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# **Leadership for the Greater Good: Reflections on Today's Challenges From Around the Globe**

## **Listen to The Music!**



David Collinson examines the intersections, tensions, and controversies between music, leadership, and politics. After considering examples of political leaders promoting and censoring music, he explores how music is used in campaigns as well as how and why certain musicians have protested in response.

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As he announced a British General Election for 4 July 2024, Prime Minister Sunak had to contend with [New Labour's 1997 election campaign song being played at the gates to Downing Street](#) (Gecsoyler, 2024). The music was so loud that Sunak's media team were forced to increase his speaker audio, but with limited success. Released in 1993 as a regular pop song D:Ream's "[Things Can Only Get Better](#)" became [New Labour's election campaign anthem](#) four years later. After eighteen years of Conservative rule, the song's optimistic message communicated the promise of a brighter future and helped New Labour connect with younger voters.

The inter-connections between music, leadership, and politics are many and varied. Leaders have long recognized the power of music to stir passions, loyalty, and commitment; mobilize movements; disseminate messages; and reinforce a collective sense of unity. Music can influence how we see ourselves and how we are viewed by others. Impacting on people's mood in very direct ways, music can resonate at a deeply emotional level, bypassing language and reason and going straight to our heart and soul (Klein, 2017). Music can lift us up and calm us down. It can be joyful, exciting, sombre, or sad. Music has the power to tell stories (Gabriel, 2022) evoking powerful memories and creating positive feelings of belonging, nostalgia, community, and well-being (Storr, 1997).

Yet, music is under-explored in leadership studies. Some exceptions exist such as studies of leadership in orchestras, ensembles, opera, and jazz (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Gabriel, 2017; Koivunen & Wennes 2011; Sutherland & Cartwright, 2022), and Erenrich publishes regularly on music and leadership in her "Grassroots Leadership and the Arts for Social Change" column in ILA's *Interface* newsletter including a recent (2024) article on the post-Woodstock era drawn from her book (2020). See also her two co-edited collections ([Erenrich & Wergin, 2017](#); [Erenrich & DeRuyver, 2022](#)).

Although there is growing interest in leadership embodiment, few of these studies focus on the aural and audible dynamics associated with song, music, and sound. Highlighting the value of researching music and leadership, this essay examines some of their intersections, tensions, and controversies. After considering political leaders' concerns to promote and censor music, it explores how music is used in elections as well as how and why certain musicians have protested in response.

## **Promoting and Censoring**

Political leaders have often valued the power of music as a unifying force particularly as it is expressed through national anthems and in support of war. National anthems typically emphasize a collective sense of unity and identity, encouraging citizens to feel proud and to undertake great deeds for their nation. War time songs appeal to peoples' emotions and articulate patriotic messages. Singing can boost morale and enhance a collective sense of belonging. Equally, music is often written to glorify war victories, perhaps most famously, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* commemorating Russia's victory over Napoleon, and Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner" celebrating Fort McHenry's steadfast resistance against the British in 1814.

Throughout history, dictators and tyrants have also recognized the power of music (Klein, 2017). In authoritarian societies leaders have used music as a weapon of propaganda to manipulate populations. In Nazi Germany, for example, the kind of music that could be played and who could play it were tightly controlled. [The Nazis embraced the music of](#)

[Richard Wagner](#) who was a fervent German nationalist and outspoken antisemite (Stranex, 2022). As the ideological voice of the National Socialist Party, Wagner's music became the soundtrack to Nazi Party rallies and was also played as background music in propaganda films, newsreels, and radio announcements. In 1933 The Party celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wagner's death with a grandiose memorial ceremony in Leipzig, the composer's birthplace.

Hitler viewed Wagner as a genius and a prophet. In 1876 Wagner had created the Bayreuth music festival devoted to performing his operas and [between 1933 and 1939 Hitler attended every year](#), giving the festival tax exempt status (Wagner Operas, n.d.). Hitler claimed that it was Wagner and his music who inspired him to enter politics (Klein, 2017). Wagner was Hitler's favored composer, but Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms were also deemed to write music that espoused what it meant to be a true German. By contrast, the Nazis prohibited the "degenerate" music of Jewish composers like Mendelssohn and Mahler and the "foreign corrupt" music of American jazz and swing (Stranex, 2022).

Similarly in the Soviet Union, leaders used music to communicate political values. Like Hitler, Lenin and Stalin recognized music's powerful influence on society. For Lenin, [great music such as Beethoven's \*Appassionata\* \(Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57\) was a useful weapon in the class war](#) (Lebrecht, 2023). In building the Soviet empire, Stalin used music to assert the triumph of communism over capitalism and the heroism of the Russian people (Street, 2012). The doctrine of socialist realism required musicians to compose overtly nationalistic music using traditional Russian folk melodies. While the complex operas of Shostakovich were publicly condemned as "petty bourgeois," Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* fitted perfectly with Soviet propaganda (the wolf being seen as a metaphor for capitalism).

Autocratic leaders have also sought to silence music they consider subversive, and this censorship has sometimes had lethal consequences. After coming to power in Chile through a military coup in 1973, the Pinochet regime tortured and killed thousands of people including the social activist singer Víctor Jara, a prominent supporter of previous President Allende (Garratt, 2019). [On the 45th anniversary of Jara's death Erenrich's radio show featured his music as well as readings from other artist-leaders](#). The Soviet Union, Iran, and various Eastern European communist countries banned Western pop music, viewing it as a form of decadent propaganda that would "corrupt" their citizens. In 1996 one of the Taliban's first edicts in Afghanistan was to outlaw the playing of music in public or private (Street, 2012). When the Taliban were driven out in 2002, Afghan citizens waved cassette players and radios, connecting music with their newfound freedom. As Street (2012) observes, "Throughout human history music has been the source of fear and the object of repression. Every century on every continent has seen those in authority — whether as church or as state — use their powers to silence certain sounds or performers" (p. 9).

This authoritarian impulse to regulate, censor, and silence music can be traced back to ancient Greece. Viewing music as central to the way society was ordered, Plato emphasized its capacity to directly influence emotions and behaviors. Arguing that "undisciplined" music would lead to social disorder and a disregard for authority, Plato proposed that those in authority must police music through laws that ensure only positive use, the rigorous pre-censorship of new compositions, and the exclusion of music that Plato considered "incapable of having a beneficial effect on character" (Garratt, 2019, p. 47).

That leaders in different societies and eras have so often been concerned to selectively promote and censor — to use music as propaganda — highlights their underlying belief in its considerable social influence and psychological impact. Governments and political parties have recognized that music can make a difference — it can change hearts and minds. This is particularly so in national elections — a defining hallmark of Western democracies.

Musicians have emerged as informal leaders of change.

## **Campaigning and Protesting**

Politicians and their advisors have often used the positive power of music in election campaigns. Taking different forms in different eras, music has been an important part of U.S. presidential campaigns for well over two centuries (Schoening & Kasper, 2012). The earliest campaign songs were tributes to candidates such as the 1786 parody “God Save George Washington.” In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Truman’s “I’m Just Wild About Harry” in 1948 was lifted from a 1921 Broadway musical, and in 1952 Eisenhower’s “I Like Ike” featured in TV advertisements.

Ronald Reagan’s 1984 campaign featured Lee Greenwood’s country music song “God Bless the U.S.A.” The song’s patriotic chorus emphasizes “being proud to be an American” and finishes with “‘Cause there ain’t no doubt I love this land, God Bless the U.S.A.” In 1992 Bill Clinton used Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow” (and in various campaign interviews Clinton played the saxophone). In 2008 [a video of Barak Obama’s “Yes We Can” speech put to music by will.i.am](#) was watched online by millions. In the contemporary era, streaming is especially useful at campaign rallies where typically many songs are played to “pump up” the waiting crowd.

Although leaders may use music extensively, this can also be controversial in various ways. At his 2023/4 campaign rallies, former President Trump usually walks on to the podium accompanied by the same Lee Greenwood song Reagan used forty years ago, which Greenwood performed at Trump’s inauguration in 2017 (Willman, 2020). This is then followed by another song featuring men imprisoned for their involvement in the attempted coup on January 6<sup>th</sup> at the U.S. Capitol [singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” interspersed with Trump’s voice reciting the pledge of allegiance](#) (Samuels, 2023). Recorded over a prison phone line, the song ends with the chorus chanting “USA.” During his rallies, Trump refers to these men as [“J-6 patriots” and as “hostages, not prisoners.”](#) (Dovere et al., 2024).

Whilst campaigning Trump uses many other songs as well. This takes us to a second area of controversy which is where candidates play songs to support their campaigns but without an artist’s permission (Schoening & Kasper, 2012). In the U.S., political campaigns can purchase licensing packages giving [legal access to millions of songs](#). Artists do have the right to remove their music from this list. [In the UK permission from the relevant rights holder is needed before a song can be used](#) (Savage, 2023). While this issue is by no means new, it is of great contemporary relevance because [many artists do not want their music to be associated with Donald Trump’s campaign and have asked him to “cease and desist” from using their songs](#) (The Associated Press, 2020). A [Wikipedia page](#) now lists all the artists who have asked Trump to refrain from using their music. (“Musicians who oppose...,” 2024). At the time of writing, this list includes Adele, Aerosmith, Bruce Springsteen, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Eddy Grant, Elton John, Guns N’ Roses, Isaac Hayes, John Fogerty, Neil Young, Pharrell Williams, Phil Collins, Queen, R.E.M., Rihanna, The Rolling Stones, The

Smiths, The White Stripes, and the estates of Sinead O'Connor, Tom Petty, Leonard Cohen, Prince, George Harrison, and Luciano Pavarotti.

In the UK Fatboy Slim criticized the Labour Government's use of his song "Right Here, Right Now" at their 2004 annual conference, the year after the Iraq War. Prompted by the recent re-surfacing of "Things Can Only Get Better," [D:Ream issued a statement expressing their regret at allowing New Labour to use their song](#) (again because of the Iraq War), and refusing any future usage (*The Guardian*, 2024).

A third related controversy has arisen where songs used in campaigns have been misinterpreted and/or misappropriated. In 1984 [Bruce Springsteen criticized Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign for using "Born in the USA."](#) While the song's chorus and title superficially appears to be very patriotic, it actually focuses on the despair of a Vietnam veteran who cannot find a job after his return from war (Dolan, 2014). During the 2008 presidential election Sarah Palin played [Martina McBride's "Independence Day"](#) as her "walk on" music. Written by Gretchen Peters, the song was named after America's most patriotic holiday and includes a chorus of "Let freedom ring!" But Independence Day tells the story of one woman's experience of domestic violence and her desperation to escape abuse. [Shocked by the way her song was being misused, Peters donated \(in Palin's name\) all the royalties she received](#) from "Independence Day" to "Planned Parenthood" (Shaffer, 2019).

In addition to resisting politicians' misuse of their songs, some musicians have become high profile advocates for change. They have organized concerts for social causes, benefits, and charities like "Live Aid," "Farm Aid," "Live 8," "Rock Against Racism," and "The Bridge School Benefit." They have held meetings with politicians and accompanied them on election campaigns, and they have played at events supporting particular candidates or causes such as the modern Women's March, begun the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017. In protest songs, speeches, statements, and petitions musicians have fought for Civil Rights and [have critiqued wars and injustices and advocated for a better future](#) (Saunders et al., 2022). And it's not just rock, pop, or folk genres. In 1999 the classical pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim co-founded (with Edward Said) the "[West-Eastern Divan Orchestra](#)" in order to foster mutual understanding between young [Arab](#), Israeli, and Middle Eastern musicians ("West-Eastern Divan Orchestra," 2024) and Toshi Reagon and her mother Bernice Johnson Reagon recently debuted their [Parable of the Sower](#) opera, based on Octavia Butler's dystopian novel, that exposes the dire consequences of immoral leadership. In these and other ways, musicians have emerged as informal leaders of change.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that the power of music raises important questions for leadership theory, practice, and research. Having examined leaders' concerns to regulate music through promotion and censorship, the essay considered its role in national elections and the associated controversies that have arisen. That leaders and governments have been so concerned to promote, censor, and use music speaks volumes about its power and influence in leadership dynamics, as do the preceding examples of artists' political protest and resistance.

Further research could explore how, why, and with what consequences music and leadership in various sectors and contexts may be mutually reinforcing and/or in tension. Studies might examine in more detail the positive power of music, the reasons why music directly

influences human behavior and leaders' and followers' motivations for using it. While this essay concentrated on political processes, research could consider music dynamics in business corporations and other types of public and private organizations, as well as in different societies and cultures. Addressing the intersections between leadership and music in sporting contexts is a potentially illuminating research area as are the interconnections between leadership, gender, and music (Rusak, 2023), including in the music industry itself where leadership might be particularly problematic (Women & Equalities Committee, 2024). Having said that, it may also be helpful to keep in mind that leaders do not always use music successfully. For example, in 2018 [Prime Minister Theresa May came on to the podium at the annual Conservative Party Conference dancing to ABBA's "Dancing Queen."](#) But her movements seemed rather awkward and wooden — the very robotic image she was trying to dispel (Belam, 2018). Further research on the unintended consequences of music use for those in leadership positions could be instructive.

The role of music as protest and of musicians as emergent leaders of change could also be fruitful areas for future research. So too could comedians' satirical use of music to lampoon politicians. Randy Rainbow is now well known for his musical parodies that re-work Broadway tunes and pop songs. [Dating back to 2016, Rainbow's spoofing has primarily targeted Donald Trump](#) (Piedra & Daw, 2023). In [his most recent video "45"](#) released during the 2024 presidential election, Rainbow uses Dolly Parton drag imagery and a re-working of her song "9 to 5" to satirize Trump's campaign.

In sum, the intersections between leadership and music are many and varied and there is considerable potential for future research in this broad area. As the Doobie Brothers advise, we leadership researchers simply need to "[Listen to the Music!](#)"

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