

Musicians United for Superior Education - People Page

Whose Music Do We Teach, Anyway? by **Christopher Small**

for MENC, Washington DC, March 28 1990.

First of all I have to declare an interest -- or rather a lack of interest. I'm not interested in music at all. That's to say, it's a matter of indifference to me what happens to those great musical objects that are performed with such regularity in concert halls and opera houses, not to mention recording and broadcasting studios, and I don't much care whether or not they survive the twenty-first century. And it doesn't seem to me of the least importance whether or not the children in our schools get exposed to them -- and I'm sorry, but that word 'exposure' used in this way always conjures up for me a ridiculous cartoon image of a man opening up his dirty raincoat and flashing the Ninth Symphony or the B minor Mass at startled passers by.

Mind you, you mustn't think I don't love those great musical objects -- well, some of them, anyway -- after all, I grew up among them, and I've come to feel about them as I used to feel about elderly relatives before I became one myself -- but there's a lot of them, some of them masterpieces, to which I just want to say, Oh go away and take your ego some place else. Anyway, in the first place, I believe that either they will survive or they won't, and nothing that any of us in this room can do is going to make the slightest difference to that, and in the second place I think there is something to be treasured even more than the B minor mass or the Ninth Symphony.

What I believe we shall be treasuring above all is not so much any music objects, however splendid they may be, as the music act, musicking, that remarkable form of human encounter in which people come together to make

meanings, to explore and affirm and, yes, celebrate for a while their common humanity and their sense of who they are and of where they belong. Because that's what seems to me the real nature of what is called music and that's what its function is in human life.

Music, in fact, isn't a thing, or even things, at all. It isn't symphonies, or concertos, or operas, or lieder or pop songs; it isn't even melodies and rhythms. It's an action, it's something people do. All those music objects are nothing more than concretions of the human activity, and it is as activity first and foremost that we need to understand music. The trouble is that we get so misled by the tendency of our language to turn ideas and actions into nouns that we come to think of them as things in themselves, and then we attribute to them a life of their own, independent of ourselves, which they don't in fact have. And I believe that it's to a large extent the befuddlement induced by this reification of music that brings us together today to worry over what it is we think we ought to be doing in schools. Music teachers aren't alone in this, of course; the whole of western education is befuddled by reification, the reification of knowledge, but we can't cure that today, and I'm not sure we ever can.

As an antidote to reification, and to help us think a little straighter, I offer you a simple conceptual tool. It's a word you may have noticed I used just now, the word 'musicking', spelt with a CK, which is the present participle of the verb 'to music'. You won't find the verb 'to music' in any English dictionary that I know of, but I'm determined to will it into existence. And since I coined the verb I claim the right to define it, which I do as follows: to music is to take part in a musical performance, not just as performer but also as listener, or as provider of material for performance -- what we call composing -- or in any other way, dancing, for example, should anyone be dancing, or even perhaps taking the tickets at the door or shifting the piano around. 'Musicking' is thus not the same as either 'making music' or 'performing', since both those words apply only to what the performers are doing.

If we think a little about what the word means, we shall find that it's quite rich in its implications. Musicking is something that people do together; all those present are taking part in it, and the fact that the one verb covers everything that is going on in the performance space means that it recognizes no essential difference between what the performers are doing and what the rest are doing, and makes no essential separation between them. So that musicking isn't a matter of composers, or even performers, doing something to, or for, the rest of us, but rather it's all of us doing something together.

What it is we're doing, I believe, is making meanings and giving structure to our experience. As I said just now, a musical performance is an encounter between human beings, and like all human encounters it takes place within a physical and a cultural setting, and those settings have to be taken into account when we ask what meanings are being generated. Musical meaning is thus to be found not just in those musical objects which the western tradition teaches us are its sole repository, but it is to be found in the act of musicking itself. What is being performed is of course significant, but it does not determine the meaning of the event as a whole.

What it is that musical meaning is concerned with is an interesting question. I haven't time to argue the case now -- you can read it if you're interested in my book *Music of the Common Tongue*-- but I believe that it's centered on relationships, relationships between person and person, between person and society, between humanity and the natural world and even humanity and the world of the supernatural, should that be an element in the lives of those present. Through the act of musicking we affirm, we explore and, not least, we celebrate those relationships which we believe are those that hold our universe together, we experience them as we feel they ought to be, and since how we relate is who we are, in doing so we are affirming, exploring and celebrating also our sense of identity, of who we are, and of where we belong. During a musical performance we don't just learn about those relationships but actually experience them through the power of the human and musical relationships that are established in the performance space. That, I believe, is

the reason why when we have been present at a good and satisfying musical performance we feel more fully ourselves, more fully realized, and more in tune with ourselves and with our fellows. We feel we have been afforded a glimpse of how the world really is.

To oversimplify a little, but not a lot, we could say that those who are musicking are saying to themselves, to one another and to anyone else who is listening, THIS IS WHO WE ARE. And that applies no less to those performers and listeners who take part in symphonic and chamber-music and opera performances than it does to those enslaved Africans and their descendants throughout the Americas for whom musicking has always been more than a source of pleasure or even of comfort but, quite literally, a weapon for survival and for the affirmation of humanity and community in the face of a society that has denied both. A symphony concert is in this respect no different from a blues performance or a rock concert, or for that matter a performance by a Balinese gamelan or a West African drum ensemble; each is a ritual which for the members of a specific social group serves to affirm their identity and to reinforce the group's solidarity, and the values which a symphony concert embodies are no more and no less universal than those of any of the others.

All this means that if we want to discover where musical meaning resides we have to ask, not What does this musical work mean?, which is the question to which the overwhelming majority of modern western musical criticism, esthetics and theory is devoted -- and, for that matter, modern music education -- but we ask, rather, What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants? To answer that question we have to explore those extremely complex sets of relationships which are established in the performance space in the course of the performance. We should notice, by the way, that the second question, What does the performance mean?, doesn't negate the first, but rather subsumes it, into a larger and more comprehensive -- and much, much more interesting -- question. And of course, in much human musicking there isn't a written-

down or even a fixed musical work at all, in which case the first question is meaningless.

What we experience during a musical performance, in fact, is a complex set of human interactions and relationships of which the composer's intention is only one element, and not necessarily the most important one. To narrow the experience down to a mere matter of some kind of communication from the composer to each individual in the audience via the supposedly neutral medium of the performance is to do grave violence to the human complexity of musicking, and even to trivialize it. Likewise to assume that a 'work' of music possesses a built-in and stable meaning that is always the same no matter where and when it is performed is to ignore the fact that meaning is created anew every time a musical performance takes place, and that it is created, as I have already suggested, by the interaction of all those who are taking part. I am certain, for example, that to perform the Eroica Symphony in a concert hall today is to create a very different set of human meanings from those which were created when it was first performed in Vienna in 1804. The patterns of organized sounds may be the same -- well, more or less -- but the meaning of the musicking has changed enormously.

It's not only questions of musical meaning that I believe can be approached by thinking of musicking rather than of musical objects; we can consider also in this way the very closely connected question of musical value. Thus, our question ought to be, not, What is the value of this musical work? -- which leads us straight into those sterile arguments of classical versus pop and finally involves us in such non questions as Which is better, a Mozart symphony or a pop song? And it doesn't help matters any to turn the argument on its head and assert, as do some musical liberals, that John Lennon and Paul McCartney, or whoever, are the greatest songwriters since Schubert. Both are concerned with the wrong question, the question, What is the value of this piece of music?

A piece of music, whatever that may be -- and the only thing that we can

really be sure of as a permanent and stable object is the paper that bears the composer's notations -- has no value in itself, or rather, it has value only in so far as it makes possible good performances. Only performance, or to be more correct, only musicking, has value in itself. The question that can help us in our quest for value is, What value has taking part in this performance -- musicking -- at this time, in this place, for the participants? And that's a question to which only the participants themselves can possibly know the answer for sure. The outsider can make some informed guesses, however, provided that he takes the trouble to acquaint himself with the participants' values and is prepared to empathize with them at least a little. Thus, it might be useful to ask the question, Which is better, to take part in a performance of a Mozart symphony or to take part in a pop concert? -- but we should have to be extremely cautious in proposing an answer. Certainly I don't believe there can be any permanent answer, either one way or the other.

In other words, there is no absolute or eternal or unchanging value in musicking; there is only value as it is perceived by the participants at the time -- although that in itself represents what seems to me a permanent and unchanging value, which is the value that we put on human beings and on their ability to make up their own minds. The principal criterion of musical value is, of what use is the musicking to the participants in affirming, exploring and celebrating their sense of how the universe is organized and of how they relate to it. And that means that there is no one kind of musicking -- no one musical tradition, if you like -- that is inherently superior to any other. All are to be treasured to the extent that they serve that important human purpose.

Please don't mistake what I'm saying. I'm not saying there is no place for judgments of quality in musicking, that anything goes. On the contrary -- only the most subtle and imaginative and comprehensive exploration of the relationships between the sounds will do to form a focus for the occasion, and that's a task that calls for all the skill, clearheadedness and devotion that both performers and listeners can bring to it. I've never yet heard of any musical

culture that failed to distinguish sharply between what's good musicking and bad, between who musics well and who badly.

And speaking of devotion, we mustn't be misled by the conventions of the concert hall into thinking that anyone who isn't sitting still and quiet isn't devoted, or that musicians who clown around as they play aren't playing with seriousness and concern for what they do. You can be just as devoted to the musicking when you're dancing to it -- an African, as well as many Afro-Americans, would say that there was something missing if you weren't -- or even if you're screaming at the musicians or just boogie-ing around and having a good time. It all depends on what the participants want from the musicking. A gospel singer in a black Sanctified church would wonder what he or she was doing wrong if the congregation sat still and quiet, and I saw just that happen to Ornette Coleman in the beautiful Palace of Music in Barcelona, when a packed and enthusiastic audience of reserved Catalans sat still and quiet throughout his performance -- they just didn't know how to respond, and his performance suffered for it.

The point is that every musical tradition, every musical culture, every musical genre, whatever you want to call it, but every distinct way of approaching musicking, has developed around the needs of its participants to affirm, explore and celebrate their sense of relationships, their sense, in fact, of who they are, and every performance must be judged according to how well it fulfills that function -- and that includes even the most apparently frivolous and commercial brands of western popular music. If making music purely for money automatically resulted in bad musicking we'd have to send Mozart's Requiem to the trashcan for a start.

That means also, of course, that no-one can tell anyone else what kind of musicking they ought to be engaging in. Well, people can try, and often do, most notoriously of course in schools, but it's rare indeed to find that they can make it stick; much more likely is that they will end up by having a destructive effect on the musicality of the victim. That's because of a hidden

sylogism that classically trained music teachers can practice on their pupils if they're not extremely careful. It goes like this: This -- meaning 'our' music, classical music -- is the only real music. You're not interested, or proficient, in our music. Therefore you're not really musical. As I said, it's very destructive, and if you believe, as I do, that everybody, every normally endowed human being, is born with the gift of music no less than with the gift of speech, then you will find such practices reprehensible, to say the least.

So if you ask me, What is good music? I can only reply, that it is music that is played and listened to with the utmost skill and devotion that players and listeners and dancers can bring to it, while bad music is that which is not.

All musicking is serious musicking when it is engaged in seriously, and those who use the term 'serious' music when they mean 'classical' or 'concert' music should be made to stay after school and write out five hundred times 'I must not confuse solemnity with seriousness'. I have been to concerts that featured some of the greatest works of the symphonic tradition, given by superstar orchestras, conductors and soloists, that to me, for all their solemn gestures of profundity, were as empty and as frivolous as anything by Wham! or whoever is currently top of the peanut league. I am tempted to say, more so, because at least with honest good-time musicking there is a good time to be had, which is a serious and important human activity. And at least Wham! don't compound their commercialism with hypocrisy. And conversely, any performance in which the performers are doing their honest best, no matter how elementary their level of skill may be, can give us a glimpse of beauty and put us in touch with that pattern which connects the whole of the cosmos.

If you ask me what ought to be the content of public school music, I am tempted just to say 'Musicking' with an enigmatic smile, and cop out at that. But I really can't leave it there, because there is something that puzzles and worries me about the musical scene, and especially about musical education, in the United States as I have encountered it.

It's this. The United States is the point of origin of one of the most powerful

musical cultures in the world today. That culture comes from the crossing of two great musical traditions, or perhaps we should say, groups of traditions, those of Africa and those of Europe, as black and white musicians encountered one another in the Americas during and after the period of slavery. It has a respectably long history; for nearly five hundred years now it has been a tool of survival for poor black and white people alike, and during the present century it has expanded and proliferated until today we can confidently claim that it is this, and not those testaments from the European past on which modern classical concert life is based, that is the major form of musicking in the modern west. Certainly it is within this tradition that the vast majority of Americans, black and white and all shades in between, find their means of affirming, exploring and celebrating their sense of who they are. Its development has been a cultural achievement of the first order.

And it doesn't exist in straight opposition to the western classical tradition, but forms more of a continuum with it. This shouldn't surprise us, since what we call today classical music was among its many formative influences. What opposition there is comes from the other direction, from the school and the conservatory and the symphony orchestra. To the musician in the Afro-American tradition Bach, Beethoven and Mozart aren't the opposition, but colleagues, perhaps more alive than they are to your average symphony orchestra musician. Why shouldn't they be? -- after all they were great improvising musicians too. And when Chuck Berry told Beethoven to roll over and tell Chaikovsky the news, Beethoven would probably have been one of the first to appreciate the joke. Maybe he's getting a bit tired of hearing his symphonies endlessly repeated by bored orchestras before motionless and impassive audiences in sterile concert halls, and would like to roll over and cede a little space to musicking of a different kind.

In any case, to this outsider it seems strange that in the very heartland of this powerful and endlessly varied musical culture he should find that those who are charged with developing the musicality of young people should place so much value on it, and should cling instead, with a tenacity that looks a little like

desperation, to the great works of the European past. I say this in no spirit of criticism, but simply as an attempt to bring what I was saying earlier about meaning and about value in musicking into the realm of practical musical and educational politics.

Well, like the old song, this story has no moral, and it probably has no end. Maybe it only goes to show that you needn't worry too much about the fate of your beloved classical masterpieces. What is to be treasured is not so much created things as the creative act, and human creativity is inexhaustible. I do not think your job as music teachers is to be guardians of past masterpieces but is rather to treasure and encourage that creativity and that musicality which is part of the universal human birthright, and you needn't be too concerned in what forms it manifests itself. Your charges will know better than you do what they need. But I think you should count yourselves lucky that there exists to hand an idiom for the creative work. Take it and use it, and you, your students and the idiom will all be the richer for it.

Sitges, March 1990.