

# Strings Against Gunfire: Music as a Trace of Humanity in Steven Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*

Sanel Biberovic

Istanbul Aydin University  
sanelbiberovic@stu.aydin.edu.tr

**Abstract:** Music is a specific type of art capable of surpassing cultures, civilizations, perceptions, as well as time and space. It can affect and carry a mood without uttering any particular words. For many, music is a kind of a spiritual expression that reflects one's faith, beliefs, perspectives and knowledge. In other words, music carries and mirrors one's being. Its possibilities are beyond human understanding. Therefore, music is way more felt than understood. Throughout time, music has always been an essential piece of life that always finds a way to touch people's hearts and souls no matter of the environment, occasion or place, even if the place happens to be a war zone. *The Cellist of Sarajevo* is exactly the type of story that reflects the power of music and its impact on the lives of common people who live each day in fear and terror, and not only on them, but on the soldiers as well. The sound of the cello awakens the lost humanity in the citizens of Sarajevo, and questions the meaning of war and what it brings to people and warriors whether they are those who defend the city or those who attack it. Anyhow, everyone stops when they hear the cellist playing, and everyone is carried by the melody back to their feelings, dreams and images of what they used to be and what they wish to become again. Therefore, this paper tends to discuss the very significant role of the cellist and his music when it comes to sparkling the citizens' emotions, hopes, memories, identity and humanity during a war period in which death lurks from every corner of a besieged city.

**Keywords:** emotions, memories, identity, hope, humanity

## 1. Introduction

Music is known as one of the oldest types of art that has been lasting as long as the human kind itself. Being a part of different cultures, traditions and societies, music was and still is constantly shaped, altered and influenced in order to serve different purposes and motives. It has the ability to express one's emotions, ideas and visions, and also to mirror a group of people, a nation, or a country. So, it can be said that music is a deep rooted and inseparable part of every community. It starts when words have no function left, and it speaks the language that is comprehensible only through senses. On one hand, music has the power to make one fall sleep, yet on the other hand it can fight wars, and undermine ideologies. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the role of music in Steven Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, and how the importance of melody comes to light in terms of representing people's hopes, emotions, memories, as well as their identity and humanity, once they are stuck in a war zone.

## 2. Literature Review

Katie Harling-Lee (2020), talks about *The Cellist of Sarajevo* as a novel through which Galloway manages to create a sound escape in order to help readers understand the experience of listening to the music alongside the sound of the war (p. 374). The element of the sound scape makes the readers more attached to the characters and their embrace of the cellist's music. The listening experience has a very important impact on the characters and how they look at life in situations, such as siege, and this shows the real power of music that makes the characters not only listen, but establish an emotional tie with the cellist, his music, and the environment (Lee, 2020, p. 376). For the characters, the sound of the cello becomes the escaping door towards the

world. Therefore, Lee says that "in *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, this world is reached with the help of music." (2020, p. 380). Thus, one may say that *The Cellist of Sarajevo* is an example of how musico-literary works play an important role in transmitting the power of music, and what it means to the characters and readers. The belief in music eventually becomes the belief in peace that has a chance to overcome violence (Lee, 2020, p. 383). According to Lee, music has the most powerful influence on people in terms of making them sensible, since it is the people who can make peace again, and secure a future without conflicts.

Speaking of influence, Georgina Banita (2010), sees the cellist not only as a determined musician, obstinate in his decision to play the cello every day, to pay tribute to the victims, but also as the center of the narrative. The cellist stands for the object of attractiveness for all those characters devastated by the war. Their listening to the cellist mirrors their need for a downtime from the terror and violence (pp. 49-50). The cellist's presence is the symbol of survival and life for the citizens of Sarajevo. Their will for life is affected by his melody.

## 3. Methodology

Galloway presents the character of the cellist and his cello as the only real weapon that can make the conflicting sides stop killing each other, and use their reason again. In order to become humane again, the citizens of Sarajevo need to get their hope back, revive their memories, rebuild their identity, and start dreaming and feeling again, and they do so by hearing the sound of the cello. Therefore, the methodology of this research is a textual analysis of the theme of music in *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, and how music makes the characters become humane again through the aspects of hope, emotions, memories, identity and humanity. Music has

always been the symbol of hope, and no matter how desperate a situation is, the sound of music always offers hope for a way out. Thus, this paper discusses the importance of the cello, and how the melody of it keeps the citizen's hope alive, through the writings of Edward Howard Griggs. Beside hope, music has a great impact on one's emotions and memories as it is observed in the paper, and supported by various articles such as those of Stephen Davies and Leon Botstein who talk about the unquestionable significance of music when it comes to bringing back feelings and the glimpses of the past. Hope, memories and emotions also make one's identity, and since all these elements are protected by the cellist, it also means that his music protects the identity of the desperate citizens of Sarajevo and those fighting for it. Therefore, this paper discusses the question of identity and how music becomes an important tool for shaping the face of the besieged Sarajevo by referring to Ion Olteteanu's studies of music and social identity. The cellist also shapes the new form of humanity, as he makes the fighting soldiers stop shooting, and come back to their senses. Thus, referring to *Sewanee Review*, this paper also focuses on the concept of humanity, its connection with music, and how music becomes the mirror of it even when all the mirrors are broken just like in besieged and bombed Sarajevo.

#### 4. Discussion

##### The Sound of Hope

Being in a war is a situation in which people lose lives, families and homes, yet they do not lose hope, and as long as there is hope, it seems that there is a way out. The same goes for the cellist who is surrounded by ruins, left without anyone, but he goes on playing his cello. "The cellist sits beside the window of his second-floor apartment and plays until he feels his hope return." (Galloway, 2008, p. 9). The melody he plays is everything he has, and as long as he plays there is hope. "By the time the last few notes fade, his hope will be restored." (Galloway, 2008, p. 10). For the cellist, hope is like an ideal that he wants to keep alive, and it seems that only music has the power to do it. Music carries out its work by cherishing and clarifying the senses, and it is deeply responsive to all beauty, affection, and the moral ideal. It may exalt people to a position where the ideal seems reachable and more attainable (Griggs, 1924, p. 68). However, the cellist is not the only one who hopes, but all the citizens of the occupied Sarajevo. "A hope that, now, is one of a limited number of things remaining for the besieged citizens of Sarajevo." (Galloway, 2008, p. 9). As much as cello is the only remaining hope for the cellist, it seems that he himself represents the hope for the whole city, since the defending army takes him under personal protection. The girl known as Arrow, due to her sniper skills, is in charge of the cellist, she is told by her superiors to keep him alive no matter what. The cellist becomes the symbol of hope that sends a strong message not only to the citizens, but the whole world as well. "People see him. The world has seen him. We cannot allow him to be killed." (Galloway, 2008, p. 48). The cellist's playing does not belong only to him anymore, but to the whole town. Music is one of the most personal arts, but at the same time it gets to be the most social one, since it forms an aspect of life that unifies all the

people (Griggs, 1924, p. 68). It appears that the death of the cellist would eventually mean the death of Sarajevo as well. Therefore, his music becomes hope, it becomes a matter of life and death.

##### Emotions and Memories as Notes

The cellist does not only keep the town and its hopes alive, but also the citizens' emotions, reminding them that they are still human beings capable of feeling, even though they are besieged without any chance to escape. Even Arrow who is supposed to keep an eye on the cellist, cannot remain indifferent towards his notes. "You will not cry, she tells herself, and she wills herself calm until after the cellist has finished, risen and returned to the building he came from." (Galloway, 2008, p.48). The music he plays brings tears to her eyes. She struggles not cry, because as a soldier she is supposed to be concentrated, yet she is another human being who cannot help herself not feel anything. The importance of music is reflected through its capability to connect with people's emotions. It becomes a source of knowledge and recognition of emotions and sensation that language cannot describe that well (Packalen, 2008, p.54). This is why Arrow is bewildered after hearing the cellist, because she is unable to express herself in words due to the impact his music left on her. "She isn't sure what has happened. She doesn't know what a man playing a cello in the street at four in the afternoon has done to her." (Galloway, 2008, p.48). The way Arrow becomes emotional shows the true impact of the cello and the music it makes, because the power of music is reflected in the way in which it brings up people's feelings rather than in the way it brings up people's thoughts (Davies, 1980, p. 86). Instead of thinking, Arrow is simply taken away by the sound of the cello that is mirrored in her teary eyes, and her emotional response to the cellist's playing shows the undeniable power of music that acts like an unknown force that simply touches one's heart and soul, and make them pour all the emotions out. Nonetheless, Arrow is not the only one who goes through an emotional awakening while listening to the cellist. Another citizen called Kenan also gets carried away by the cello. "He stares at the cellist, and feels himself relax as the music seeps into him." (Galloway, 2008, p. 123). The music makes him forget all the sorrow and horrors of war, as he feels a wave of love raising in him and waiting to be poured out. He knows that after hearing the cellist, he will go to his apartment. He will climb upstairs and firmly open the door, and then he will grab his wife Amila and kiss her the same way he used to kiss her when they were young. He wants stroke her thick hair and run his fingers through it. (Galloway, 2008, p. 123). Kenan is aroused by the music that peeked into the bottom of his soul. Being a very intimate type of art, music explores one's spirit and reanimates the deeply buried feelings that words cannot epitomize (Griggs, 1924, p. 68). All of a sudden, Kenan is touched by music, and since he cannot explain the feeling he has, he simply wants to express it by loving his wife like never before. Thus, the cellist becomes important not only for the existence of Sarajevo, but also for its people when it comes to reminding them of one of the most important human values which are emotions.

It is true that music is a powerful weapon that is capable of invoking even the deepest emotions within a human being, yet together with emotions music brings back to life memories as well. When Arrow hears the cellist, she is carried by his music all the way back to her childhood, and she gets to feel the moment of safety and tranquillity. "She leans back into the wall. She's no longer there. Her mother is lifting her up, spinning her around and laughing." (Galloway, 2008, p. 48). The music that touches her feelings touches her memories as well. The emotional arousal caused by music is part of the original experience that becomes part of a memory that is experienced in a new way both consciously and unconsciously (Shelemay, 2006, p. 30). Arrow experience the moment of her mother caring her again and she goes on experiencing all other memories that the cellist's playing offers her. She feels the tongue of her dog licking her arm, and remembers playing snowballs with her friends in cold winter days. The music makes her recall variety of moments from her reckless falls and hurt knees, all the way to her first kiss in a theatre (Galloway, 2008, p. 48). For a moment Arrow feels alive again, as alive as her memories. "... and she imagines if she closed her eyes she could convince herself that she was walking through the streets of Sarajevo as it used to be." (Galloway, 2008, p. 59). The music does not only make her remember Sarajevo before the war, it makes her capable of convincing herself that the city is still like it used to be. Her memory becomes her present. Every musical experience is preserved in memory as a sound world and reminiscence of the past (Shelemay, 2006, p. 20). The sound of cello elevates the memories and makes the citizens long for the past, or at least get to touch it for a moment in order to feel the peace of days gone. Kenan also cannot help it, but let the sound of the cello take him down through decades when he was a little boy. Even though Kenan has not heard the cellist before, the sound seems so familiar to him, because it makes him remember himself as a little boy who wearing a new coat held his father hand while crossing the street on a cold winter day. (Galloway, 2008, p. 123). Kenan recognizes the sound since it reminds him of an experience he had as a child. He remembers the time spent with his father, and for a moment there is no horror or terror, and the whole city resurrects. "Kenan watches as his city heals itself around him." (Galloway, 2008, p. 124). The sound of the cello does not only keep the memories alive, it also elevates the feeling of life itself as it brings light to every dark corner of the citizens minds. Yet, it also reminds them of the time that they lost, because when they look around they realize they are infatuated. Once the music stops, Kenan comes back to his sense, and realizes that peace exists only in the memories. "But it is all taken away. The music is over, the notes stop. He is back on the street where twenty-two people were killed while waiting to buy bread." (Galloway, 2008, p. 125). By bringing their memories back, the cellist also reminds the citizens what they have lost. The function of music is not only to pin point a certain memory, but to have the listener feel the memory as something lost when compared to the life in the present and what makes it different from the life lived in the past (Bostsein, 2000, p. 534). Arrow, Kenan and many other citizens are able to experience their old habits and routines thanks to the cellist, yet their memories last as long as the music is played.

### Identity and Humanity as a Melody

It seems that not only the citizens' memories will last with the playing of the cellist, but their identity as well. The cellist becomes so important for the citizens, and losing him would mean the loss of their identity as well. This is what Arrow's superiors are aware of, and they want the cellist to live. "We need you to keep this man alive." (Galloway, 2008, p. 48). The cellist becomes crucial for the whole town, since the music he plays turns into a component of every citizen's being, and Arrow is the one who feels it that way too. "But she knew these notes. They had become a part of her." (Galloway, 2008, p. 149). The notes of the cello do not only become a part of Arrow and her being, but of every child who gathers around the cellist in trepidation, and every citizen who, on their way to get bread, stop and listen to the music in order to capture the moment and carry it with them wherever they go. One of the functions of music is to become a significant part of anyone who listens to it. It also allows listeners to establish themselves inside the musical aspect through which they develop a personal tie with the music that fuses into a symbiosis with their identity (Olteteanu, 2011, p. 218). The whole city of Sarajevo has a personal tie with the cellist, and the defending army knows this. They know how important is for the cellist to stay alive, because his death would not be an ordinary one, it would be the death of everyone. "It's not about merely killing him. Shooting him is a statement." (Galloway, 2008, p. 49). The enemies are also aware of the significance of the cellist's presence on the streets; therefore killing him is a priority, because with his death, Sarajevo would lose all the hopes, emotions, and memories which would lead to the loss of their identity as well. Thus, losing their identity under the circumstances that do not promise them a bright future can be considered as dying before facing real death.

Besides helping the citizens to maintain their identity, the cellist's music also keeps reminding them that they are still humans who are not meant to kill or create chaos, but live in peace and love. As Arrow watches over the cellist, she notices that there is an enemy sniper in one of the windows, getting ready to shoot the cellist. Yet, when she sets her weapon and looks through the scope, she realizes that even the enemy is listening to the cellist. "Arrow is about to send a bullet into him, but stops. His finger isn't on the trigger." (Galloway, 2008, p. 91). Instead of choosing to kill the cellist, the sniper decides to listen to his playing which he does for a couple of days more. "He's listening to the music. And then Arrow knows why he didn't fire yesterday." (Galloway, 2008, p. 92). It seems that the music invokes the human traits in the enemy sniper who takes a break from the world of war and decides not to kill another human being. Even though they belong to the opposite sides, both Arrow and the sniper have one thing in common, and that is listening to the cellist. The melody of the cello invokes the human core in both of them which shows the ability of music to lead people into the state in which they become aware of the real nature of their being, of the "other self" that is hidden in them, and in every other human being (Blacking, 1969, p. 38). Arrow and the enemy sniper are divided and led to hate each other politically and ideologically, yet the cellist's playing reminds them that they are still equal human beings capable of doing something together without hatred, and that is enjoying the



music. Music is a type of art that is enjoyed in togetherness, and the more it gets appreciated from the listeners, the greater is the ecstasy of listening to it. Music stands for that aspect of life that unifies all the people, even though they may have different opinions or perspectives. It is the feeling they get from the music that unifies them, and this characteristic of music is the aspiration of humanity (Griggs, 1924, p. 68). Arrow and the sniper are brought together under the notes of the cellist who touches the very deep human sides of their personalities. Watching over the cellist and listening to him made Arrow aspire towards the feeling of justice, therefore she decides not kill again, even if that is going to cost her losing her life. "She hears music, and, this time, she does not fire." (Galloway, 2008, p. 134). It appears that Arrow has turned back to the state of a pure human being who is morally conscious. It is Plato who claims that music is a moral law, because it opens the door of universe to every soul, and it gives life to everything. Music leads into goodness, justice and beauty. It is the core of human order (Block, 1916, p. 442). Arrow wants to believe in goodness and beauty because of the cellist. "The music demanded that she remember this, that she knows to a certainty that the world still held the capacity for goodness." (Galloway, 2008, p. 155). She knows that if she kills anyone on the other side, she is going to become a fugitive, and there is nothing good in it. Therefore, she decides to walk away and get out on the street that will expose her and get killed. Anyway, she does not mind, but crosses the street and goes into the cellist's apartment knowing that she is spotted and that the enemies will get her soon. (Galloway, 2008, p. 150). Arrow does not care for her death anymore, because she wants to die as a human being, not as a killer. The cellist made her aware of her real being which is not to be a murderer, but a decent human being full of love and compassion. Music is a human art, because it makes people realize and liberate their self-consciousness (Block, 1916, p. 446). Arrow is totally awakened, and in the end, she even reveals her own name in front of the enemies who kick in her door. "My name is Alisa." (Galloway, 155, p. 150). As she dies, she reveals her real name, because she does not want to be remembered as a killing machine called Arrow, but a human being who decided to put her weapon down and stop killing thanks to the cellist of Sarajevo.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that music plays a very important role in every society, not only as a type of art, but as a mirror that reflects a people's mindset and culture, because it has the power to liven up their emotions, hopes, memories, fears and dreams. Being this much entwined in one's being, music also becomes a part of people's identity as well as a reminder of their true inner humanity. Therefore, when humans find themselves in desperate situations such as wars, and once their words and speeches become useless, music becomes their voice and shield. This is what Galloway realizes as he uses the character of the cellist to fight the war, because it is the sound of music that gathers and unifies people, reminding them of their true humane core, unlike the sound of machineguns and bombs.

## References

- [1] Banita, G. (2010). Escaping binarism: The Bosnian war in the Canadian imagination. *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, 30 (2), 45-61.
- [2] Blacking, J. (1969). The Value of Music in Human Experience. *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 1, 33-71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/767634>
- [3] Block, L. J. (1916). The Significance of Music. *The Sewanee Review*, 24 (4), 440-446. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27532954>
- [4] Botstein, L. (2000). Memory and Nostalgia as Music-Historical Categories. *The Musical Quarterly*, 84 (4), 531-536. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742594>
- [5] Davies, S. (1980). The Expression of Emotion in Music. *Mind*, 89 (353), 67-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2253505>
- [6] Galloway, S. (2008). *The cellist of Sarajevo* (Vol. 1). Random House Canada.
- [7] Griggs, E. H. (1927). Music's Meaning to Humanity. *Music Supervisors' Journal*, 14 (1), 9-23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3382432>
- [8] Harling-Lee, K. (2020). Listening to survive: Classical music and conflict in the musico-literary novel. *Violence: An International Journal*, 1 (2), 371-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2633002420942778>
- [9] OLTEȚEANU, I. (2011). THE FORMATIVE FUNCTION OF MUSICAL INTERACTIONS WITHIN SOCIAL IDENTITY. *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 3 (1), 215-220. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26804857>
- [10] Packalén, E. (2008). Music, Emotions, and Truth. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 16 (1), 41-59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327289>
- [11] Shelemay, K. K. (2006). Music, Memory and History: In Memory of Stuart Feder. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 15 (1), 17-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20184538>

## Author Profile



**Biberovic Sanel**, English Language and Literature,  
Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey,  
Email: [sanel.biberovic94@gmail.com](mailto:sanel.biberovic94@gmail.com)