

On the Education of Musicians: a Manifesto¹

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Aristotle wrote that young people would profit from the study of music but should give it up well before the point of becoming professionals. He agreed with Plato that music brings harmony to the souls of the young, but he drew a clear line between well-bred gentlemen and professional musicians.

“The right measure will be obtained if students of music stop short of the arts which are practiced in professional contests... for in this the performer practices the art, not for the sake of his own improvement, but in order to give pleasure, and that of a vulgar sort, to his hearers. For this reason, the execution of such music is not the part of a freeman but of a paid performer ...” *Politics* 8-6 (in the Jowett translation).

This is a class prejudice. Musicians, actors, jugglers, comics and other entertainers have been treated throughout history essentially as servants, not as fellow citizens. Joseph Haydn is a prime example, responsible not only for composing and performing for the prince and his guests, but also for the laundry of the court musicians. A first class education, historically, was deemed appropriate for those who would assume leadership positions in society, not for the working classes and not for the entertainers (and incidentally, not for women, although that gradually changed). It is striking that the founding of the first great modern conservatory in the western world, that of Paris in 1795, was a socially progressive, forward-looking attempt to bring dignity to the profession. It was felt that those who would play in the theaters and concert halls should be not only adept at the instrument but also grounded in aural skills, solfeggio, and music history. This was a big step forward from the time of the very first conservatories in the West, in the fourteenth century, when orphans in the Italian *ospedale* were trained to play and sing in public to solicit charity for their food and lodging. But the education received at the Paris Conservatory in no way matched that received by the children of the upper classes, because it was restricted almost entirely to music. Amazingly little has changed since then. Randall Thompson put it quite simply in 1967: “The direction of a conservatory is frankly vocational. That of a Liberal Arts College is not. The aim of a Liberal Arts college is to

¹ An early version of this essay was presented in a panel, “Aspects of the Notion of Artistic Integrity” at the 2012 Annual Congress of the Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen, 10 Nov 2012. This version owes much to the helpful comments of George Rose.

produce integrated citizens.”² *I think it is time to realize that young musicians not only need, but also deserve, a first class education in the liberal arts and sciences.*

It is tempting to come to a very different conclusion. Consider the familiar distinction between broad general education and specialized training in a particular field. We all recognize that highly skilled vocations such as carpentry or plumbing or surgery require intense, specialized training and apprenticeship. Music does also. Indeed, the length and intensity of training needed for a career as a pianist or violinist exceeds that of these other examples. So why should a budding musician waste time with a liberal arts³ education? That is the first question I will try to answer here, by arguing that *a liberal arts education is not only valuable but also crucial in the education of young musicians.* After that I will try to answer a second question: where does the idea come from that gifted young musicians should focus exclusively, or almost exclusively, on music?

My argument for the necessity, not just the desirability, of a liberal arts education has three parts. The first two parts present important though not ultimately decisive considerations in support of this claim, but the third part presents a consideration that I think is indeed decisive.

1. Other things being equal, the life of a musician with a solid general education will be richer and happier than that of one without it. I suppose this is hardly controversial, yet it is important nonetheless. All the parts of a liberal arts education – the single courses taken as part of the exploratory phase of one’s education, or the in-depth study that constitutes a “major” – will in later years become a sources of pleasure and edification. Not coincidentally, the broad education will connect one to other interesting people at many stages of one’s life.

(2) A liberal arts education provides a career advantage in music. The ease and self-confidence in writing and speaking that comes from a liberal arts education helps a musician in a wide variety of practical ways, from pre-concert talks and the preparation of program materials to negotiations with employers and funders. Further, one need only think of YoYo Ma’s *Silk Road* project, for example, to see the power of a career-enhancing idea born of knowledge of history and the imagination to ask penetrating questions. This is a point of broad applicability. Who could suppose that the success of individuals such as Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg came simply or even mainly from their facility with algorithms? Even without finishing a liberal arts college education, both developed the broad and far-ranging skills and habits of mind, characteristic of liberal arts education, that served them well as innovators and leaders.

(3) A liberal arts education will make a musician a better musician, adding refinement, discrimination, and imagination to technical prowess. This is the part of

² *College Music: An Investigation for the Association of American Colleges*, p. 97.

³ From now on I will use the phrase “liberal arts” in the broad sense, to include the sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences.

the argument most in need of justification. Points (1) and (2) are important but not decisive. One could grant that a liberal arts education brings pleasure and career advantages, yet argue that, when it comes to the music itself, it is the years of practice, study with master teachers, and performance experience, on top of the essential ingredient of musical talent – not a liberal arts education - that determines the quality of the outcome. Indeed, some would argue that it is the willingness to sacrifice a great deal – including the personal and career advantages of a liberal arts education - that characterizes the most dedicated musicians, that allows them, through single-minded focus, to become great musicians. I think this is wrong, and I will try to show it is wrong. I will argue that the skills and attitudes fostered by an education in the liberal arts and sciences are exactly those that will make the difference between technical excellence and genuine artistry.

What kind of argument is possible here? I have to assume that the reader recognizes the difference between technical excellence and genuine artistry. We have all heard performances that are frustrating because they are, in a sense, faultless, but still unaffectioning and uninteresting. The performance may be well in tune and rhythmically solid, with pleasing sound and generally “musical” phrasing, good tempo and ample energy. There are no “mistakes”, yet our minds wander. By contrast, a performance of authentic artistry holds our attention. We recognize a palpable sense of concentration and of overall direction among the parts of the piece, either forward toward what is coming or reflective of what has been heard; there is a sense of freshness and discovery, as though the performer is inventing the piece; there is moment-to-moment characterization of musical materials, expressive of wit, drama, pathos, longing, grandeur, and mystery; and there is even more – all quite difficult to characterize in words but conspicuous in performance.

Who is to say where artistry comes from? We speak of musical talent, and anyone who has worked with young musicians for many years knows how important but also elusive that concept is. I have argued elsewhere⁴ that at least part of musical talent is responsiveness to the “stuff” of music: rhythms, chord progressions, textures, timbres, silences, and the other things out of which musical works are constructed. But talent alone does not produce artistry. Artistry is exquisitely sensitive to the details of particular works. *The qualities strengthened by a liberal arts education include those that conduce toward the grasp of such details, and therefore toward artistry.* These are the qualities of curiosity, intellectual adventurousness, the ability to see connections, and the mental discipline to focus on complex arguments and narratives. The day may come when we know enough about the human brain to quantify these neurological connections : how the study of mathematics can affect the performance of a Schubert piano sonata, or how the study of a foreign language and culture can affect the performance of a Bach suite. But even now we can recognize the result and know that it is real.

Let me give a more specific example of the ways that a liberal arts education can improve one’s music making. There is an interesting musicological literature on the

⁴ “Musical ‘Topics’ and Expression in Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* volume 54 number 4 (1995).

presence of “topics” – the Greek *topoi* – especially in music of the eighteenth century.⁵ The topics are such things as the hunt, the church, the courtly dance, the forest, the village wedding. Musical references to these topics are present even in so-called “absolute” music – for example, a fragment of a horn call representing the hunt, or a modal chord progression representing church worship. These allusions were and remain recognizable (almost unconsciously) by audiences as such, providing an extra-musical dimension. The result for the listener is a general sense of connection to the concerns of everyday life. What is the significance for the performer? To some extent the performer needs to “bring out” the topics; more importantly, a broadly educated performer will be likely to have background knowledge of the cultural phenomena represented by the topics. This, at the very least, will likely enhance the performer’s concentration. It will communicate itself to the audience as a kind of insight and a source of delight.

One can imagine a number of objections to my claims about the value of a liberal arts education for music-making. One objection – surely the one most frequently made - is that that there is simply not enough time for academic studies beyond the demands of the instrument. My experience is that gifted young people generally have more energy than they know what to do with, and that fewer hours of intelligent practice are much better than many hours of mindless practice. Furthermore, the level of technical accomplishment of young players has risen dramatically over the years. It is evident that many students arrive at conservatory needing musical refinement (and all that supports it) far more than hours of technical work.

In truth, I am often surprised by how readily these conclusions are accepted by my fellow musicians and music educators. That leads to the second question: *where, then, does the idea come from that gifted young musicians should focus exclusively, or almost exclusively, on music?* If this view is as misguided as I claim, what accounts for its stubborn hold?

I think there are two main factors at work here. The first, which I have already mentioned, I will call the *Aristotle prejudice*. It is the view, quite simply, that the proper general education of the elite is not necessary or appropriate for the training of entertainers. That view, unfortunately, is alive and well today. Indeed, it is so familiar and ingrained that it is often difficult to recognize.

The Aristotle prejudice should not be confused with the different but related view that vocational topics – for example, journalism, law, accounting, hospitality management, engineering – should not be part of the course of study of liberal arts colleges. One could say broadly that Aristotle disparaged that which is done for material gain, and there is the sense that the best liberal arts education eschews vocational considerations. But, contrary to the Aristotle prejudice, the liberal arts college of today views specialization for the professions simply as a later stage of education, built upon the foundation it provides.

⁵ See, for example, Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (University of Chicago Press, 1983) and references included there.

Another factor that contributes to the prevalent view of conservatory education is the 19th century Romantic view of the exalted genius, a person of inspiration, madness, and obsessive focus, a person with a higher calling, in direct touch with a spiritual force. We all recognize this as a central conceit of romantic literature, poetry and painting. A famous example is the persona of Beethoven that was constructed in the second half of the 19th century. We recognize this notion in the mystique surrounding Franz Liszt and other virtuosi at whose performances audience members were said to faint from excitement. We recognize the philosophical underpinnings of this notion in Schopenhauer's view that music—and only music—provides access to the Will, the world of things in themselves, otherwise entirely hidden from human view. The Romantic conception of music and genius, still very much alive today, teams up with the Aristotle prejudice: *it makes peace with what I regard as the shortchanging of the young musician by glorifying single-mindedness*. This is a potent and insidious combination: gifted musicians are denied access to the education associated with upper class opportunity, while being assured that the loss is not significant. The Romantic conception makes a virtue of an intellectual deficit!

Now of course there is much of value in the Romantic conception. The Romantics understood that music is not only pleasing but also deep; not only attractive but also important. There is truth in the feeling that high musical attainment is wondrous, even magical. But there is nothing in Romanticism that should keep a young musician of the highest aspirations from having a fine general education. One can be inspired and in touch with the muses and profit from a rigorous liberal arts education. Artistry is enhanced by the education.

The reader will not be surprised to learn that undergraduate students in the Bard College Conservatory of Music, founded in 2005, are required to pursue **two** degrees over a five-year period: the bachelor of music degree and the bachelor of arts degree in a field other than music. The high success rate of our graduates in gaining admission to the most competitive graduate programs in the U.S. and abroad has been heartening. More than 90 percent continue in music; a few have chosen to pursue graduate study in other fields, including economics, biochemistry, and information systems. Significantly, this curriculum is spreading: a new school of music in China, the Soochow University School of Music, now offers a double-degree curriculum modeled on that of the Bard Conservatory and offered in collaboration with Bard College.

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