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Music: An Instrument for Social Renewal

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A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Philosopher John Dewey, in his book *Art as Experience*, writes of the intimate connection art once had to everyday living in the religious and civic rituals of song, drama, and dance; in the everyday use of beautiful objects made by skilled craftsmen; and in the connection and pride citizens took in their public buildings. He mourns the modern movement of art into galleries, museums, and concert halls. Dewey thought that art could provoke society to make fundamental changes (Dewey, 1934). If we are to believe Dewey in his view of the potential art holds, a focus on urban renewal, then, does not go far enough. Let us make a call for social renewal, which would also include urban renewal in its usual, economic development sense but would include other aspects of renewal as well: a commitment to civic engagement, a thoughtful critical approach to art and to the world, and an effort toward the true spirit of community.

In my own family, music has radically altered our lives in just such a Deweyan way. It gives our lives focus, pleasure, and provides a way of life that is, if not exactly secure, certainly not impossible. My husband, a classical flutist, leads the Calumet Chamber Musicians, which offers quarterly concerts in Northwest Indiana and the South Suburbs. Our sons are musicians as well. Our older son lives in Los Angeles and makes his living working in film music. Our younger son is a jazz drummer who lived and performed in New York City and now is studying for his Master's in music education at Indiana University, Bloomington. Because of the importance music plays in our lives, we think and talk about music and its role in society often. Can music be used by a community to not only renew itself economically, but intellectually, socially and spiritually as well? I would like to think that it can.

Scattered programs are showing how this might happen. *The New Yorker's* music critic, Alex Ross, describes a music education program in Rhode Island developed by a small group of chamber musicians called the Providence String Quartet. Led by violist Sebastian Ruth, who studied the philosophy of music education at Brown University, the group has set up shop in a low-income

neighborhood storefront. They give lessons to children in the community under the auspices of a non-profit music school called Community MusicWorks. Ruth rejects the idea of “outreach.” “We’re not searching for genius, for ‘diamonds in the rough,’” he says in the article. “We’re relating music-making to the community”(Ross, 2006, p. 86). To that end, they and their students play Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms not only at colleges and museums, but at the community center, the soup kitchen, an assisted-living center, an indie-rock club, and city hall. They perform alone and with their students, and take them with their parents—many of them immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Liberia, Cambodia, among other places--on outings to concerts of touring orchestras. The program is so successful, over 130 students are on a waiting list to take music lessons at the school.

In his classes at Brown, Ruth studied the idea, put forth by philosophers and educators such as Dewey, Paul Woodford, and Maxine Greene, that art has the potential to change society and thus strengthen democracy. In the *New Yorker* article, Ruth explains: “Maxine Greene talks about the arts creating openings, this mysterious clearing in people’s lives, so they walk out of the forest and can breathe. Maybe, at that moment, music becomes a huge part of their lives. Or maybe they use the clearing to see themselves in a new light, and go on to do something different. It could be any kind of music, could be any other art form” (Ross, 2006, p. 88).

Harvard scholar Howard Gardner also believes music education can enrich our lives. In a keynote address to a conference of music educators held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Gardner, author of the books *The Unschooled Mind* and *The Disciplined Mind*, commented that it is not difficult to get children to memorize facts, which is what most state-mandated tests require of them. The difficulty is in getting them to understand, to analyze, and to apply the principles they have learned—in other words, to become disciplined thinkers. We can gain this understanding through the disciplines of science, mathematics, history, ethics, and the arts (Gardner, 1999).

Gardner refers to the disciplines as our “mental furniture.” They are “the ways in which we think about questions and issues that are important to human beings” (Gardner, 1999, p. 10). To acquire them takes time, thought, and immersion in a subject. Since music is one way that can help students discipline their thinking, the fact that it is vanishing from our schools comes at a great cost.¹

Another person who assesses the current educational climate in like manner is Daniel Barenboim, music director of the Berlin State Opera and outgoing director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. “We don’t really give our children real education, but at best information, and that is why words have lost their meaning and words that are full of content have become pejorative,” says Barenboim, who was selected to give the 2006 British Broadcasting Corporation’s Reith lectures, the first conductor in the lecture series’ 58-year history. In lecture one, delivered in London, Barenboim discusses the benefit of music education for everyone, not just those who wish to get professional training in order to become performers. Music can be a pleasant source of entertainment, but that is a small role it plays.

“My contention is,” he says, “that music has another weapon that it delivers to us, if we want to take it,

and that is one through which we can learn a lot about ourselves, about our society, about the human being, about politics, about society, about anything that you choose to do. I can only speak from that point of view in a very personal way, because I learn more about living from music than about how to make a living out of music” (Barenboim, 2006, Lecture 1).

In lecture two, at Chicago’s Symphony Center, Barenboim mourns the way that, even from birth, we neglect our aural abilities in favor of the visual. Making matters worse, commerce uses music for non-musical purposes such as advertisements, which leads to an increasing ability to tune out altogether. In one example Barenboim cites, a section of Mozart’s *Requiem* (Mass for the Dead) was used by a plumbing manufacturer for a commercial to sell toilets until it was withdrawn following complaints from viewers. Music is piped into supermarkets, hotels, or clothing stores to create a mood, to make customers relax. The ubiquity of it makes us insensitive and, indeed, senseless to it. His point is that classical music becomes accessible, not through having it available through a sound system as we shop or do our daily chores, but through being interested enough to acquire more knowledge about it (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 2).

This power of music is evident in his project called the West Eastern Divan, named after a set of poems by Goethe that was inspired when the great poet became interested in Arabic culture. Barenboim, who is Jewish and spent part of his childhood in Israel, and the Palestinian scholar Edward Said in 2000 started an orchestra comprised of Jewish and Arab students from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. Orchestral and chamber music, Barenboim says, are inherently collaborative efforts. Musicians must do two things at once to be effective: they must express themselves and they must listen to what the others are playing. The implications for communicating and negotiating are obvious.

The orchestra’s goal, he says, is to bring people who are normally separated together to make music: “In this workshop, we were trying to start a dialogue, to take a single step forward, and to find common ground” (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 3). Against all arguments that the project is overly simplistic and idealistic--that such an orchestra cannot do much in the face of guns and bombings--Barenboim keeps it going. Speaking at his fourth lecture in the series, which took place before a mainly Palestinian audience in Jerusalem, he explains that Palestinians who do not have equality with Israelis in the political sphere meet in the orchestra as equals. Practicing and performing with each other gives both sides an opportunity to show the other that they can converse on an equal footing with the hope that that ability will carry over outside of music. Barenboim notes: “Music in this case is not an expression of what life is, but an expression of what life could be, or what it could become” (Barenboim, 2006, lecture 5). What the Israeli/Palestinian conflict desperately needs are people from both sides who will talk to each other, who know how to listen. Perhaps one day leaders will emerge who have had the experience of performing a Beethoven symphony together and, having that necessary scaffolding in place—those skills of conversing and listening--will be able to start

negotiations in good faith.

Besides education, music performance itself has the potential to inform and broaden the way we think. Traditionally in the U.S., the arts have been trumpeted as the means to “sell” a city or a region: “[C]ulture has become as necessary an adornment and advertisement for a city today as pavements or bank-clearances. It’s Culture, in theaters and art-galleries and so on, that brings thousands of visitors to New York every year...” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 398). The speaker is Chum Frink, a fictional businessman in Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, attempting to drum up support for his idea of establishing an orchestra in the fictional town of Zenith. Lewis is lampooning this boosterism of art for commercial purposes. Frink continues: “Pictures and books are fine for those that have the time to study ‘em, but they don’t shoot out on the road and holler ‘this is what littleold Zenith can put up in the way of Culture.’ That’s precisely what a Symphony Orchestra does do” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 398). The passage is quoted by Joseph Horowitz in his book, *Classical Music in America*. Regional boosterism aside, there are other reasons for supporting performances of an orchestra or chamber music group. One of the most profound is to allow people a chance to engage with serious music, to keep it, as Gardner says, “in the lives of human beings” (Gardner, 1999, p. 20).

To keep music vital, it is as important for orchestras and chamber music groups to perform works of living composers as it is to repeat the beloved masters. Doing so is risky, since newly-composed music does not have the benefit of having withstood the test of time. It is necessary, however, that conductors and music directors undertake this risk. One such person who did and succeeded was Harvey Lichtenstein of the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). In 1960s New York, Lichtenstein became executive director of the BAM and transformed it from a lackluster venue to a vibrant neighborhood arts center that provided a performance space for the works of living composers such as Philip Glass, John Adams, and Steve Reich. This tactic was risky and depended on an audience who was willing to attend and support new and challenging programming. Lichtenstein was able to develop such an audience, and because he offered programming that was being done nowhere else in New York City, he was able to attract concertgoers from Manhattan as well. According to Horowitz, “[Lichtenstein] proved that one man can make a difference in determining what opportunities are offered gifted performing artists and their actual and potential audiences” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 528).

Northwest Indiana carries on with its own attempts to make a difference in people’s lives. The Calumet Chamber Musicians have collaborated the past three years with South Shore Arts to present concerts in the Munster gallery. In January, 2005, it presented a concert related to the exhibit *Valor: The Warsaw Uprising of 1944*. “Heritage, Refuge and Music,” a program of works by musicians who suffered the ravages of war-torn Europe or who found refuge from it by escaping to the United States, combined the utter devastation of photographs of the uprising with haunting music of physical loss, spiritual disintegration, and, ultimately, hope and redemption, leading to a stirring emotional event many times more intense than if either art form had been experienced alone.

Another Northwest Indiana organization attempting to offer opportunities for social renewal through the arts is Michelle Golden's Books, Brushes & Bands for Education. Over several years Golden, a region artist and arts administrator whose enthusiasm for the possibilities of language, music, and visual art energizes anyone in her orbit, has given area students a chance to write and design books, perform in choirs and after-school band programs, and participate in poetry workshops and a contest culminating in *Poeticize* (in collaboration with Dr. William Buckley, IU Northwest English Department), a beautifully bound book of the best entries. Finally, Emerson School for Visual and Performing Arts, in Gary, gives students in that city a chance to immerse themselves and excel in music, dance, theater, and the visual arts.

Dewey makes a case for art with an analogy to a garden. Flowers can be enjoyed, he says, without knowing anything about soil conditions, moisture, and seeds. However, it takes *knowing* about those things to *understand* flowers (Dewey, 1934, p. 12). Understanding music, then, is to learn about it. We can help that happen through educating ourselves and our children, and attending performances--those that speak not only to the pleasure of listening once more to a piece well-loved, but those that open us to experience new music, music that pushes us to the limits of our understanding.

After all, art teaches us by adjusting our relationship to the outside world. Art cannot teach overtly; to try to do so is to turn it into propaganda. When art becomes didactic, it loses its effectiveness. When art works best, it gets dispersed into the culture like a therapeutic mist that infuses our imagination with possibility and lets us breathe more deeply. Art teaches by putting us in touch with our imagination and with our deepest desires and emotions. We can support it and enhance it so that it leads us out of the urban/industrial forest and into a garden of beauty and delight. If the moral function of art, as Dewey says, is "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive" (Dewey, 1934, p. 325), then let us promote art not just for urban renewal, but for much more—for the renewal of society and our individuality, if only we are curious and courageous enough to risk it.

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¹ The fact that music programs, along with other arts, are being cut from school curriculums can be found in numerous studies, among them *The Sound of silence--the unprecedented decline of music education in California public schools: a statistical review*, which found that, between 1999 and 2004, the percentage of California public school students involved in music education courses declined by 50%, the largest decline of any subject. The Wisconsin Education Association Council notes reduced hours for arts programs, along with teacher reductions and program cuts, in the Milwaukee and Madison public schools, among other communities. In Northwest Indiana, non-school arts organizations are supplementing programs in the Hammond and East Chicago public schools.