

The Practical Paths of Music Diplomacy from the Perspective of Interculturality

-- A Case Study of the Philadelphia Orchestra's Concert in China

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Abstract

As one of the multifaceted pathways for international exchanges, music diplomacy has historically played a significant role in promoting Sino-American cultural interactions. The Philadelphia Orchestra, being the first American orchestra to visit China after the founding of the People's Republic of China, serves as a representative participant in American music diplomacy, making it a valuable subject for research. By focusing on the auditory attributes as well as the cultural symbolism of music and through the perspective of interculturality, this paper explores how American music diplomacy towards China, exemplified by the Philadelphia Orchestra, constructs an equal dialogue context to facilitate interactions among China and the United States, how the interplay of national music strengthens the internal connections of ethnic cultures and how the shared emotional experiences that music evokes resonates with the mutual trust in two countries and achieve positive outcomes, which can provide useful references for future public diplomacy initiatives that utilize music as a medium.

Keywords

Interculturality, Music Diplomacy, Sino-American Cultural Exchange, Philadelphia Orchestra.

1. Introduction

Music transcends borders and bridges cultures, serving as a crucial factor in creating understanding and identity while promoting globalization.[1] Fifty years ago, the Philadelphia Orchestra visited China, breaking the ice through music and opening a new chapter in Sino-American cultural exchanges. With thirteen visits to China, the Philadelphia Orchestra has acted as a cultural ambassador, steadily enhancing interpersonal connections between the two nations, receiving high praise from both media and the public. This half-century span encapsulates the musical friendship between the peoples of China and the U.S., highlighting the significant value of music as a medium for fostering mutual understanding and interaction at both individual and national levels. Thus, it is evident that music serves as an essential player for public diplomacy among nations, enhancing contact and communication.[2] This paper aims to analyze the music diplomacy of the U.S. toward China through the theoretical lens of interculturality, using the concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra in China as case studies. By examining the auditory properties of music and the cultural symbols it carries, we explore how such diplomatic efforts can be feasible, effective, and empathetic, providing a pathway for China to promote international cultural exchanges and music diplomacy.

2. Theoretical Pathways

2.1. Theoretical Integration of Public Diplomacy and Music Diplomacy

In comparison with citizen diplomacy, public diplomacy refers to diplomatic activities conducted by a government to engage with foreign publics. This type of diplomacy primarily relies on proactive interactions between the government and the civil society, inviting citizens to participate and fostering friendly relations between peoples of different nations,[3] which can be regarded as a project in the public interest aimed at garnering global goodwill. As an effective tool for international cultural exchange and public diplomacy, music naturally possesses the potential for promoting such exchanges. According to *Chinese Encyclopedia: Music and Dance*, music exists through the vibration of sound waves, evoking various emotional responses and experiences through human auditory perception.[4] Through its non-figurative expression of emotions, music establishes resonance and empathy during the interaction between performers and listeners, thereby building emotional trust on this very basis.[5] As music is fundamentally devoid of symbolic function, the shared emotional qualities conveyed through which are more easily decoded by recipients from different cultural backgrounds in cross-cultural exchanges. This distinctiveness underscores the unique significance of music in international interactions and further confirms its viability as a vehicle for public diplomacy.

Music diplomacy has long been a prevalent aspect of the historical connections between China and the U.S.. China has long been renowned as a land of rites and music; as shown in *Rites of Zhou* that music was employed to harmonize states, reconcile people, comfort guests, and delight distant visitors, illustrating the significant role that music, as an emotional art form, played in promoting harmony and integration among various ethnic groups in ancient times. In modern times, both domestic and international academics have primarily explored the role of music in international interactions from a diplomatic perspective. Regarding the U.S. music diplomacy, Chen Yudan posits that due to its highly abstract artistic qualities of, its ability to transcend national and ethnic boundaries, and its extensive social functions, music can serve as a unique cultural form within international relations. It plays an irreplaceable role as various international actors utilize it to construct identities, facilitate diplomacy, and promote peace. [6] At the same time, music is intricately linked to power dynamics. Applying the theory of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye, it has been found that music can attract the goodwill of foreign politicians and the public in a flexible and inclusive manner.[7] Zeng Linzhi emphasizes the role of music in U.S. public diplomacy, noting that it acts as a conceptual ambassador, conveying messages that are beyond political discourse yet cannot remain unspoken, thereby subtly influencing cultural identity.[8]

Thus, this paper defines the concept of Music Diplomacy as a diplomatic form that uses music as a connective medium, which is characterized by government leadership, with participation from non-governmental organizations and the public. Through channels such as instrumental performances, singing, and musical cultural products, it facilitates direct and broad engagement with foreign governments or audiences, disseminating information about the country's political system, values, and cultural characteristics, effectively enhancing the nation's cultural appeal and political influence, improves the international public opinion environment, safeguards national interests, and fosters the sharing of diverse civilizations.[9]

2.2. The Concept of Interculturality and Enhancing the Effects of Musical Activities

Interculturality originates from a philosophical shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity, fundamentally emphasizing the recognition of the subjectivity of others while avoiding their objectification or commodification.[10] Jürgen Habermas advanced the concept of intersubjectivity to the cultural level, referring to this new idea as interculturality. The EU

explains this concept as a basis for proactive intercultural dialogue with all countries and regions, while UNESCO defines interculturality as the existence of multiculturalism and fair interaction, and the potential for shared cultural identification through dialogue and mutual respect.[11] This concept is regarded as a method for addressing the cultural challenges in a multicultural society. Therefore, interculturality has become a powerful theoretical tool for reflecting upon and responding to various cultural issues, particularly in resolving cultural conflicts.[12]

Discussions on interculturality have lingered in the Chinese academic context. The emergence of interculturality relies on the essential elements of differences and similarities between cultures. Cai Xi posits that the openness of cultures, recognizing their differences, and understanding cultural dialogue as a relationship of power are prerequisites for the emergence of interculturality. This involves maintaining differences while seeking common ground, fostering empathy, and expanding the space for tolerance through interaction, negotiation, and mutual subjectivity. Wang Caiyong emphasizes that the connection with others is where the characteristics of interculturality are manifested.[13] From the perspective of the relationship between interculturality and cross-cultural communication, many scholars agree that the former provides a theoretical foundation for equal dialogue among different cultures. For example, Wang Yanling and Zhu Nan argue that the concept of interculturality offers theoretical support for facilitating dialogue and communication among different cultures in today's multicultural context, achieving shared meaning and identity construction. [14] Hui Dongpo emphasizes that interculturality provides ethical logic for the exchange and integration of different cultures.[15]

In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the applications of the concept of interculturality, confirming its value in optimizing the international communication effects of artistic forms such as film co-productions and opening ceremonies. For instance, Jin Danyuan and Zhou Xu argue that interculturality theory serves as the key to resolving the inherent contradictions in Sino-foreign co-productions. This theory not only provides new creative insights into how cultures can coordinate but also offers clear guidance on specific operational aspects such as story types, cast selection and aesthetic forms.[16] Similarly, Jian Xingzhu and Li Nannan refer the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics as an example, arguing that the ceremony respected the cultural differences between the East and West while fully utilizing the essential theory of interculturality. This approach has facilitated recognition at the level of values, shared meanings among subjects, and emotional resonance.[17] Tang Runhua and Zheng Min systematically explores how to enhance the effectiveness of telling Chinese stories in the publishing industry, guided by the principles of interculturality. However, music, recognized as a borderless symbol, in combination with interculturality theory has yet to receive attention, despite its importance as a medium for artistic communication and education.

Given the theoretical and practical foundations of music diplomacy, this study review the Philadelphia Orchestra's visits to China as a case study. By leveraging big data technology to assess global impact and employing case analysis and textual analysis methods to elucidate mechanisms of action, the study, from the perspective of interculturality, aims to address the following questions: How can interculturality theory be internalized in the theoretical innovation of music diplomacy? What practical pathways does music diplomacy encompass, and what effects have been produced? What insights does this provide for future Sino-American musical exchanges?

3. Mechanism of Practice

3.1. Historical Origins of Music Diplomacy

The Philadelphia Orchestra, established in 1900, is one of the five major orchestras in the U.S. and has played a significant role in fostering U.S.-China relations. In 1971, Eugene Ormandy, the orchestra’s music director and renowned conductor, wrote to then President Richard Nixon proposing that the orchestra perform in China. After two years of coordination, in September 1973, the Philadelphia Orchestra became the first American symphonic ensemble to visit China since the founding of People’s Republic of China, successfully completing this historic cultural exchange journey and providing momentum for the normalization of relations between the two countries. *The New York Times* noted that following the Ping-Pong Diplomacy that opened a new chapter in U.S.-China relations, the orchestra’s visit truly tied the two nations more closely.[18] Over the subsequent half-century, the Philadelphia Orchestra has visited China 13 times, consistently maintaining interactive collaboration with the Chinese counterparts and frequently performing alongside Chinese artists on both national and international stages.

After Henry Kissinger’s visit to China in 1971, both sides expressed a willingness to advance bilateral relations, but the initial strategic communication was primarily limited to the leadership level, lacking a foundation of deeper interactions between the people. How to break the ice became a shared concern for both nations. At that time, the U.S. had considerable practical experience using music for public diplomacy, often employing music as a political precursor to convey messages that politics could neither articulate nor ignore. China, in contrast, was more cautious and passive. However, the eventual visit of the Philadelphia Orchestra exemplified a mutual understanding in improving bilateral relations. In this process, the political implications of music were limited and it primarily expressed a political stance and signaling goodwill. When performed in concert halls, music brings audiences together through the act of listening, fostering an embodied sense of presence that makes the emotions conveyed in the music more easily transmitted and decoded, thereby achieving a favorable communication effect.

3.2. Interactive Mechanism of Music Diplomacy

Taking the Philadelphia Orchestra’s concerts in China as an example, the interactive mechanism of music diplomacy is illustrated as follows:

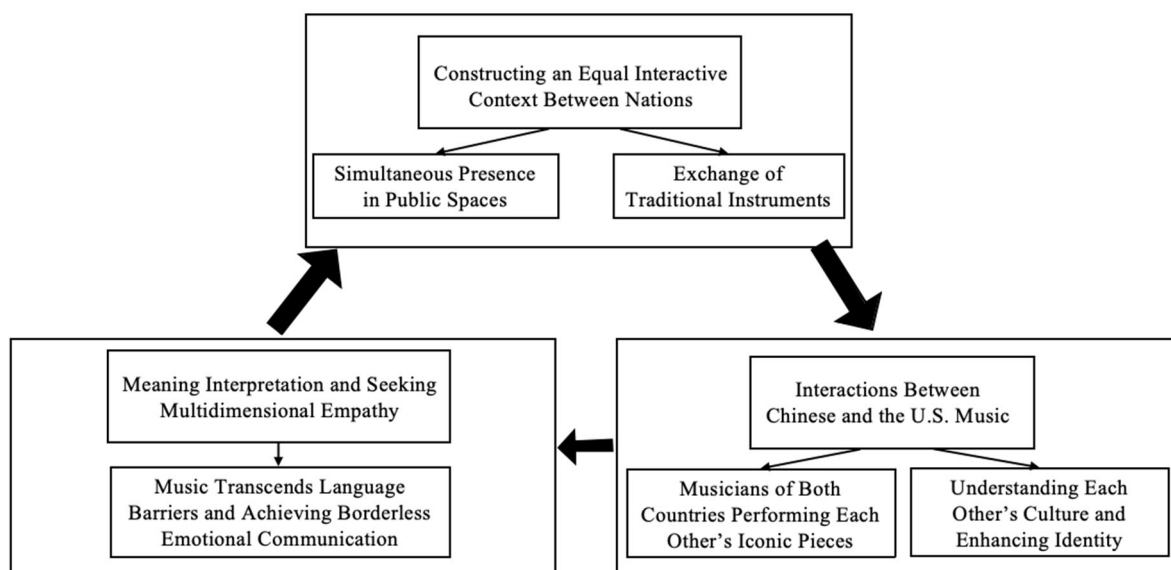


Figure 1. Interactive Mechanism of Music Diplomacy

3.2.1. Constructing an Equal Dialogue Context between Nations

Interculturality is an extension of the theory of intersubjectivity from a macro perspective, and Habermas emphasizes the necessity for individuals to encounter each other within an intersubjective relationship to establish a bidirectional interaction. In other words, intersubjectivity underscores that the mutual presence of both parties is the foundation of communication, necessitating a relatively equal environment for dialogue. In the 1970s, when China and the U.S. had yet to fully understand each other, the Philadelphia Orchestra, as a cultural pioneer, visited China and established a cultural bridge for the people of both nations to better understand one another. Music, as a means of understanding, transcends barriers of language, nationality, and ideology, thereby reducing the distance between performers and audiences through spatial co-presence. Music performed in the same setting often evokes empathy among listeners, allowing them to experience the emotions conveyed and thereby appreciate each other's cultures, dissolving prejudices and misunderstandings rooted in government policies or media news reports.

Moreover, folk instruments and traditional music embody a nation's finest cultural heritage, shaping a rich and authentic national image in international interactions. The symbolic significance of these instruments often emerges through exchanges with other countries. Reflecting on the visit in 1973, the exchange of commemorative gifts between American and Chinese artists witness the Philadelphia Orchestra present clarinets, trumpets, and scores from renowned Western composers, while the Chinese counterparts reciprocated with traditional Chinese instruments like the Pipa, Chinese drums, and Huqin, including a large Chinese gong with a diameter of 1.1 meters. Upon returning to the U.S., the orchestra immediately performed *Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition* using the large gong. This mutual sharing of culturally significant instruments and the resultant performances facilitated dialogue and communication between nations and ethnic cultures. Fifty years later, Philadelphia Orchestra violinist David Bruce still regards the Chinese gong as a special gift, noting in an interview, "Every time we perform and rehearse, the orchestra brings it along; whenever the musicians strike the gong, we all think of China." [19]

3.2.2. Interactions between Chinese and the U.S. Music

The concept of interculturality emphasizes the differences and interactions between cultures, creating new meanings through cross-cultural exchanges. Sociologist Randall Collins notes in his theory of interaction ritual chains that these rituals are key to awakening emotions. How does music construct new meanings through interaction, and how does it evoke public sentiment? This paper posits that when musicians from one country perform pieces from another country, they interpret these works through their own cultural identities, thereby generating new cultural meanings.

Historical reviews of the Philadelphia Orchestra's tours show numerous instances of Sino-American musicians performing each other's renowned compositions. In September 1973, during its inaugural visit to China, the orchestra shared the stage with Chinese artists to perform iconic Chinese pieces such as "Moon Reflected on Second Spring" and "Yellow River Piano Concerto". The Central Orchestra Choir also sang "America the Beautiful" in English. These performances resonated deeply with both the American and Chinese players as well as audiences, allowing musicians to subtly grasp each other's cultural traditions, historical backgrounds, and national characteristics, thus enhancing mutual understanding and fostering a sense of identity and trust. Similarly, the themed concert "Echoes of Ancient Tang Poems" serves as a powerful testament to Sino-American musical cultural exchange. This concert, featuring classic Tang poems like Luo Binwang's *Singing of Goose* and Li Bai's *Dink to Me* and *Quiet Thoughts by Night*, paired with Western symphonic music, was premiered during the 2023 Spring Festival by the Philadelphia Orchestra along with international vocalists from ten

countries. It received widespread acclaim for its unique ancient Tang Poems with western rhythm. At the 50th anniversary concert in Beijing in November 2023, the orchestra once again performed selections from "Echoes of Ancient Tang Poems". Jose Rubio, a baritone from the U.S. stated, "When we sing the poems in Chinese, music becomes our bridge to understanding each other and a vivid expression of mutual respect and understanding between different cultures.[20]

3.2.3. Seeking Multidimensional Empathy through Meaning Interpretation

Why does music have the power to transcend cultural barriers associated with nationality and ethnicity, evoking a sense of identity among people from different countries and regions? As recorded in *Record of Music*, music arises from the heart; emotions felt within manifest in sound. Research has also indicated a remarkable consistency between music and human emotional forms.[21] The emotional experiences elicited by music serve as a borderless language that can evoke empathy, allowing individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to share similar feelings of joy, sorrow, and excitement, which enables to foster connections creates a bridge for communication. Thus, in the context of cross-cultural communication, music often transcends linguistic barriers and cultural differences, facilitating emotional exchanges that promote mutual understanding and evoke shared feelings of empathy.

A search was carried out in web repositories, specifically websites, blogs, social media posts, academic articles, using the terms "Philadelphia Orchestra" and "China" with a time span from October 1st, 2023 to October 1st, 2024. This search found a total of 4,865 related reports and 228 posts on X, 96.2% of which exhibited positive or neutral sentiments, indicating that the vast majority of the American public views the Philadelphia Orchestra's visits to China optimistically. For instance, X user @JeevesReggie shared a video from *China Daily* about the orchestra's tour, stating, "Genuine friendships can and will thrive across different cultures." @MariSays2, reposted a video from the Chinese Embassy in the U.S., remarking, "the friendship between China and the U.S. is everlasting." An op-ed in *The New York Times* by Matthias Tarnopolsky, President and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, declared, "Our journeys to China signify a belief in the possibility of change through dialogue. Music can convey shared ideas and emotions that language often fails to express."

3.3. Future Prospects for Music Diplomacy

On September 27th 2023, the U.S. State Department launched the "Global Music Diplomacy Initiative", aimed at promoting peace and cross-cultural connections through music, while supporting broader U.S. diplomatic goals such as expanding educational and economic opportunities, equality, and social inclusion.[22] Over the past year, the U.S. has continued to engage international audiences through the dispatch of local musicians for global performances, collaborations with local artists, educational workshops, improvisational sessions, and cross-cultural exchanges, thereby providing more possibilities for music diplomacy. Matthias Tarnopolsky wrote in *The New York Times* that the recent Philadelphia Orchestra concert in China is one of the inaugural projects of the "Global Music Diplomacy Initiative".[23]

Looking ahead, there is a need to inherit and promote national and ethnic music, showcasing the unique characteristics of such exchanges. For instance, during the recent concert in China, one of the pieces performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra was American-style Leonard Bernstein's "Overture" from *Candide*. Additionally, it is important to encourage domestic musicians and musical groups to establish cooperative relationships with musicians and cultural institutions from other countries at the grassroots level. By fostering joint creations, performances, and events, these efforts can enhance emotional and cultural recognition through shared musical sentiments and content. For example, Global Music Diplomacy Initiative has initiated the American Music Abroad 2024 spring season, in which over thirty American musical artists and groups from various genres will travel to countries such as China,

Qatar, and Morocco to engage in diplomatic activities through music, conveying American culture. Moreover, music—being a highly permeable, accompanying, and malleable auditory medium—can be utilized in formal diplomatic settings to create diverse musical content based on different themes. Specific musical expressions can be tailored to target audiences, integrating technologies like artificial intelligence, VR, AR, and the metaverse to broaden the scope of music diplomacy and truly achieve the effect of nurturing.

4. Conclusion

The universality and inclusivity of music can bridge the cultures of different nations and ethnicities, facilitating the sharing of civilizations and enhancing trust and recognition among them. This research examines the interplay among public diplomacy, intercultural theory, and international music communication, using the Philadelphia Orchestra's concert in China as a case study and identifies three paths of cultural intertextuality in Sino-American musical public diplomacy. In the context of discourse, the Philadelphia Orchestra laid a cultural bridge for Sino-American exchanges through its concerts, creating an equal dialogue between nations by exchanging instruments and gifting sheet music. In terms of content, Sino-American artists achieved the reproduction of cultural meaning by performing each other's national musical works. Regarding audience reception, through media coverage and online posts, the study validates music's ability to evoke shared emotional experiences among people. However, this research also acknowledges certain limitations. The concept of interculturality is broad and applicable in various contexts and more efforts should be invested in the symbolic meanings and emotional logic music carries, exploring its connections to international communication, which will provide theoretical support for China's public diplomacy activities using music and offer pathways for the international dissemination of excellent musical works that embody the essence of Chinese culture.

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