

# Ep #49: Music as a Place of Refuge

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you  
with  
Michèle Voillequé

## Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I wanna help you expand your toolkit, your capacity for joy and comfort and solace and sanity. I feel like those are things that are needed in the world right now by maybe more than just me.

And to that end, I wanna talk today about how music can be a place of refuge and a place of rest, and also a kind of food – a food for the Soul, a food for the Mind.

If you're listening to this in real time, it's late April, 2025 and last month the Vienna Philharmonic came to Berkeley for a three night residency, and I went to the concerts all three nights.

And I have to give a shout out to my friend who bought the tickets. I probably would've gone to one, I wouldn't have gone to all three, but he really wanted to go to all three. So we went to all three and pretended that we were in Vienna for the week. It was, they were just amazing.

And this was right after Trump had met with the Ukrainian president, Volodomir Zelenskyy in the Oval Office, and there was a lot of anti-Europe sentiment in the news. Like all the headlines were about the end of NATO and I felt very self-conscious going to these concerts.

I felt a lot of shame as an American. Here was this great cultural institution of the Vienna Philharmonic, and they've come to play for us, to share their art with us, and my government is just spitting all over them.

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I was very grateful to be there, but I also felt very awkward and very ashamed on the part of my country, like I just wanted to send them all an apology note.

But I think, “they’re smart people,” and they understood that those of us in the audience were there because we appreciated them. We didn’t come to heckle them, we came to appreciate their playing.

And it just blew me away how moving their performance was, not just because it was artistically wonderful, but the emotional spirit with which they were playing and how they listened to each other.

They played a bunch of things and often there would be a solo. It was the English horn or the violinist or an oboe – somebody would have a solo, and it was just beautiful watching the rest of the orchestra when they had nothing to do except count measures of rest, right, to watch them remain present to the music and really lean in and listen to their fellow musician who's playing.

I could see that they were allowing themselves to take in the beauty that they were creating as they were creating it. It was just, I've said exquisite how many times now? I'll, I could just keep saying it over and over. It was amazing.

And I felt so grateful to get to hear the concerts and so wanting everyone in the audience to notice, “Do you see them listening? I mean, you hear them playing, but are you watching? Can you see them listening? Watch them listen! Their listening is amazing! We need more of that listening now. Do you get it? Do you all get it?”

I don't know if everybody got it. We gave them standing ovations, I'm sure everybody got it. But I wanna say that if you haven't seen a symphony orchestra live, whether it's the Vienna Philharmonic, or some,

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something else, even just, you know, a high school symphony orchestra, it's just an amazing experience to watch a group of people collaborate so beautifully in real time and hear them play, but also watch them listen.

So in this music, in this experience, I felt my shoulders drop. I was just able to feel like, oh, yeah, you know, there's beauty in the world. There is safety right now, this moment, this is a place of refuge. This is safe.

Music as a place of refuge has been on my mind in that way.

My own self, making music, it often feels like that when it's going really well. It feels like a beautiful, safe place to be. Not that there isn't excitement, not that there isn't some aspect of danger, but there's also, overall, the feeling of making music is one of comfort and safety and belonging and community.

Another example I have of listening to music as a place of refuge comes from the VA Medical Hospital in San Francisco where I have volunteered since 2008.

Beginning in the pandemic, we started doing Zoom visits because, pandemic, and we are continuing with that now, even though the infectious disease concerns are not as pressing, they are still kind of pressing in this population of people.

So I was visiting, I am visiting folks who live in the Community Living Center at the VA medical Hospital. So it's skilled nursing and also hospice care, and it's a very vulnerable population.

Instead of me directing a chorus, which is what I did before the pandemic – we would meet every other week and rehearse in the main

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gathering space there – I've been visiting residents one-on-one on an iPad with Zoom.

So the recreation therapist carries me around on her iPad and we, I visit with veterans and, we listen to music together and we talk about music and we talk about what they like and what's important to them, and it's a beautiful part of my week.

And what I've noticed, particularly this year, almost everyone I visit is bothered by the events of the world. In my experience there over the last, wow, almost 20 years, not everybody has always been like really up on the news and current events and everything.

But this year, almost everybody I'm talking to, I'm sharing music with, is aware of things happening in the outside world and they're disturbed by it. They're not happy with it.

And I just wanna tell you a couple of stories about that, of how music has helped, has been a place of refuge.

One of the veterans I visited, this was several weeks ago, was just in a very deep funk and hardly he didn't really even wanna see me, and had a hard time climbing out of the news and feeling like there was anything good in the world at all.

And I said, “What do you wanna hear right now? What do you think would be, would feel good?” And he said, “Zombie” by the Cranberries. So we watched that video over YouTube and as it was playing, I was thinking, “You need a concert experience right now.”

And I found a video, a concert video of INXS playing "What You Need,” and it was this huge stadium show. And so after we watched the

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Cranberries, I asked if I could, I said, “I have an idea. Is it okay if we just, if I play it for you, I think you're gonna like it.” And he said, “yes,” and luckily he did.

But this experience of first being in this piece of music, “Zombie,” that took him back in time to a place that was happier and felt comforting, and then this video of a big stadium show, you couldn't help but feel like you were there with the 30,000 other people who were there.

And at the end of this visit, which was only 10 minutes long, his face was beaming and he had come back to a better part of himself, and that's exactly what music is supposed to do. And it made my day to see that and to be reminded that's possible.

Even when you're so down in the dumps you think that there's no way out, music and human connection can pull you back out.

One of the veterans I visit these days is in hospice and has a long history of music in his life. So, when he was a younger person, he managed a couple of cafes and heard all kinds of folk music and all kinds of international bands.

And I mean, I would ask him what his interests were in music and I think his first answer was, “What am I not interested in?” It was, just a great variety of experience – he's in his eighties now – all throughout his life.

And so what we've settled on in our time together is, I mean I'll ask him, “What kind of music would you like to listen to?” And he'd say, “Ugh, I can't even think of anything. There's just so much. I can't think of something specific.”

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And so I asked him, “Well, what country should we go to? Where should we go visit?”

And so now we travel by country. And we listened to an Irish session from a bar in Dublin and we listened to folks who were recording in a train station some Roma gypsy music that was mashed up with Klezmer, just amazing stuff.

And then last week he wanted to go to Greece, and so we listened to that. It's a short visit. It's maybe 10 minutes, but he is transported. He's transported by the music to a country that he's visited, to a place in his mind and his history that is comforting, exciting, full of hope, full of memory, full of youth, full of something that's nourishing.

And I said I had a couple of stories, but I, I think I've got four. So my, my third story is a man I've visited for years he's from New York. He's lived in San Francisco for a very long time, but he's always from New York. And there's nothing like Frank Sinatra to cheer him up or to take him back home again.

And I love knowing that about him. I love knowing that if all else fails, if he's not up for talking, if he's not up for singing with me – 'cause he will also sing with me, this is another wonderful thing, is that I have still gotten to sing with folks just over Zoom.

He's not up for it every time, but I know that I can play “Fly Me to the Moon” and he will sing along and he will smile the biggest smile. So worth it. It is so worth it.

And so my last story today from the VA Hospital is I was visiting another man, in hospice who's died now.

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He was born in Italy and moved here and served our country with distinction and in our times together, maybe over about six weeks, I just played old, Italian pop songs from the fifties and sixties and it really took him back to his youth.

And if there was any worry on his brow, it was gone by the end of the song. And he would tell me about the village where he grew up and how he left Italy and came to America. But the music created an environment in him where he could peacefully, joyfully, remember his roots.

This is one of the best ways I've had in my life to get to know people and to be reminded in case I forget, because I have crappy days like everybody else, how powerful music is, how a simple song can really fix things.

What is it? The Elton John song, "Sad Songs Say So Much." Every song says so much.

So that's a bit about music as a place of refuge, music as a mode of healing, music as a place to feel safe, to recover your past, to remember the good things and to help yourself feel connected to something larger than yourself.

And I wanna share my own experience with music as a kind of a food and a kind of, I don't know, as a tool.

So, I've had two children and my eldest, I was in labor with her for 27 hours, which is a long time. And throughout the labor I had a song going through my head, a very simple song by Mary Grigolia called, "I know this rose will open."



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And the words are, “I know this rose will open. I know my fear will burn away. I know my soul will unfurl its wings. I know this rose will open.”

And that was going through my head over and over and over. It would fall away and then it would come back, and it was a way for me to mark time. It was a way for me to take good breaths.

I wasn't singing the song while I was in labor. It was just, it was an ear worm, it was going through my head, but it allowed me to feel a rhythm of something that was familiar and that I had some, felt I had some control over when the labor I did not feel like I had any control over. Right? That's kind of what labor is. You're just at the whim of it.

Anyway, so that was a very, that was really useful for me and I have used songs like that in my head also in the dentist's chair, also waiting in lines. They're useful tools for passing the time and for providing some structure.

My first child's labor was very long. My second child's labor was very short and came on suddenly and like, “Oh, here, we're going!” It was almost like, blink and you'll miss it.

But in the car, it was a dark and stormy night, and in the car on the way to the hospital, we were listening to the classical music station and they were playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and that “da da da, da da da da” was just perfect with the rain.

I don't know if there was thunder, but there was a lot of rain and I just, I loved that. I loved that annunciation of that birth. And the labor was so short, there wasn't really time to think of any songs at all, except to remember, as I was in the hospital, I had Beethoven's Symphony going through my head and that was, that was its own comfort.

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In terms of music as food, for both of these pregnancies, I was doing very different things musically. For my first pregnancy, I was in a modern opera workshop, a couple of modern opera workshops actually.

So I was in a couple of modern operas, short things, pregnancies are long, right? And a lot of the music was really dissonant and was pretty strange and not always melodic and my child just let me know what she thought about it and just kicked me.

She was, once she started kicking, she was a kicker and she made it clear that she didn't enjoy that modern opera. I thought, "I think this is making you really smart. I think this is good prenatal care." But, no, she kicked me.

And then for the second child, I thought, okay, modern opera was really not the thing and now the child that in utero did not like modern opera, now that she's outside my body wandering around is really not gonna like modern opera.

So how about Bach's B Minor mass, and I was very lucky that a local chorus was doing Bach's B minor mass, and I thought, ah, that will be my prenatal care for this baby. And it was.

And the second child did not kick. The second child just kind of rolled over every once in a while, really seemed to love Bach. It was an easier pregnancy than the first one.

In those cases, the modern opera and the Bach, I treated them like food. They were food for me. They were food for my babies. And maybe that's something that only a musician would say, but I really think it's something that could be true for every human – that we're able to increase our joy, increase our sense of comfort and safety by what we choose to allow into our ears, by what we choose to be around.

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There's a lot of stuff that we cannot avoid.

And I'm not suggesting that we wall ourselves off and not pay attention and not protest and not be active in the world when we honestly feel we need to be active in the world.

But part of acting in the world is also resting. We don't act in the world incessantly. We act in the world and then we need to rest. And part of that resting and recuperating and regenerating – music is, in my life, the lives of the veterans that I work with, the lives of many other people I know – music is an important part of that regeneration.

I think that's really all I wanted to say to you today.

I hope this finds you well and with some joys in your life.

Thanks so much for listening.

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