The Sounds of Equality: Reciting Resilience, Singing Revolutions

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Asian And Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Curation, Diasporic Sound



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***SO!* Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome!**

When the pandemic hit the world in late 2019, the concept of lockdown ceased the social life of the people and their communities. In these unprecedented circumstances, a video from Italy took the internet. People in Italian towns such as Siena, Benevento, Turin, and Rome were singing from their windows and balconies, which raised morale. The song "Bella Ciao," an old partisan Italian song, became an anthem of hope against adversity. This anti-fascist song was popularized during the mid-20th century across the globe as a part of progressive movements. Following this, people in many countries around the world created their renditions of "Bella Ciao" in Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, French, Spanish, Armenian, German, Portuguese, Russian, and within India in languages such as Punjabi, Marathi, Bangla, and even in sign language renditions. It was such an apt moment that captured the idea of empathy, solidarity, and the human need for community.

This moment was still resonating with me when I was approached by Goethe Institut, New Delhi, to work on music and protest, and create The Music Library. I knew what I needed to do.

Embed from Getty Images

The Music Library was conceptualized as a weekly playlist of protest songs. I believe protests are not just demands but are aspirations, unfulfilled promises that truly represent the resilience of people. I could not imagine anything more beautiful than protest music to represent the world, as it amplifies human desires for connection and better days ahead. I designed it as a weekly music bulletin that people could dwell in for half an hour, and it would be like a short musical insight to that country or theme. Although the project had to be cut short due to institutional limitations, The Music Library creted 36 weekly playlists focused on liberation movements, anti-colonial struggles, people's uprisings, and popular expressions of dissent.



The logo for The Music Library, Goethe Institute

The Music Library hosts two types of playlists: issue-based and country- or region-specific. This approach curates and classifies music for a broader audience attuned to these categories. When I prepare a playlist, the first thing I seek is to incorporate marginalized and diverse voices. Diversity can be based on caste, gender, language, region, and more. I typically favor field recordings, amateur productions, and emerging artists. Occasionally, the featured artists have as few as 50 views on their videos. After listening to numerous songs and consulting individuals with greater expertise, I select 5-8 songs and then write a blurb to introduce the playlist. Sometimes, I also seek help for language assistance. In that sense, it's a very collaborative effort. The Music Library's mission resonates with Merje Laiapea's mapping of Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion through music. The Music Library similarly engages protest music, but with a wider array of areas and themes.

After the first few weeks, I decided to transition from Indian protest music to global and I wanted to foster a gradual introduction instead of a snap transition. I realized that inviting guest curators would enable the transition to linger on for a bit before settling in, and the guest curators would have a much better idea of the protest culture in their respective country and/or area of research.

For example, Sara Kazmi, a scholar-activist-singer from Pakistan, curated a playlist on protest music of Pakistan; Yueng, who is researching Hong Kong music for his Ph.D, curated a playlist on The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. So their expertise and knowledge of respective countries give us a better sense of what protest music is for people there than I could provide on my own. Like Sara and Yueng, many of the guest curators have either been part of protest movements or have written, observed, or researched closely. Likewise, there are guest playlists by musicologist Lucas Avidan that emphasize the prominence of hip-hop music, or as some call it "Bonga flava" in Tanzanian protest music, and a playlist on MC Todfod, an emerging rapper from Mumbai Hip-Hop collective *Swadesi* who passed away at the age of 24. Protests themselves are essentially about bringing people together and working together. In this sense, the co-curatorial process resonated with the idea of protest music itself as a collective action.

The idea of protest is essentially an act, attitude, orientation, and assertion against the dominant conservative system. So, in that sense, its definition is as varied as the kinds of conservatism existing in societies. It could be based on class, caste, gender, race, nation, region, language, food, and culture. In short, protest music means speaking up against power. Protest music plays multiple roles for the people practicing it or whom it represents. In a highly unequal power relationship, it is like a crack or a rupture against hegemony. In others, it asserts power. For many, protest music symbolizes an idea, utopia, like one world or *Begumpura,* i.e., land without sorrow, in 15th-century saint-poet Ravidas from India. With old social issues such as casteism, patriarchy, feudalism still lingering around and consolidating, and capitalism and nationalism getting strongholds across the globe, the world is more fragmented and hostile. In this situation, the protest music from around the world raises some particular issues but also many universal ones, such as equality, recognition, dignity, food, housing, healthcare, education, and above all, the right to live as an equal citizen. The Music Library brings all of this protest music under a single umbrella, as all this music has one thing in common: Resilience! At times, The Music Library is a music room that soothes, and other times a war cry for equality!

Bangladesh's playlist, for example, curated by Dhaka-based artist, Emdadul Hoque Topu, is based on Liberation War songs. The Liberation War was a unique liberation movement based on linguistic identity. So, language, a mode of expression like music, was at the heart of the movement. Interestingly, when the recent popular uprising occurred, I was in Dhaka and saw the popular resentment against the Liberation War and its icons. It shows that protest music is as evolving and contemporary as any other expressive form, one age's protest song could later turn into a voice of the oppressor or used to oppress any dissent. For instance, *Rajakars*, a term that till recently had very negative connotation due to its association with the detractors of anti-liberation, has been employed and repurposed in a chant or slogan *ami ke, tumi ke, Rajakar, Rajakar* (who am I, who are you, Rajakar, Rajakar) for the current uprising that led to the overthrow of the Sheikh Hasina-led government.

In another instance, the historic Farmer's Protest of 2020-21 in India–termed the biggest movement in recorded history– has led to a proliferation of music to bolster it. Though the protest started in the north Indian state of Punjab, it spread across India and drew global support. Punjab

is a musically unique place; it is one of India's most popular and prolific independent music industries. Due to early migration history, Punjabi music has spread globally and has been adaptive of derived from various musical cultures such as rap, pop, etc, while maintaining its distinct linguistic identity. This made the Punjabi music popular and relevant beyond its linguistic boundaries. The movement has been chronicled by a newsletter called the *Trolley Times*, where I worked as a co-editor. Numerous Punjabi singers have contributed immensely by producing music and being part of the movement. After a long time, a strong impulse in the popular cultural sphere evolved in solidarity with the mass movement.

The Music Library was under construction when the world was going through a pandemic, and unprecedented isolation, a hallmark of oppression. In the pandemic, when people were dying, this quote became popular: *Corona is the virus, Capitalism is the pandemic*. People could see the havoc of capitalism playing out in full public display from the first world to the third world. Someone who is cornered, pushed against the wall, with no recourse to grievance redressal, cries out to make themselves count, and find solidarity and rise. I designed The Music Library to show how music can break a slumber and bring people to march together, similarly to what "Bella Ciao" did during COVID-19.

It began as a hum that was joined by neighbors, and then it spread, loudly, across the world as an expression of solidarity and resilience. "Bella Ciao" is such a marvellous testimony of what music can do and has been doing! I hope The Music Library serves as a humble repository of this resilience.

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Featured Image: Image of "Bella Ciao" being sung in Santiago, Chile during the 'estallido social' (2019) by AbarcaVasti, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

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