However, I would argue that more often than not, these songs are only contributing factors to the overall movement working for emancipation. While singing these anthems may evoke feelings of emancipation due to the performer's ability to express their opinions and emotions with those who share similar experiences and beliefs, this rarely results in any freedom being granted, except possibly freedom of the mind, as the

group sings of hope for the future. Even today, protest songs are still composed by groups such as 'A Tribe called Quest' and 'Gorillaz', and rappers often freestyle during live performances, bringing the audience's attention to issues they may not have realised were prominent in society. These poignant moments remind us of the importance of activism, and the need to keep striving for a society where efforts towards emancipation are no longer needed. Yet, in current society, protest anthems serve both as an indication of how far we have come in terms of equality, but also a harsh reminder of how greatly we could improve.

1620 Words

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