

# Musicians United for Superior Education - People Page

## **Musicking:** A Ritual in Social Space

A Lecture at the University of Melbourne June 6, 1995

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It was a great pleasure for me to be invited to take part in this centennial conference in, if not precisely my own country, at least in my own part of the world. But there's another reason, also, why I'm pleased to have been asked to speak here today. It's because taking part in this important event has required of me that I try to put my ideas in order concerning the art that I have been practicing for some sixty years now, so that I can say what it is that I believe to be important in that art.

For more years than I care to think about I have been worrying away at the question, or, rather, pair of questions: What is the nature of music? and What is its function in human life? In the life, that is, of every single member of the human species? I have reached some tentative conclusions, and it's those I'd like to talk about today. I make no apology for throwing my two cents worth into a pair of questions that seem to have defeated some of the best minds in western thought, at least since the time of Plato, since I feel I do have something to contribute to the formulation of the question and even possibly to an answer.

In search of that answer I have over the years read as widely as I could in the philosophy, and the esthetics, and the history, and the sociology of music, and I have done my best to make sense of Kant and of Hegel and of Schopenhauer, and I have read Adorno, and I have read Lucacs and Langer and Meyer, and I didn't find any of them of much use to me. In the first place, they were all much too abstract and complicated. I find it hard to make myself believe that so universal and so concrete a human activity as music

should require such complicated and abstract explanations. It all seems terribly remote not just from my own musical experience, whether it's as performer, or as listener, or as composer, or as teacher, but even more so from the experience of the vast majority of my pupils and students.

In the second place, those writers, and others like them, deal more or less exclusively with what we today would call the western high-art tradition and accept without question the assumptions of that tradition, without showing any awareness that they are just assumptions; it is rare indeed in western writings on the esthetics of music to find so much as a glance outwards to the experience of other cultures, even as far as western popular traditions.

And thirdly, I have a problem with their use of the word `music'. One moment it's treated as if the art itself were a thing, with powers of growth and development and action, and then suddenly, by a stealthy process of elision, the thing `music' becomes equated with those works of music which are the pride and the glory of the western tradition. And then the assumption is quietly made that it is in those works, those music objects, that the nature and the meaning of music reside.

The assumption isn't made as explicit as that, of course. But it does surface from time to time, as when Carl Dalhaus (1983) asserts quite bluntly that `The concept "work" and not "event" is the cornerstone of music history' and adds a little later that `The subject matter of music is made up, primarily, of significant works of music that have outlived the culture of their age'. Or when the critic Walter Benjamin says, in a single memorable sentence, `The supreme reality of art is the isolated, self contained work'.

And so, when they talk about the effect of music--the emotions it arouses, for example--what they're really talking about is the effect of a work of music. And, further, they mean specifically the work's effect on a individual listener, not on a composer, and certainly not on a performer. This is curious when you think about it, since performers are without doubt the most active members of the composer-performer-listener triad, and one would imagine

that they would be most in need of a good reason for doing what they do. It's a curious fact that performers and performance are hardly ever mentioned in writings on the meaning of music. It seems that a work of music has an ideal platonic existence over and above any possible performance of it. It's as if each work were floating through history, untouched by time and social change, waiting for an ideal listener to draw its meaning out, by a process that Kant called disinterested contemplation. Performance, if it gets thought about at all, which is seldom, is nothing more than the medium through which the work has to pass before it can reach its goal, the listener. As for performers, they are the servants of the work and of its composer, and, like servants generally, the more unobtrusively they can do their menial job the better.

And so philosophers and musicologists, and sometimes even composers, who ought to know better, bury their heads in their scores, which is where the essence of the work is thought to reside -- where else could it possibly be found? -- with scarcely a glance outwards to that real world where people actually make and listen to music. Like Emmanuel Kant, sitting writing year after year in his musty study in Königsberg -- I sometimes wonder what would have happened to his concept of disinterested contemplation if he'd ever ventured out as far as the nearest tavern. Like Brahms, who, we are told, turned down an invitation to a performance of Don Giovanni saying he'd sooner stay home and read the score. I hate to think what Mozart, the supreme practical musician, would have had to say about that. A hearty bit of Viennese scatology, I'll bet.

In that real world where people actually make and listen to music, in concert halls and suburban drawing rooms, in bathrooms and at political rallies, in supermarkets and churches, in record stores and temples, fields and nightclubs, discos and palaces, stadiums and elevators, it is performance that is central to the experience of music. There can be no music apart from performance, whether it's live or on record. You don't need a musical work at all -- in many of the world's great musical cultures there's no such thing -- and you don't even need a listener, at least not one separate from performers.

But you can't have music unless someone is performing. And when I talk of performing I don't just mean a formal public event. I mean any occasion when anyone is singing or playing, whether it's too him or herself, to a small group of family or friends or to an audience of thousands. So it seems to me self-evident that the place to start thinking about the meaning of music and its function in human life is not with musical works at all but with performing.

Now if there is anything that's clear about performing it is that it is action, it's something that people do. We could call it an encounter between human beings that is mediated by nonverbal organized sounds. All those present, listeners as well as performers, are engaging in the encounter, and all are contributing to the nature of the encounter through the human relationships that together they bring into existence during the performance.

As I thought about this, I realized that if music isn't a thing but an action, then the word 'music' shouldn't be a noun at all. It ought to be a verb. The verb 'to music'. Not just to express the idea of performing -- we already have verbs for that -- but to express the idea of taking part in a musical performance. And, as those of you who have read my book *Music of the Common Tongue* (1987) will know, I have taken the liberty of redefining this verb, which does in fact have an obscure existence in some of the larger English dictionaries, to suit this purpose. I offer it to you now, the verb 'to music', with its present participle 'musicking' as in the title of this talk -- the added 'k' is no caprice but has historical antecedents -- not as verbal cutesiness but as a genuine tool for the understanding of the act of music and of its function in human life.

This is how I have redefined it. It's quite simple. To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance. That means not only to perform, but also to listen, to provide material for a performance -- what we call composing -- to prepare for a performance -- what we call practicing or rehearsing -- or any other activity which can affect the nature of the human

encounter. We should certainly include dancing, should anyone be dancing, and we might even stretch the meaning on occasion to include what the lady is doing who takes the tickets on the door, or the hefty men who shift the piano around or the cleaners who clean up afterwards, since their activities all affect the nature of the event which is a musical performance.

It will become clear as we go along how useful this verb can be, and I shall use it from now on as if it were the proper English-language verb I hope it will become.

Apart from favoring the idea that music is action, the verb has other useful implications. In the first place, it makes no distinction between what the performers are doing and what the rest of those present are doing. It thus reminds us that musicking --and you see how easy it is to slip into using it -- is an activity in which all those present are involved, and for which all those present bear a responsibility. It isn't just a matter of composers, or even performers, actively doing something for the passive rest of us to contemplate. Whatever it is that is being done, we are all doing it together.

When we use the verb we take into account the whole event, not just what the performers are doing, and certainly not just the work that is being played. We acknowledge that a musical performance is an encounter between human beings in which meanings are being generated. As with all human encounters it takes place in a physical and a social space, and that space also has to be taken into account as well when we ask what meanings are being generated in a performance.

And if musicking is action and not thing, a verb and not a noun, then we should look for its meaning not in those musical objects, those symphonies and concertos and operas, or even those melodies and songs, that we have been taught to regard as the repositories of musical meaning. You will understand that I'm not trying to deny the existence of those objects, which would be silly, or even to deny that they have meanings in themselves. What I am saying is that the fundamental nature, and thus the meaning, of music lies

not in those objects but in the act of musicking. It lies in what people do. Musical objects have meaning only in so far as they contribute to the human activity which is musicking. Only by thinking in that manner can we hope to gain an understanding of its nature and of its function in human life.

That being so, the question which is most useful to us is not, What is the meaning of this musical work? which is the question that is asked by philosophers and musicologists alike. No: the really useful question is, What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these people taking part?

You will notice, on the one hand, that by framing the question in this way we don't have to assume the existence of a musical work at all. After all, in many of the world's musical cultures there's no such thing, so that the musicologists' question has no meaning. But on the other hand, it doesn't exclude the possibility of a stable musical work. It just removes the musical work from centre stage, and subsumes its meanings into a larger meaning, that of the total event which is the performance.

The question then arises, In what does the meaning of this human encounter that is a musical performance consist? The answer I am going to propose is this. The act of musicking brings into existence among those present a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of musicking lies. It lies not only in the relationships between the humanly organized sounds that are conventionally thought of as the stuff of music, but also in the relationships that are established between person and person within the performance space. These sets of relationships stand in turn for relationships in the larger world outside the performance space, relationships between person and person, between individual and society, humanity and the natural world and even the supernatural world, as they are imagined to be by those taking part in the performance. Those are important matters, perhaps the most important in human life.

I want to make it clear what I mean. I mean that when we music, when we

take part in a musical performance, the relationships that together we bring into existence model those of the cosmos as we believe that they are and that they ought to be. We do not just learn about those relationships, but we actually experience them in all their beautiful complexity. The musicking empowers us to experience the actual structure of our universe, and in experiencing it we learn, not just intellectually, but in the very depths of our existence, what our place is within it and how we relate, and ought to relate, to it. We explore those relationships, we affirm them and we celebrate them, every time we take part in a musical performance.

There's nothing metaphysical or supernatural about this process, nothing mystical. It's part of that natural biological process of giving and receiving information which links together all living creatures in a vast network that the great English anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1980) called the pattern which connects.

All living creatures, from bacteria to human beings to sequoia trees, need to be able to give and receive information; it is a condition of being alive. The means of communication are extremely various. It may be a colour or combination of colours, a shape, a posture, a way of moving, a chemical secretion, a sound or a pattern of sounds. But always the information concerns relationships. How do I relate to this entity? -- for example, is it predator or prey or offspring or a potential mate? Is my environment getting warmer, or lighter, or saltier, or drier? This is vital information for all creatures, and how they respond to it can make the difference between life and death for them -- for us, perhaps I should say.

Even at the simpler levels there is room for some flexibility in the response to the information. But as we ascend the scale of complexity the gestures and the possibilities of response become more and more varied and more complex. Bodily posture and movement, facial expression and vocal timbre and intonation provide in the more complex animals a wide repertoire of gesture and response. Those gestures and responses still concern

relationships, however, and in complex and contradictory creatures like human beings the gestures and responses can be complex and contradictory also. Gestures from me might indicate to you that I love you, and hate you, and fear you, and would like to kill you, but intend to nurture you, all at the same time. Such complexities are not unusual in human relationships.

Whatever form the gestures of relationships may take, they have one thing in common. They do not state who or what the entities are that are relating. Those are taken for granted. So that if I make a gesture that indicates that I dominate, or submit to, you, the 'I' and the 'you' are not stated, and in fact can't be stated. Only the relationship that unites us is stated. We might say there are no nouns, or even pronouns, in the language of biological communication. We can't say "He submits to her", or "She will dominate him". The language cannot deal with relations that are not actually happening or with entities that are not actually present. It is a here-and-now communication.

In contrast, verbal communication as it has developed, uniquely among human beings, has equipped us to deal with entities that are absent, with past and future events, with abstractions and with the contexts in which they occur. But unlike the language of gesture, it can deal with matters only one at a time.

This is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in that it has made possible those analytic capacities, that step-by-step logic, and that ability to compute about things, that have proved powerful tools in gaining such mastery as we have over the material world. But it is a weakness in that words in general have proved less than adequate in dealing with complexities of our relationships with one another and with the rest of the cosmos. One thing at a time is just too slow and too cumbersome to deal with the many-layered quicksilver nature of relationships.

But the language of gesture continues to perform functions in human life that words cannot. These functions lie specifically in the exploration and the



articulation of relationships, and in this function they are as precise as words are in their field. We have also learnt to play with this language, just as we do with words. To play is to change the context of the communication, to lift it temporarily out of the context of everyday reality, so that we can explore the implications of a relationship without having to commit ourselves to it.

Under the privileged conditions of play, the communicative gesture is freed from the immediate and possibly life-or-death situation and acquires a less urgent but no less vital function as discourse, as a way of exploring and articulating relationships, not only among human being but also between humans and the wider pattern of the cosmos, the pattern which connects. The ancient gestures have been elaborated over the million-year history of the human race into those complex patterns of gesture we call ritual.

Now ritual can be interpreted in two ways. We might call them secular and sacred. Both interpretations are valid. The secular interpretation is that to take part in a ritual is to explore, to affirm and to celebrate the participants' concept of the relationships of their world, or of a portion of it, whether that portion be physical, social, political, religious or any of those in combination. The gestures of the ritualers -- and, in ritual, words also are experienced as gestures rather than understood as semantic structures -- bring into existence relationships between them that model the relationships of their world as they understand them to be.

The sacred interpretation is that ritual is the acting-out of a myth. A myth is a story that tells how things in some past time came to relate as they do, and thus how they ought to relate in the present. Its accuracy as history is irrelevant, what matters is its adequacy as a paradigm, as a model for living and acting in the world.

However we choose to interpret it, we can say that, during the concentrated and heightened time of ritual, relationships are brought into existence between the participants which model the exemplary relationships whose origin the myth relates. In this way the participants not only learn about the

relationships but actually experience them in action. They explore them, they affirm their validity and they celebrate them without having to articulate them in words. In the memorable phrase of Clifford Geertz, in ritual 'the lived-in order merges with the dreamed-of order'.

Now ritual, as we know, may bring together and orchestrate an enormous variety of what we today call artistic genres: speech, music, dance, costume, architecture, sculpture, body decoration, masking, cooking -- and eating -- and scenic design. It can include at one and the same time all those activities which we call the arts. But I think we're better saying it the other way around. It is not that ritual brings together all the arts; rather it is that each of the activities that today we call the arts is a fragment of the great unitary and universal performance art we call ritual. Each of what we call the arts is a way in which we use the language of gesture to affirm, to explore and to celebrate our concepts of how we relate, and should relate, to ourselves, to one another and to the world. I should go so far as to assert that finally all art is performance art.

It could be that we have what we call 'art', or 'the arts', only when we cease to be aware of the ritual function of the activity and try to divorce it from its ritual purpose. I say we try to divorce it because I believe we never can do so. No matter how secular or even frivolous it may appear, the ritual function of art is always there for those who can perceive it. All art is serious art.

We notice also that the way in which all the arts issue from and return to ritual is as action, as performance. In the enactment of ritual it is the making, the wearing, the exhibiting, the dancing, the musicking, in a word the performing, that is valued, not the objects themselves that are made, or exhibited or worn, or performed. They are of value only in so far as they serve the ritual purpose. And so we see that what is to be treasured in what we call the arts is the action, rather than any created object. And we see, further, that if every living creature is able, and needs to be able, to give and respond to information concerning relationships, then the ability to take part in the

activity we call art is not confined to a few gifted people but is part of the evolutionary inheritance of every member of the human race.

Where does musicking fit into all this? We can expect that as a fragment of the great performance art which is ritual, musicking will bring into existence a complex web of relationships that exists for the duration of the performance. At the centre of the web are the relationships which the performers create between the sounds. Radiating out from those, and feeding back into them, are the relationships among the performers, between the performers and the listeners, should there be any, among the listeners, as well as with the composer, should there be one apart from the performers, and with anyone else who may be present - or even significant others who are not present, the ancestors perhaps, or the as yet unborn, or the deity who is the personification of ideal relationships.

You're probably asking at this point, What relationships is he talking about? Well, they're all around us in any musical performance. As an example, let's consider just a few of the relationships that are created when a symphony orchestra performs in a concert hall.

Even the concert hall itself, the physical space in which the event takes place, is in the first place designed and built around certain concepts of human relationships. Like all buildings, it has the power once it is built to impose those concepts on what takes place within it. The physical space creates the social space. Its great size and its opulence tell us much about the social importance of what goes on there, while the rows of seats all facing in one direction keep the audience in regimented comfort and limit the possible interaction between its members. It keeps some people apart and brings others together, allows some to dominate and others to be dominated, and isolates all those within it from the world of their everyday lives.

We might consider then the relationships among the members of the audience. They sit still and quiet during the performance, not communicating with one another in any way, each individual alone with the sounds in the

midst of the crowd of people. Their relationship to the players is of the most distant kind, for players and audience never speak to one another and enter and leave the building through separate doors. The social barrier formed by the edge of the stage is as impassible as if it were a brick wall. The audience cannot affect the course of the performance in any way, because there is another set of relationships that dictates that, the one between the players, the conductor and the probably dead composer. As for the players, they can relate to one another only through the notations they have before them and through the gestures of the conductor. They do not even have a complete picture of the work to be played, but only the portion they themselves are to play, and they depend on the conductor to co-ordinate their efforts.

The conductor is the power centre, the dictator if you like, of the proceedings. All the relationships between the players as they play pass through him because he is the only one who has the complete picture before him, the only one (I have to make this pun) who knows the score. But even he isn't a free agent, since what he does is decided by the composer's notations that he has before him. The event, in fact, is a model of the way in which power relations work in contemporary society.

It wasn't always like this. Here's an extract from a letter that the twenty-one-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote to his father from Paris in July 1778, telling how his new symphony -- it was the one we today call the 'Paris', in D.K297 -- had captivated the notoriously hard-to please Parisians. You can't mistake his tone of jubilation. He writes, 'In the middle of the first allegro there was a passage that I felt must please. The audience was quite carried away, and there was a tremendous burst of applause. But as I knew when I wrote it what effect it must produce I had introduced that passage again at the close -- when there were shouts of 'Da capo'. The andante also found favour, but particularly the last allegro because, having observed that all last as well as first allegros begin here with all the instruments playing in unison, I began with two violins only, piano for the first eight bars, followed instantly by a forte. The audience, as I had expected, said 'Hush!' at the soft

beginning, and when they heard the forte began to clap their hands. I was so happy that as soon as the symphony was over I went off to the Palais Royale where I had a large ice, said the rosary as I had vowed to do, and went home.' He would doubtless have found the silent good manners of today's concert audience strange, and maybe even a bit dispiriting.

The custom of immediate audience response lasted into the twentieth century. The story of the tumultuous Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* is too well known to need retelling, but there's also E.M. Forster's wonderfully funny and affectionate account in his novel of 1905, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, of a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in a small provincial Italian town, where he says the audience buzzed throughout the performance like a hive of happy bees. And then, there's the old story of the tenor in a small Italian opera house doing his big aria and getting encored, and doing it again, and getting encored again, and beseeching the audience to let him go and get on with the opera, when a voice from the gallery called out, 'And you will do it again, my friend, and again, until you get it right!'.

Different relationships indeed, between performers and audience! But modern audiences seem to be quite happy with the present relationships, and I've never heard anyone complain. And even the fact that we don't complain, that we don't seem to want the power to influence the course of the performance, might indicate a frame of mind --one that is not just aesthetic perhaps, but political in the widest sense.

Then there are the sounds themselves. I haven't time to go into the various sounds and sound relationships in all their enormous complexity that go to make a work of symphonic music. In essence they are both rational and at the same time dramatic. They are rational, in that they operate within the closed circle of mathematically tempered fifths and the rational hierarchy of the universal scale from which there is no escape, as well as with simple rationally-organized rhythms that can be notated by a dividing-by-two notation system. And they are dramatic, in that they bring about in the minds

of the listeners tensions and relaxations, conflicts and resolutions, and create surprises and paradoxes which are then shown to be rational in their tonal-harmonic nature. The performance of a symphonic work is the acting-out of a drama, working towards a final and conclusive resolution. The relationships between sounds can be thought of as metaphors for human relationships, and the work as a whole can be thought of as a drama of the progress of an individual human soul through opposition, struggle and overcoming. Now opposition, struggle and overcoming are all relationships of a specific kind that seem to be characteristic of western culture. The fact that we can use such words when talking about our most prestigious form of musicking suggests a form of cultural bias of which philosophers of music from Kant to Langer seem unaware.

The language in which these dramas are couched is not that of words but the ancient language of gesture, enormously refined and elaborated. This means, as we have seen, that who or what is struggling and overcoming, who or what, in a word, is relating, is not named or given a location. That in turn means that the level of generality of the mythical paradigmatic events of the struggle is much higher than it is in the narrative form which is almost exactly contemporaneous with the symphony, namely the novel, in which the protagonists are given very specific local habitations and names.

But we should make no mistake. We experience a symphonic work in performance, not as 'structure' or 'form' to be contemplated disinterestedly, but as a dramatic sequence of events in time in which we involve ourselves, and even identify with a protagonist, no less when we are reading a novel. 'Structure' and 'form' are concepts imposed after the event, just as they are when critics talk about the 'structure' or 'form' of a novel. Any competent composer working in the symphonic or sonata style will think of the events of his drama as a linked sequence of tensions and relaxations, and he will place those events in time as carefully as a competent novelist or playwright or film script writer.

To take part in the performance of a work of classical music is to experience a special case of the ritual narrative, in which particular paradigms of change and development in relationships are articulated. I say a 'special case' because not all ways of musicking are dynamic in that way, and very few musical cultures espouse that concept of change and development through opposition, struggle and final resolution which characterizes the musical works of the western symphonic tradition. That tradition is in fact something of a freak among world musics as a whole and even within the history of western musicking. For that reason alone, those theorists and philosophers, and music educators too, who take the western symphonic tradition as a paradigm for how human musicking as a whole ought to be are likely to find themselves aground in the shallows of a rather small lagoon while the great ocean of musicking rolls around them unnoticed.

What I am saying is this: to take part in a musical performance is to take part in a ritual whose relationships mirror, and allow us to explore and celebrate, the relationships of our world as we imagine them to be. If this idea has any validity, then current ideas of music as some kind of code for the communication, or the expression, of emotions, or for the representation of emotions, or even, heaven help us, for the representation of the morphology of emotions, which the term Suzanne Langer (1957) uses, emanating from a composer to each individual listener through the supposedly neutral and transparent medium of the performance, just don't stand up.

I've already tried to show that performance isn't neutral at all but is suffused with a rich collection of meanings. And secondly, to my mind the idea of music, or musicking, as the communication of emotions doesn't jibe with my experience of music, at any rate. I can't remember ever being made happy, or sad, by a happy, or sad, piece of music. I'm not even sure I could identify which was which. And if anyone can please tell me what morphology of the emotions is represented by the Jupiter Symphony I'll eat my copy of the score. Or, for that matter, what morphology of the emotions is represented by Rudolf the Rednosed Reindeer, because that's music too, and needs

explaining.

But at the same time there is a problem with this idea of the emotions. Musical performances without doubt do arouse in us emotions, often powerful ones, and this fact does need some explaining, Gregory Bateson (1987) has an idea that can be useful to us here. He suggests that emotions are not autonomous or free-floating states of mind or feeling, but rather are ways in which our computations -- that's the word he uses -- our computations about relationships resonate in consciousness. If all creatures, from amoebas to human beings to sequoia trees, need some means of getting an answer to the question, How do I relate to this entity?, then clearly they need some means of representing this relationship to themselves. And at least for those more complex creatures that have attained consciousness, it is through the emotional state that is aroused that the relationship is represented.

So that when I music, it isn't any built-in emotional content residing in a piece of music -- in the isolated, self-contained work -- that evokes my response. My response is to the act of performance itself. Even taking part in performances of the same piece can be either an upper or a downer on different occasions, and it isn't just how the players play that makes the difference; that's only part of it. It's how the listeners listen, how the dancers dance, how the place resounds, and how I myself resound with my fellow-musickers. When things come together in the right way, whether it's others playing, or on rare but doubly fortunate occasions, myself, I know the source of those feelings of elation and joy that can produce tears; it's the knowledge that this is how the world really is, and this is how I relate to it. The emotion that is aroused, in fact, is not the reason for the performance, but the sign that the performance is doing its job, the sign that for the duration of the performance the lived-in order has merged with the dreamed-of order.

Not any old performance will do that for us, of course. Only performances in which we, the participants, are empowered to explore and affirm the



relationships of our world will do. That means that the performers must explore the sound-relations as subtly, comprehensively and imaginatively as they are capable, and that the listeners must respond equally. Our emotional involvement in the performance, the extent to which we are moved by it -- or are not moved by it, which may be just as significant -- depends on the extent to which we feel ourselves to be for the duration of the performance part of the pattern which connects as it is modelled by the relationships of the event. Once again, we are not observing these relationships from the outside, but are actively involved, every one of us, in their creation and their maintenance.

The experience of musicking is much richer and more complex than conventional western esthetics allows, since in experiencing the relationships of the performance we are experiencing the relationships of the wider world as we conceive them to be and as we believe they ought to be. The phrase 'as we conceive them to be' is of course a vital modifier, since not everyone perceives the relationships of the world in the same way.

Members of different social and cultural groups, as we know only too well, have different senses of the nature of the pattern which connects, different concepts of how we relate, and ought to relate, to one another and to the world, different senses, in fact, of who they are. That this is true even within a single society or nation-state is a truism; it's the stuff of politics, and we needn't be surprised to find that members of different social groups within that society pattern their musicking in different ways in order to generate sets of relationships that model their ideal. That means not only the style of the sound-relationships they bring into existence or listen to, but also the whole way in which the performance is patterned.

And so we find within a single society not one but innumerable ways of musicking. Of course, as we might expect, there is a good deal of overlap both in musical style and in style of organization of the performance as a whole; head bangers and highbrows have more in common than they would like to believe, since all members of a society or nation state have in common a

number of social experiences and assumptions about relationships. That's what makes them a society in the first place.

But there are also any number of differences, any number of sometimes deliberate differences, as one social group sets itself off from others, or tries to do so, or voices resistance to being defined by more powerful groups. There are even antagonisms and oppositions between ways of musicking, as members of opposing groups use their musicking to affirm, explore and celebrate their opposed senses of who they are.

In any musical performance there are right and wrong ways to behave, right and wrong ways to dress, to speak and to respond to the performers and to one another. To behave at a rock concert in ways which apparently come naturally at Symphony Hall is to invite ridicule and even perhaps hostility -- and vice versa of course. That these norms are felt not as restraints but as natural behaviour shows how lightly they fall on those to whom they represent ideal, or, rather, 'natural' social relationships. Once again, the lived-in order merges with the dreamed-of order.

As I suggested earlier, the differences between, say, a symphony concert and a heavy-metal concert aren't entirely clear-cut. It's very easy to set up simple antithesis between the two ways of musicking, with the first representing the acceptance of the values of the contemporary industrial world, or the scientific world, or the bourgeoisie, or whatever, and the second representing its rejection. That kind of neat antithesis is the basis of a lot of pop sociology of music, but it doesn't bear much resemblance to the real untidy world of human relationships.

There's too much overlap in the two ways of musicking. For example, in both ways we share the experience with strangers, in both we pay for admission, in both the audience is kept apart from the performers, both have a network of stars and superstars whose glamour is part of the deal, both rely on high technology and both use the techniques to advertising and marketing to sell the performances. Not to mention of course the overlaps in the musical

techniques, as demonstrated so brilliantly by Robert Walser (1993) in his book on heavy metal. We have to be aware that both ways of musicking belong to the modern western style of large-scale public music making that is mediated by the passing of money. I say `modern' because the idea of a musical event to which anyone is admitted who can put down the necessary money dates back only as far as the seventeenth century at the earliest, and didn't become the rule until the nineteenth.

An unsympathetic observer might even find a certain hypocrisy in the rock-concert situation. Many popular artists make a great show of their unity and their identity with the audience; I remember an aging and justly famous country star sitting on the edge of the stage and announcing, "We're gonna be here all night!" We all cheered, even though we knew it wasn't gonna happen; neither the theatre management nor the star's handlers would ever allow the performance to run much over its allotted duration. But we appreciated the gesture, and who knows? he might have been wishing just as sincerely as we in the audience did that it might be true. I don't suppose that thoughtful artists enjoy the circus conditions under which they have to work any more than do thoughtful members of the audience.

Again, some popular artists go to the point of behaviour on stage that might be taken as an invitation to sex. But any deluded member of the audience who takes the invitation seriously will soon find him or herself bundled off the stage, and not too gently, by a team of heavies who have been hired for the purpose.

You don't find such pretenses in a symphony concert, of course. Performers at Symphony Hall don't issue sexual invitations -- at least not onstage -- and don't feel any need to pretend the concert is going to go on all night. I said there was a certain hypocrisy in the rock concert. But hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, and the pretenses made in these situations show what those taking part, and that may well mean performers as well as audience, are really looking for in the performance. We can read it perhaps as a ideal of

community and conviviality as an antidote to the anomie of our age. The community of the rock concert may be spurious, but people are not on the whole so silly as not to realize this, and no-one can blame them if they feel that counterfeit community is better than none at all.

In any case, what we need to understand is that those taking part in different kinds of musicking are looking for different kinds of relationships, and we should not project those of one kind of performance on to another kind. Any performance should be judged on its success in affirming, exploring and celebrating those relationships which those taking part feel to be ideal. Only the best musicking of which all those taking part are capable will do that, and only those who are taking part will know for sure what those relationships are. And I believe that the best musicking is always done by those who do the best they can with what they have, however modest what they have may be. And when I say the best musicking, we have to remember that there are many ways of musicking well, and the technical dexterity so prized in western high culture is only one of them.

Then again, the meaning of performing a specific musical work may change over time. For example, when that great drama of the transformation of a soul that we call the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven was performed in its composer's day, that performance was, and was intended as, a powerful revolutionary event, whose revolutionary sound relationships formed a metaphor for the transformation of social relationships. It excited some as a ritual of liberation and scared the daylights out of others. Today it frightens no-one, and cannot do so. The ritual of performing the piece in a concert hall today gives if anything a sense of reassurance, that society's relationships are as they have been and will remain so. Do what we will, we cannot any more breathe revolutionary life into the act of performing the work. It belongs, if you like, to the authorities, not to those who would change society. That may be OK with you, and it may be OK with me, but we need to understand what has happened to the piece and not expect of it any liberatory power. If we want to explore and affirm and celebrate those changed social relationships

that some call liberation -- and not everyone does, of course -- then we have to find our own rituals.

There must be a link between the nature of the musical work being performed and the nature of the performance event, and although that link seems to be flexible, as we see from the example of the Fifth Symphony, it is not infinitely so. Beethoven's great drama has changed hardly at all over the not quite two hundred years since its creation, but the relationships of the event in which it is performed have changed profoundly. The work is a powerful structure which has so far been able to bear the weight of those changed relationships, but we cannot assume that it will go on bearing them forever. Sooner or later that link between the nature of the work and the ritual purposes of performance will break, and when that happens the work will cease to have anything more than antiquarian interest and will drop from the repertory. That moment may well be closer than we think.

Anyway, what the argument comes down to is this: that if we are interested in understanding the nature of musicking, then the basic questions we need to ask of a performance are two, from which a whole constellation of subsidiary questions will then arise. The first is, Whose ideal relationships, whose concept of the pattern which connects, are being celebrated here? And the second is, What is the nature of those relationships, and how are they represented in the performance?

And we can ask those questions not just of formal concert situations, but also about the man in the bus with his walkman clamped over his ears -- he may be listening to anything from Ice Cube to The Ride of the Valkyrie but the gesture of exclusion is the same -- or of the underpaid Spanish cleaning lady singing as she mops the floor, or of the crowd singing patriotic songs at a political rally, or of ol' pals singing bawdy songs at a drunken party, or of the singing congregation in a church -- or, if it come to that, of those taking part in the Ghanaian adzida dance or of the players and listeners to a Balinese gamelan performance, or of the participants in any one of thousands of

different kinds of musicking across the world.

Any attempt to explain the meaning of musicking, and its function in human life, that doesn't at least try to deal with all kinds of human musicking, however strange or primitive or even unpleasant it may appear to our perceptions, just isn't worth the paper it's written on.

And it doesn't matter whether we think of ourselves primarily as teachers or as musicians, we cannot and must not countenance any view of musicking that assumes that any one tradition is intrinsically better than another. All musicking is serious musicking, yes, even singing dirty songs at a drunken party, and all musical events must ultimately be judged on their ritual efficacy, on the subtlety and comprehensiveness with which they empower those taking part to affirm, to explore and to celebrate their concepts of relationships. Within each tradition, each style, there will be some performances where this is done well and others where it is done badly. Only those who have taken the trouble to immerse themselves in the culture, which means the community, will be able to tell which is which. We may well feel, however, and we do have a right to feel, that there are ways of musicking that accord well with our own concepts of ideal relationships and others which do not. The choice of ways of musicking may not always be done consciously or deliberately, but it is never a trivial matter.

You may have gathered that I am not at all sure that musicking as it is practiced today in western concert halls and opera houses accords with my own feeling of how we ought to be relating to one another and to the world. You will of course have your own views on that. I only hope that what I have had to say will help towards framing those questions which are most fruitful in pondering the meaning of the act of musicking. As I used to say to my students, I don't care if you agree with my answers. The important thing is to see that there are questions to be asked.

(c) Christopher Small, Cielo, Texas, April 1995

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