

What Brings Us Together?

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When my daughter Laura was about three years old, she was engrossed at my side one day, watching me at the piano. On a lark, just to see what she would say, I asked, “Laura, I notice that the notes on this end of the piano [bang, bang, bang] sound a lot different than the notes on this other end of the piano [bang, bang, bang]. What do you think the difference is?” She puzzled up her face for a minute, played a few of the keys on both ends herself, and then announced, with finality: “Well, these notes are the little notes [at the top end of the keyboard], and these notes are the big notes [at the bottom end].” Then she left, with a smile.

That moment was a capsule reflection of a question I have carried with me through many years. If such simple assumptions like “high” and “low” didn’t seem to have much universal meaning (at least for her, since she intuitively chose “little” and “big” instead), what does music really mean?

Years earlier I had been flailing away with a baton in the apartment of Maestro Joseph Rosenstock, when I was studying orchestral conducting. He sat at the piano, reducing the full orchestral score of Beethoven symphonies and playing them at the keyboard (something I’m sure all of you can do), while I conducted from behind my music stand. In the middle of some movement or other he suddenly stopped playing, looked a little disgusted, and told me to go sit on the couch. He came over, opened his score, shoved it under my nose and said, “You have to read the score like a book!” I had no idea what he was talking about. How do you read a score

like a book? It's a musical score, not a book! He means me to see some sort of meaning in this score that I can't find. What does this music mean—for me, for others?

Growing up I tried to immerse myself in music in every way possible, because its meaning seemed magic to me. When it first came out, I sat through *The Music Man* seven times in two days (back in the days when theaters didn't kick you out between shows). As I grew older, I tried everything that had anything to do with music. I played clarinet from the second grade on, joining bands, orchestras, chamber groups, and playing in festivals and solo competitions. I spent hours at the piano, picking out tunes and chords by ear. I studied a little violin—even buying a violin at the end of my mission to carry home. I bought a 12-string Gibson guitar and a banjo, becoming a groupie to a guy I worked with who had grown up in the Ozarks, a great bluegrass player of “old-time” music, and we'd sit in his living room with the tape recorder going until 1 or 2 a.m. I spent hours locked away with BYU's music synthesizer, weaving patch chords together and trying to make interesting sounds. I worked as a music copyist and played a Fender Rhodes keyboard in a soft rock band in college to pay the bills. I didn't have a large record collection—I couldn't afford it—but the few records I had were worn through to the other side: Stravinsky, Sibelius, Mozart.

When I enrolled in college I took philosophy courses, read books on aesthetics, and studied acoustics and physiology, trying to answer my question, “What does music mean?” I agreed with Aristotle, ““Rhythms and melodies contain representations of anger and mildness, and also of courage and temperance and all their opposites and other moral qualities, that most closely correspond to the true natures of these qualities.... Music has the power of producing a certain effect on the moral character of the soul.” When I considered my musical art and religion I had some of the fears shared by St. Augustine: ““Thus I float between peril of pleasure, and an

approved profitable custom: inclined the more to allow the old usage of singing in the Church, and yet again, so often as it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than with the message, I confess myself to have grievously offended: at which time I wish rather not to have heard the music. See now in what a state I am!" I read Hermann Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel (The Glass Bead Game)* and wondered how music and art meant somehow more than just the notes, rhythms, and nuances, but somehow the lattice of sounds and ideas evoked an order that was more than the sum of the parts. I was so driven by this question I wrote my masters thesis to the question, exploring structuralism and Jungian psychology to look for an answer.

And on other days I sided with Felix Mendelssohn, who complained, "There is so much talk about music, and yet so little is said. For my part, I believe that words do not suffice for such a purpose."

There were times when I turned to the scriptures and church leaders, as well as to my university professors, for spiritual direction in looking for my answer. I read the *Psalms*, early hymns of praise and worship and considered the Lord's words in DC 25:12: "For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads." I knew that music was important to our Heavenly Father, for in D&C 136:28 I read: "If thou art merry, praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving." I remembered at the conclusion of the Last Supper, before the Lord went out to the garden, that Christ and the apostles sang a hymn.

One day, as I was talking with Professor Robert Manookin, a composer on the BYU faculty, he told me with some earnestness, "I wonder what heavenly choirs sound like? I hear people talk about hearing choirs in the temple, or on other sacred occasions. What did they hear?"

Does it sound like Brahms? Or more like Palestrina? Or is it simple four-part harmony, like in the hymnbook? What is it about that heavenly sound that is so wonderful, that carries such deep meaning into the hearts of those who hear it? That's what I want to write!"

So I went off to graduate school at Columbia University to study musicology. Perhaps they could teach me what composers meant by their music. I spent days with Josquin's breathtakingly beautiful motet, "Ave Maria, gratia plena" and Bach's cantata, "Christ lag in Todesbanden." I learned the poignant story of Michael Haydn's *Requiem* and how it affected the young, 16-year old Mozart who played in the orchestra in 1771 and then later partially recreated the work in his own *Requiem* 20 years later.

When I finished school I became a teacher, facing my first class of freshmen at the University of Michigan 25 years ago. I then asked myself, "What is it about music that brings them here? What does music mean for them?"

I knew some were there because they were pushed—by parents, friends, or teachers. Some were driven by ambition to conquer the stages of Classical stardom. Most, however, I knew were there because of a more idealistic purpose, because they loved their art. These students, probably, had survived life-changing experiences like those I passed through in my childhood, sitting in the orchestra and playing the Finale from Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*—when, as the solo horn entered on top of that quiet, shimmering string tremolo, my heart skipped several beats and I knew, *this is what I want to do all of my life*. I could look into the eyes of most of my students and see that same fire, a meaning they carried in their heart—even if we found it impossible to express that meaning in words, exactly.

I taught at Michigan for nine years, and then at Penn State for eight, and then came to BYU. Here I found something more than I had known. The level of music making was as high

as anything I had seen elsewhere, but there was something deeper beneath the surface. I saw it in the tears of students singing of the resurrection while performing Mahler's Second Symphony. I found it in the silent elevator I shared with two violinists who had just poured out their hearts to children in a cancer clinic in London, in the hearts of education students recently returned from teaching English through music in the orient, and in the face of an overwhelmed, shaken graduate student who, at the end of an independent readings course on music in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, began weeping and cried out, "Now I understand what happened!"

What drives them also drives us. Music has meaning. It is that which brings us here to this organ workshop today. It's message changes us, makes us better, lifts and inspires us. We want, sometimes desperately, to help others hear what we hear, to feel the same thing we do, in something like the same way.

You've come here to learn how to do that. You know that here you will find wonderful teachers who will help you with technique, share practical knowledge like registration or organ history, and explore new repertoire. Here you know you will find others like yourself who want to share and learn together. Most importantly, though, you come here in the hope of learning to communicate the meaning you find in music with others.

You have an obligation and even a duty to do that. As the Lord reminded Oliver Cowdery (D&C 6:10), "Behold thou hast a gift, and blessed art thou because of thy gift. Remember it is sacred and cometh from above." Each of us is given a measure, a "talent" in a literal sense, "Unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one: to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. And all this for the benefit of the church of the living God, that every man may improve upon his talent, that every man may gain other talents, yea, even an hundred fold..." (DC 82:17-18)

So we will study and learn together, and then we will serve, lift, and inspire others. We will search for the meaning of what we do and how we can make our talent best serve others. We know that technique is essential, but also that it is only a means to an end. We want to show, through music, how art can be a means in the hand of God to bless the lives, gladden the hearts, comfort the weary, and in some small way, give meaning to life.

Years ago I was sitting alone (or so I thought) in a dimly lit chapel, playing hymns on the piano. A silent observer finally rose, came forward, and paid me one of the highest compliments I've ever received as a musician. She said, "When you play the hymns, I hear the meaning of those words so strong, like you are singing to my heart." When we are able to convey the message of our art to others, that's when we succeed, I believe.

Welcome to BYU. I hope some of spirit of this place will help you in your quest as a musician and servant. I hope what you learn and take with you will help you express those things that you find to be most important in life and in eternity—to inspire and "Lift up the hands that hang down." Music can do this.