

Why the Musical Arts Are So Vital

A majority of readers of this site probably play the piano, and a good portion of those probably play fairly well. So you already know why the musical arts are so vital: The ability to express inward zones helps us process our world, helps us balance needs, wants and realities, and it does so much more effectively than sitting on a shrink's couch for a hundred dollars an hour. Sitting down to play a Brahms Intermezzo is an activity far removed from simple passive entertainment. Depending on your mood and energy level, the slightest change of tempo or placement of agogic stresses, or emphasis of voices within the rising and falling textures of the music can make a big difference in the resultant mood and message of the music. Does your inflection emphasize a high level of contrast between the yearning and resolution (tension and release), or it is flattened and despondent, too inward and brooding to even look for a sunny horizon of hope? Maybe the phrasing is so crisp and your touch so light, that there is an inner buoyancy that affirms an indomitable spirit of optimism.

Beyond the ability to serve as reactive 'moodscapes' great music also resonates in our consciousness and affects our outlook on life, and even more importantly, it has an almost unique ability to integrate the two hemispheres of the brain—the analytical and emotional—for simultaneous and harmonious whole-brain processing. Great music, that which has a strong progressive narrative, is the one 'rationally emotive' outlet which creates and nurtures a sense of empathetic connectivity within the listener. Above all the arts, music is the one venue where one learns to balance both hemispheres of the brain, emotion and intellect. This fine attunement of analytical and emotional nuance is, in fact, almost entirely unique to musical experience. This sense of awareness, of projection of outcomes, and empathetic perspective in the struggle between good and evil, or attainment of desired outcomes or deferment of gratification are all fought out simultaneously in the complex tapestry of the great musical masterpieces.

Individuals who have never developed this capability to harness the rationally emotive function of the brain will then to a large extent have to switch back and forth between the two modes. This doesn't mean that they may not still be a high-functioning asset to society, for we certainly all benefit from the smart and gifted scientist (the analytical), or charismatic leaders of men (the emotional and social connection), but it seems to me that whole-brain integration with a strong sense of empathetic connectivity is the ideal model which will take humanity to the next level.

Of course, a truly cultured society will require that as many of its citizens as possible have had a solid education in the areas of history, governance, economics, and psychology. In order to be able to stand up to against the advancement of radical extremist views one must also develop a tolerance for religious (or non-religious) expression and tread carefully in matters of theology. All of this strong foundation in education will be for naught if not tempered by empathy, because otherwise

intelligence and creative energy may be put to deleterious uses. When I speak of role models, I admire individuals such as Thomas Jefferson or Carl Sagan whose brilliant intelligence and creative energies were in both cases made fully integrated and empathetic by a strong appreciation of the fine arts.

At this particular juncture in human evolution the need for reflective art is vital if we are to balance empathetic perspective against the forward march of technology. A true perception of music's communicative narrative is one of the most potent tools we have for training the brain how to process analytical and emotional content at the same time.

In good music, whether Baroque or Modern, there is an internal balance of elements which leaves the listener with a sense of resolution. Conversely, when one sees a carefully crafted commercial, or hears a hip-hop hit that boasts of making a score, it leaves an unfulfilled feeling in the person who must then go out and buy the product, or make the score (or live the lifestyle) in order to close the open-ended loop and find internal balance.

This internal balance and sensitivity to emotional nuance works at all levels, whether we talk of the lone individual within the context of the unknowably vast cosmos, or the societal group that maintains its own sense of identity within the greater brotherhood of mankind.

I talk in further detail about what defines great music in the essay, **Listener Psychology: How we Perceive Music**. For the purpose of this essay, the details of what defines various levels of greatness in music is not important. Most of the readers here will already understand that. The questions I wish to focus on here are: what are the obstacles in the world that inhibit so many from discovering the communicative power of great music, and what can be done to change those conditions?

The primary obstacles I see are: rampant consumerism, Pop Culture and cheap entertainment, celebration of the celebrity, overload of trivial information that vastly imbalances reflective wisdom, and no sense of contributing to society anything beyond one's own self-interest. Some of these activities have existed for millennia, others are more recent developments, but in every case, in this age of instant communication and all-pervasive media, it is now a question of the proportion and overall relevance that they play in the modern lifestyle. Let's look at each of these in turn.

We now live in a society of rampant commercialism which depends on an insidious need for frenzied materialism just to keep the economy working. The result is consumer overabundance of expendable goods that were never necessary to begin with. Just because I'm aware of the issue and writing about it doesn't mean I'm immune to its attractions. Let me give an example that perhaps many readers will relate to.

Most of us have a dream car we'd love to own and for me it would be the Jaguar XF which I test drove and loved. Just sitting in the car felt like an extension of myself and I certainly appreciated the details and quality workmanship. But in prioritizing my needs in life, a fine piano and audio system are more important, so I'll just have to hold onto that Infinity M for a while longer. I don't see expensive luxury items such as a fine car, or dream piano such as a Steinway or Bösendorfer as a problem per se, if they are actually appreciated for what they are and not just an idle status symbol. What I see as a bigger issue is the time and resources spent on stuff we don't really need (and by 'need' I mean things beyond food and shelter that we actually appreciate and use to enrich our lives).

Probably the most incredulous extravagance I've seen was featured in an online flight program about luxury goods. It seems Austria minted a 1000-troy ounce gold coin honoring the Vienna Philharmonic, said to be the largest legal tender gold coin ever minted. The cost to collectors was \$440,000, and the entire production run was sold out in a matter of days. A close runner-up to this was the \$252,000 some collector paid for the dress Judy Garland wore in the Wizard of Oz. We seem to live in a world where millions of dollars are thrown around every day like so much play money!

But, in a less rarified realm and closer to home, I was shopping for holiday gifts last year in a Hallmark shop when some music-themed decorations and figurines by Jim Shore caught my eye. In general I appreciate the work of all artisans who take the time and pride to craft quality work of any type, and these were certainly very intricately detailed. Unlike the expensive Jag or Bösendorfer, these \$45 craft items are something I could easily afford to buy. But where would I put them? Buy another curio cabinet or display table where they would gather dust? Where does it end? I already have so much stuff that the basement and attic are full of storage boxes bursting at the seams.

Whenever I'm outside of my immediate group of friends and acquaintances where more meaningful conversations can be had, I find that general interactions in the workplace and gatherings of relatives tend to revolve around Pop Culture, entertainment, and the latest gee-whiz gizmos from our tech suppliers. I don't care to know how some star athlete spent his 7-million dollar bonus, or know where so-and-so Royal couple spent their last holiday. Such things are so desultory and unrelated to my world as to actively annoy me that I should have to expend the saliva necessary to talk about them in conversation. But more and more, people are fixated on such trivial pursuits.

Five or ten years ago perusing the magazine rack of my local supermarket and nearby bookstore I would have found three magazines on piano, three on classical music in general and four on audio (each with a portion devoted to reviews of classical music). Those are all now long gone. Besides music, at one point there were also five magazines on wine, four on landscaping, and three on history, which were also interests of mine. Now there is only one magazine on wine, and one on gardening.

I understand that interests come and go according to fashion and passing fads, and that the entire market for print publications has quickly evaporated as so much is now available online for free. However, when I do look at what's left on the magazine rack I'm concerned with the deeper implications. The whole section that used to have the music, art and history magazines and journals has now been taken over by five magazines on guitar and countless feature magazines on pop personalities.

People get caught up in information overload from the latest breaking news and constant bombardment of tweets and texting and social media, but these are mere ephemeral distractions that sap a lot of energy from more important causes.

Then there is the issue of how insular our lives have become with only our own immediate needs registering upon our consciousness. Every time I walk down to the nearby creek in the community park I'm amazed at the amount of trash in the water. How did all that stuff get there? How could so many people be so careless or not have any concern for the impact these plastic bags and water bottles have on the environment? Oftentimes, when I have some extra energy I carry a back pack and fill it with discarded cans and bottles of other people's energy drinks. In looking online for any outlet for an organized community effort of volunteers to clean up these areas I've found nothing. Seems to me an ideal outlet for a high school classroom project or scout troop. But then there would inevitably be the liability wavers and other legal nonsense.

I don't mean to imply that civilization is now suddenly on the brink of self-destruction, because there has never really been a perfect idyllic time in human history. Every time I see a program on the Library of Alexandria, or see a glossy new book about the splendors of ancient Rome I want to steep myself in the achievements such a civilization: the political discourse, the civil engineering projects, the inspiring sculpture and architecture. Of course I'm also saddened that it was all lost to petty grievances, hubris and intractable idealism, and I'm always equally appalled at the horrors they inflicted to build up such a repository of societal wealth and innovation with slavery being merely the lowest rung of an extremely class-divided society.

The perennial question has always been how to achieve the good while avoiding all the potential negatives. Religious gurus and political leaders all promise that they have the answer. As an advocate for classical music I point my finger at Pop Culture as the biggest problem eroding the sensibilities of fine art (and hence, cultured society), but the fact is that simply banning ghetto rap and all simple-minded pop music, and enrobing the world in Bach and Beethoven would not necessarily guarantee that we would end up with a better society. After all, the Nazis greedily plundered artwork from all over Europe and were in full attendance at concerts of Beethoven and Brahms in Berlin as the Allied forces brought down the curtain on their fanatical idealism. Mere exposure to Bach and fine art is not a golden balm for mankind's sins.

Plenty of psychopaths and sociopaths listen to classical music. The problem is that they have never learned to listen with a sense of emphatic connectivity. That will be the basis of a forthcoming book I am writing. Even so, edifying types of music and art are only manifestations of a healthy, intellectually reflective society; they cannot be then used as a Band-Aid that promises joy and brotherhood in a world that is mired in deep economic disparity, and political and religious intolerances that end up in acts of terrorism.

One of the most influential books to my thinking on society and political structure was Thomas Sowell's classic, *A Conflict of Visions*, about the ideological origins of political struggles. If I had to summarize the book in one sentence I'd say that it concerns how each individual or society answers the question: "How do you envision the world in fifty years?" Some seek to preserve things as they are, or as they were in some idealized vision of the past, others look with restless inquiry, and occasional misadventure down blind alleys, toward constant evolution. As I study history, I find no instances of societies past or present that have achieved a perfect balance, so it is my belief that we need to keep looking for answers and solutions.

This belief in the ever-evolving progression of human experience reflects a hope that mankind may someday find an external manifestation of the kind of internal balance one finds in music. But, for every step forward, every new promise of technology for a better life, there seem to be unintended consequences and setbacks. Some argue that simplistic atavism is the answer, that if we lived simply off the land like the Native Americans, we would find balance of physical and spiritual needs, and that nature would be our magnificent cathedral. Some religions argue that mankind's restless striving for betterment is in itself a sinful pursuit on par with the building of the Tower of Babel, and that we all need to live simply and peaceably, awaiting the Day of Final Judgment. Pragmatists hedge their bets and say that maybe it's all for naught, but why not try for some improvement while we're waiting for the Big Answers?

Short of some radical whole scale reinvention of society as postulated by the utopian philosopher Jacques Fresco, how can we work toward a systematic progression of improvements which will lead us to a better future? Obviously mere intelligence and a stellar education are not the answer as witness the Romans, the Nazis, or the Ivy League graduates who have become entrenched in idealistic bunker warfare in Congress. Nor is externally imposed moral structuring, as witness religious advocates too eager to take up arms against those with different views, or military officers who rape subordinates and abuse power.

Culture and intelligence are empty without a developed sense of empathy. Mere 'civility' can be too cold and easily turned when the prevailing powers see fit. Developed empathy doesn't typically arise solely from a liberal arts education or listening to classical music. That must be developed early on, as part of the home and school environment. As is so often the case our beliefs and resolves are formulated by personal experiences, simply because they have a more direct impact on our lives than learning from books or passive observation. In my case, my awareness of

empathy became very clear when, after a few years in the Montessori school system, our son switched over to public schooling when we moved. What a dramatic difference in teaching philosophy! At Montessori they develop both self-respect and empathy because the older children are asked to help assist with the younger children. Our son, an only child, relished the role of being a big brother, and enjoyed the reciprocal synergy of helping younger children who in turn looked up to him and sought to emulate his more mature behavior. By instilling this caring and giving attitude, a deep sense of empathy is developed for those who are younger or weaker.

Our son is now in college, but we still talk about the public school 'experiment' and the overall negative impact of his having to adjust to the regimented and compartmentalized approach of the public school system. Many concerned parents who have the option of proximity and financial means will consider a fine private school, and I know several teachers at these schools who report exceptional results. I also understand now, why after 25 years as a teacher in the secondary education system my mother retired with a sense of disappointment at how little progress had been made in methodology and learning environment in our public schools.

To teach properly in the early and most impressionable years of the student's education wouldn't necessarily require more tax dollars or more equipment or supplies or learning aids. But it will require a change in methodology. And this mention of change is always what makes conservatives bristle with skepticism. It's true that many educational experiments have been a bust, as witness my younger sister having gone through the whole phonetics phase. But what we are doing now is ineffective. I happen to live in one of the wealthiest counties in the U.S., but that doesn't make much of a difference when what is needed is a complete change of methodology. Dollars and fancy environ-friendly buildings are not what are needed.

Now, specific to how music education might play a role in empathetic development, I will venture into some thinking that may make many music teachers uncomfortable. We can't just argue that we need music in the schools, because frankly, even when the money was more available in the 70's and 80's, the results were not too impressive. My position is that teaching toddlers to shake rattlers in time to music, or squander the precious little resources that are available in the secondary education system trying to teach kids to toot on plastic recorders or hack away at pint-sized Suzuki violins is not going to create a lifelong connection to music. In fact, it may be enough to discourage many children from further exploration.

My love of music developed well before school age when as a toddler I was fascinated by the sounds of the church pipe organ. Playing violin in the school orchestra in fourth and fifth grade nearly ruined me for music when we had a mean German teacher who used to pull our hair when we made mistakes. My love for music wasn't rekindled until the seventh grade when I had a choral instructor who used to play recorded symphonic music and play some classics on the piano and ask us to interpret what the meaning of the music was. No talk of form or historical dates, but an attempt to get at the expressive narrative of the music. She played recordings of

programmatic music such as Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Berlioz's *Witches' Sabbath*, and Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, among others. On the piano she played Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*; in choir we sang simple classics and for something lighter some selections from *Fiddler on the Roof* which was just out.

Within two months I was avidly buying up recordings of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, and I can tell you, from just that one class in that one year, four of us went on to become professional musicians or music teachers, and many of the rest that I stayed in touch with were still active in church choirs or community programs as adults. At the very least, this method of teaching youngsters how to attune to music (without the stress of mastering an instrument) created a highly sympathetic listener base for classical music. Later on, when this teacher retired, I wrote a letter of appreciation which was published in the local paper.

This brings up the idea of, the valuation of, learning to play an instrument, versus being a 'passive' listener. My opinion is that learning how to listen must come first!! The key is to eliminate 'passive' from the equation, and teach listeners how to tap into the narrative power of great music. If there is an understanding of classical music, a perception of its expressive narrative and communicative power, then the desire to pick up and learn an instrument will follow. If the student proves to have no proficiency for actually playing, then at least they will be good listeners the rest of their lives.

It is also possible to learn an instrument quite proficiently, and yet never really understand the deeper levels of musical expression. I've heard proficient pianists at international competitions who seem to only grasp the crudest outlines of the music and display no innate understanding of hermeneutic inflection. They probably got along so far by natural talent and because they enjoyed the flattery of people telling them they were good at something. No, a true understanding of music, how to listen and discern interpretive inflection, is the first, critical cornerstone of any effective musical education.

There are benefits to learning an instrument, and statistically (but not exclusively) the most discerning listeners have at some point learned to play an instrument to a decent and comprehending degree of proficiency. Most of the readers of this website probably fit that profile. But learning to toot on a recorder in the third grade doesn't count. The main benefit is the ability to focus on a singular task, to fine-hone self-discipline to accomplish a task. But this may also be achieved by other means than learning a musical instrument; playing chess, for example, rock climbing, or practicing one's tennis return alone in a half court.

The younger generation has learned to cope with a nearly constant fraying of attention, but have lost the ability to focus to any great depth. There are now weekend programs where for a mere \$5,000 one can learn how to re-connect and focus on a single task. Increasingly, the ability to sit down and listen to Beethoven's

Ninth—the whole thing, not just the sound bites—is becoming an evolutionary atavism. But anybody who can sit down and play a simple melody on an instrument has both the ability to perform complex interactions (mental conceptualization, hand and eye coordination, necessary physical responses) and the single focused task of making the melody expressive or at least recognizably coherent.

The human mind needs diversity of experience to thrive. This is why it is good to read a book to supplement passive forms of entertainment. In a book, the progression of events in prose or symbolisms in poetry are not laid out with explosive soundtracks or startling visual tricks, we need to hold it all in our own minds and create a sort of internal architecture. But learning an instrument is even better, because there are the additional steps of physical mastery and interpretive inflection.

Of all the instruments one can chose to play, I have to agree with Josef Hofmann that the piano is the most chaste and perennially rewarding instrument. The piano sits at the apex of potentiality in terms of harmonic complexity, contrapuntal layers, and dynamic inflection wherein the greatest range of musical expression is possible. The guitar has supplanted the piano (or keyboards) as the instrument of choice in today's youth culture, but most will never get beyond strumming a few chords. Unfortunately, strumming a few chords on the guitar or playing cool riffs on the keyboard are not avenues for the edifying exploration of the human spirit in all its diversity. As I define it, casual music making, as a form of social entertainment is completely unrelated to music as a fine art.

The problem is that most people don't truly understand what fine art is all about. This is why I say that learning how to listen is ultimately more important than learning how to play an instrument. That is the one great and dismal failure of the education system. I'm in the process of writing a textbook which proposes a new method of teaching students how to listen to music and recognize the vital element of hermeneutic expression (the basis of the expressive narrative). Children ages 4-6 could be taught to listen to Haydn's Surprise Symphony and to stand up and shout on cue when the 'surprise' comes. Or even at this age they can be taught to discern the difference between "sneaky with a smile" (with the intended result being a laugh) and "sneaky with a frown" (with the intended result being harm or hurt to another). Both types of music will be similar in outline, but discerning the subtle differences of psychological intent is what is vital in making sense of the narrative linear progression of most music forms.

I am distraught when I see accomplished musicians who switch back and forth between jazz and classical music at a moment's notice. I'm not so sure how good they may be with the jazz but with the classical music they are only skimming the most exterior outlines and missing entirely the hermeneutic expression of the music. You simply cannot act a tragic Shakespearean scene and then switch over to a zany Robin Williams comedy sketch, not if you've understood and felt the pathos of the tragedy.

People in the classical music business wonder what happened, and how Pop Culture became so pervasive as to exclude any more refined or intellectual pursuits. Marketers who run the major symphonies in this country have led us down a blind alley of 'inclusiveness' as a supposed means to bring new listeners into the tent. The result is that the truly engaged listeners (such as myself) have become disenfranchised, and the concert halls are still not full of blacks, teenagers, or any of the other targeted groups they hoped to bring to the fold. The reason for the failed experiment is that the message of great music is more than just notes that can be dressed up in different clothes, made to reveal its meaning through artificially imposed exterior perspectives.

I know some of my opinions will ruffle feathers in the arts community, but dumbing down concerts by playing pop tunes in the style of masters, or classical tunes played with upbeat rhythmic arrangements destroys the real expressive message of the original. Having a black pianist in dreads and flamboyant colorful shirt playing Beethoven didn't suddenly bring throngs of black listeners into the hallowed inner sanctum. Playing Bach on a Stradivarius in the subway only annoyed people. A string quartet of gay men in tight pants, a teenage violinist with a sheer blouse and nose stud, a buff Seminole Indian posing shirtless for concert posters, combination concerts with jazz and classical artists, Elton John and Sir Georg Solti together, none of these concepts have worked. They've only marginalized the real purpose of the music.

Earl Wild once commented that in the early part of his career the young people in the audiences were from all kinds of backgrounds, the only thing in common was that they liked listening to good music. In the latter part of his long career he noticed that the only young people in the audience were youngsters who themselves were precociously involved in music performance. Many have pondered how to get the general populace more involved in classical music or fine arts of any type, when the culture is so completely saturated with pop culture and easily accessible entertainment.

The biggest problem, not even realized by most educators, is that the great majority of listeners hear only the outline details and general mood of the music. They have never learned how to really listen to, or attune themselves to, the unfolding narrative power of great music. If they had, then the vitality of classical music would have never given Pop Culture a foothold.

Casual entertainment has always existed alongside more thoughtful artistic expressions. Minstrels, jugglers, rowdy tavern songs have had their place and purpose, and poets and court musicians have had theirs. And there has always been a sense of sacred and secular. The problem now is that Pop Culture has become so pervasive that it is almost impossible to escape, and the fine arts are more and more considered an irrelevant anachronism.

We've thus far discussed the problems of how fine art has been slipping away from relevance in society. As I already mentioned, a few music and art appreciation

courses within the structure of an overall liberal arts education are insufficient to really bring the relevance of the arts alive for most. At that point it is usually too late, for by then Pop Culture will have become a deadening cancer within the psyche.

What is needed is an earlier start with an emphasis on developing an empathetic ear. My proposal, briefly, is that introductory musical appreciation should begin in the first grade, perhaps in sessions 30 minutes each week, and increasing until by the fourth grade there are two one hour sessions per week. This is not far from what they do in Austria and Germany. The schedule and presentation of science, math, and engineering concepts can remain as they are now. Literature and language start out fine but in many cases falter by the high school level; that needs to be assessed. History needs to be made more relevant to the concept of cultural impact. Comparative philosophy may be introduced as early as the sixth grade, but no later than the eighth.

The advantage of this approach is that it encourages students to try and understand the motivations behind different perspectives and belief systems. The early introduction of proper bi-cameral attunement to music also makes for more wholesome attitudes and tolerances. Throughout this entire process, the school system must actively avoid inadvertent glorification of Pop Culture in the projects that are assigned and the performances that are sponsored by the school. There is plenty enough exposure to Pop Culture that the schools don't need to reinforce that these are legitimate models of behavior to emulate.

Short of a complete overhaul of the prioritization and presentation in the educational system the most a concerned reader can do is to continue to support the good within the music and arts community and to withhold monetary resources as a proxy veto to inane Pop Culture. That and to be cognizant of consumerism and to balance light entertainment and recreation with more edifying pursuits. Periodically ask yourself where you would like to see humanity in the next fifty years, and whether what you are doing helps or hinders in that vision.