

Music as a third way of diplomacy

Hélène Daccord, Global Ethics Forum, 8 oct 2025
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Good evening, and thank you, Globethics, for convening a forum that dares to reinvent responsible governance. Thank you, dear Fadi, for the invitation.

I'm delighted to introduce this concert by Pax Musica—an NGO and academy that supports musicians who have found refuge in a new country through mentorship alongside renowned performers. Pax Musica gives concerts worldwide, sharing a message of peace and dialogue through music, and building bridges of solidarity wherever harmony is fragile.

Tonight, we will hear “The Song of the Birds” by Pablo Casals—a musician who, like many today, found his voice far from home. Casals said that when he played this piece, he thought of peace, of freedom, and of the sky that belongs to everyone.

Among Pax Musica's artists are musicians from Armenia, Ukraine, and Kurdistan. Their music reminds us that every sound shared is already a step toward peace.

As the founder of Pax Musica and the author of *Quand la musique fait l'histoire*, I would like to offer a brief reflection on **music as a “third way” of diplomacy**—beyond hard power, and beyond mere soft power.

In French, we call the interval that makes a chord la tierce—the third. One note is a monologue (cello playing a note) two often pull against each other (cello and violin playing a second)..... the third lets differences hold (cello and violin playing a tierce).....

The third unlocks music. Tonight I want to speak about **music and cultural diplomacy as that third way**— a space where distinct notes can resonate without cancelling each other. Music doesn't extinguish conflict; it opens doors. Cultural diplomacy is the third that turns sound into accord. **That's the tierce.**

The art of the third can be learned in three movements — listening, explaining, and bridging — the gestures that turn dissonance into harmony.

Our third way begins not by speaking, but by listening—together.

1) LISTEN

Cultural memory can precede political compromise—another third way. A shared repertoire gives adversaries a language to imagine coexistence.

Consider Beethoven's Ninth (Cello and violin) you know.... This piece is a real “carousel of appropriations”: The same score has served opposed political narratives

performed by Nazi Germany to glorify unity through domination, by protesters in Tiananmen Square to cry for freedom, by Bernstein in Berlin to celebrate the fall of a wall, and by the European Union today to symbolize peace. One work can host competing meanings—room enough for dialogue.

Shared symbols survive because they can be read differently without breaking—that's what the third allows.

Invest in shared symbols that different groups can read differently without walking out. it's Not a consensus—it's *shared listening, a common space of dialogue*. **That's the tierce.**

After listening comes understanding.

The third turns attention into explanation — sound into sense.

2) EXPLAIN

In times of conflict, music does not “negotiate” — it “explains” what words can't. It builds a corridor of attention, dignity, and resolve that politics can later walk through. It's not a peace deal; it's the space in which peace becomes imaginable.

Consider Van Cliburn's performance at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, 1958.

An American pianist, on Soviet soil, at the height of the Cold War.

When the jury hesitated, Khrushchev asked: “Is he the best?” — “Yes.” — “Then give him the prize.”

For a brief moment, the applause bridged two systems that had stopped speaking. The third was not compromise, but **recognition of shared integrity** — a pause in the noise of ideology where respect could breathe.

Explaining is not just about words; it's about making meaning visible.

Culture helps leaders frame complexity in human terms. What we explain today shapes tomorrow's agreement. Like musicians, take the time to tune yourselves.

Finally, consider music as a **structure**.

The third no longer only tunes or explains — it begins to **connect**.

This is the moment when music stops being an event and **becomes a bridge**.

A bridge between memories, between identities, between worlds that rarely meet.

3) BRIDGE

Artists are ambassadors of nations that don't yet exist—the imagined communities policy must catch up with.

Remember Rostropovich at the Berlin Wall, playing Bach (Cello). A plastic chair at Checkpoint Charlie, Bach in the open air, cameras rolling. He represents neither East nor West but the reconciliation both sides craved; the world watches, and political space widens. Presence without posture widens political space—the third between East and West at that time.

From Verdi's *Risorgimento* to Wagner's German imaginary, artists voiced nations-in-becoming, before unification. Artists often voice the polity before the passport is printed.

This is soft power at human scale—credibility earned by presence, not posture; representation without credentials. **That's the tierce.**

To conclude : the tierce is not the loudest note; it is the enabler of harmony.

If you remember only three words, let them be these: **Listen. Explain. Bridge.** In a world tugged between force and façade, **music offers a third way for diplomacy**: it trains us to hear what is there, to make meaning visible, and to build ties that outlast the moment. May we be the third in the room—the small interval that turns noise into accord. **That's the tierce.**