

14: *Involvement and Enjoyment:*

MUSIC AS EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE: WHEN WORDS CAN'T DO JUSTICE

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TALKING ABOUT MUSIC IS LIKE dancing about architecture, as the anonymous saying goes. It's often difficult to find and express appropriate symbolic communication (such as body movement or even words), which often has personal, relative meaning to objectively represent some aspect of our world that we all share. How does choreographed body movement relate to architecture, or spoken or written language to the pure objectivity of music? Language and symbols, as poetic and beautiful as they can be, can take us only so far in communicating some aspect of our world that is both personal but yet shared by us all.

We tend to alter the very things at which we marvel when we represent them with second- or third-order symbols, such as words, pictures, or notation. Those symbols, which often are personal and familiar to us, are shaped by our upbringing, environment, experience, cognitive abilities, and many other variables. These are the reasons why some people prefer the music of Bach and others like The Beatles; some gravitate toward Gothic architecture and others, Romanesque; or some prefer Coke and others, Pepsi.

We appreciate beauty in visual art and the art of music as it conceptually represents an event, person, idea, emotion, or place in the real world. The Barrios musical masterpiece, "Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios" ("Alms for the Love of God") or Caravaggio's "Doubting Thomas," which the artist painted in 1602, represent the artists' interpretation of some momentary event in life.

Nearly everyone viewing the “Doubting Thomas,” which shows an incredulous Disciple Thomas touching the spear wound in the side of Jesus as others look on, comes away with practically identical impressions. However, listening to “Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios” will evoke different feelings, emotions, thoughts, and memories for each of us because of the words we use to describe them. Therefore, we can argue that music often can transcend the original intent of the composer or interpretation of the artist.

Over the centuries, people have learned the ways music and the arts represent interpreted reflections of life and that they could participate in shaping those reflections through acquiring musical expertise and performance experience. Except perhaps for poetry, the written word implicitly imprisons the writer while the spoken word handicaps the orator because of built-in conceptual and contextual boundaries (all language is a second-order representation of something) that sometimes are difficult if not impossible to cross. But the artist and musician provide a glimpse of the nature of reality, the splendors of heaven, or the torments of hell (and sometimes all three at once) because they are not as restrained by such conceptual bondage.

For example, Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” is one of the most beautiful and at the same time sorrowful pieces of music ever written. “Adagio” is the second movement from Barber’s String Quartet, Op. 11, written in 1936. This strikingly beautiful composition, written in “arch” form, moves forward in a step-wise melodic fashion that weaves inversions and variations to create an unforgettable aural experience. It is often the music of choice at funerals for heads of state and dignitaries because of its heavy emotion and somber feeling of loss, which no doubt is why it was selected as part of the soundtrack for the movie, *Platoon*.

We know that music can help restore a sense of self-identity and relatedness in therapeutic approaches that reconnect patients to their personhood to a place beyond their illness. The transcendent nature of music elevates patients into higher realms and can facilitate intuitive realizations of their sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. The Most Reverend Michael Mayne, Dean Emeritus of

Westminster, writes that music has the capacity to expose us to a kind of beauty and hopefulness about the human race that cannot be expressed in any other terms. When disaster befalls individuals—or communities—music can therefore serve as a catalyst by which people can renew their own sense of identity and worth, and help restore their connectedness with others and perhaps a power beyond themselves.

In a previous book, *It's All About HYMN*, I wrote about a friend who was visiting his hometown in the midwest of the United States shortly after much of the town was devastated by a series of tornadoes. He recalled one scene in which congregation members of a church that was destroyed had gathered among the rubble to comfort each other and salvage what they could from the debris. Young and old alike, they broke out into spontaneous, joyous unaccompanied song with the old hymn, “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.” These people embraced the hymn because it served as a connection to each other through that sense of community. While many of those individuals may have lost homes or loved ones in the storm, their connectedness as a “community” remained intact, which helped maintain—perhaps even strengthen—each individual’s unique contribution to it.

WHEN MUSIC TRANSCENDS THE LIMITATION OF LANGUAGE

In 2006, I was commissioned by a Christian disaster relief group affiliated with the Samaritan’s Purse organization to provide original music for a five-minute video presentation. The production was to show how this organization was helping people rebuild homes and lives along the Mississippi Gulf Coast that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The video production was running behind schedule, and I had to create the music based on a verbal description of the imagery that was to be shown to audiences. The first portion of the video was to depict scenes of destruction in the area and the emotional despair on the faces of people who lost everything. The second half of the video was to show people from the relief group building homes and caring for their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. There would be no vocal narrative for the project.

The challenge for me was to convey in a musical expression what words would simply fail to capture, even though I had no direct visual imagery to

work from for this project (though the cable news stations filled that void with non-stop coverage of the disaster). I ended up with two original pieces to accompany the video presentation: one for the first half of the video, and another for the second half. The titles for the pieces sprang forth on their own with virtually no conscious forethought. I was hoping to avoid something I've seen all too often: titles for such projects appearing contrived or artificial, thereby dulling the luster of the final product.

How would I communicate through the guitar the fear, loss, and uncertainty these people experienced, and ultimately the sense of being genuinely loved and cared for by strangers? The imagery that came to mind immediately was the passage in Matthew 8:24-27, when a great storm came upon Jesus and the Disciples who were in the middle of the Dead Sea in a small wooden ship. The Disciples were afraid for their lives, but Jesus was asleep in the ship during the maelstrom. When they awakened him, he rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.

After some experimentation for the bridge section, which transitions from a major to a minor key, I incorporated a few subtle dissonant chords and used an arpeggiated diminished-seventh chord up the neck of the guitar in a crescendo fashion to express the imagery of fear and uncertainty. To resolve the emotional tension, I return the listener to the major key after a second pass through the bridge section, to suggest a sense of reassurance and hope after the storm has passed. The title for this first piece just had to be "Let Not Your Heart be Troubled."

The second piece expresses the kind-hearted nature and concern for others displayed by the folks in this relief organization and all Good Samaritans, and is aptly entitled, "Song for the Samaritans." The major key provides a calming yet subtle uplifting mood, which parallels the visual imagery in the video.

I had just one opportunity to view the finished video only minutes before its premier for the relief group and their church congregation sponsors, and to pace my two original compositions with the video, which were to be performed live. Fortune favors the brave, and maybe a little divine providence helped, but the video finished *exactly* as the tones from the last chord echoed in the auditorium at four minutes and fifty seconds.

FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND

Several years ago, my very good friend and co-worker Bill was killed in a horrible motorcycle accident. His death came particularly hard for those of us who worked with him and knew him for so many years. Bill was the quintessential Harley-Davidson rider: Six-feet-two-inches tall, 300 lbs, long greying hair in a ponytail, and sporting a Billy Gibbons ZZ Top-style beard. His physical appearance intimidated people who didn't know him, but his was a gentle, kind, and compassionate spirit rarely encountered these days. Bill enjoyed listening to me play and practice during lunch hours in the glass-and-stone lobby of the building where we worked. Bill thought the acoustics were amazing there and added a sense of life to the music.

Bill's wife asked me if I would play just one piece at his memorial service. She told me my arrangement of the old hymn, "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" was one of Bill's favorite, so on a Saturday afternoon in a standing-room-only crowd in a large Masonic Lodge in Dripping Springs, Texas, I performed my rendition of the piece, which for such an occasion, can evoke an emotional response. And that it did.

But Bill wouldn't have wanted everyone in such a state. He was one of the smartest, funniest people I had ever met, and I knew I had to do something musically to lighten the mood. Many had already related funny stories about Bill, and that helped us all forge our way through the grief by thinking *Bill would have loved that!* So, it was my turn.

Bill was from Alabama and everyone who knew him was aware of his expert knowledge of the history of the south, particularly the Civil War, which he called the "war of Yankee aggression." When I had finished the last bar of "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," I immediately transitioned into an arrangement of "Dixie." The mood of the room changed instantly because everyone understood the musical message that piece related about Bill. People were laughing through their tears and grief because of that powerful musical association—when words couldn't do justice—that served as a soothing, healing balm for their wounded spirits. While I may have involved people in the music, it was the music that in turn reminded them of their involvement in Bill's life, and how much enjoyment he brought to friend and stranger alike.

Bill would have loved that. §§

