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Beyond Beauty, Brilliance, and Expression: On Reimagining Jazz and Classical Music Performance Training & Reconnecting with the General Public

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JOY, PLEASURES, and A GROWING DISCOMFORT

Many of us classical music performers grew up spending years apprenticing with master musicians, feeding an appetite for music-making that was gloriously insatiable. We quickly came to relish great artists and works from the past few centuries in classical music and the past half-century or so in jazz. The attraction was as inevitable as it was natural. Those two eras, after all, coincided with the development of extraordinary compositional and performance technique and produced musical works (and performances) revealing moments of profound splendor and brilliance.

The fact that the increasing virtuosity and complexity of these two music genres coincided with their slowly decreasing popularity within the general public this past century didn't seem so much a fault of the music as a testament to its increasing sophistication. And our performance training – informed by tradition and focusing with rapt intent on beauty of tone, brilliance in technique, and clarity and authenticity in expression – continued to largely ignore the awkward issue of our music's decreasing presence in the lives of those around us. Whether we were composers or performers, it was clear to us that we had a heroic charge: to propel traditions that were exceptional in their aesthetic nuance and historical significance. And we have been proud to continue that work, promoting art for art's sake as possible, and graduating performers with often remarkable playing skills. We have done that even while being part of an educational system and institutions endlessly ravenous for more and better pupils to fill ensembles, courses, programs, and faculty loads.¹

The joy and pleasures of classical and jazz music have been virtually boundless for most of us 'in the know.' And for those of us fortunate to work within educational communities boasting exceptional performance series, that joy is ongoing. I think of a number of standout performances within my own conservatory this past year. The breathtaking honesty and intensity of Gidon Kremer and Kremerata Baltica. The spellbinding inventiveness of Cecile McLorin Salvant. Most readers will have their own examples.

All this said, I must admit a serious discomfort, one that springs from ever-increasing tension between these joyful experiences and two stubborn realities: the ever-increasing employment challenges facing our graduating classical music and jazz performance students, and the relative unpopularity of these two musical genres within the general public. In considering the issues, I've come to an uncomfortable conclusion. Beyond all their extraordinary splendor, the cultures surrounding our two music performance disciplines—the 'art music' genres long privileged in our conservatories and college/university music departments—have come to contain a small and pernicious quality. That pernicious quality, one further exacerbated by the peculiar pressures within our higher education system as outlined above, might be described as follows. Thrilled by beauty and brilliance and by the aesthetic experiences accessible to us fortunate few, we increasingly

adopted an attitude that cared little for one additional critical component of musicianship (at least as understood long ago): the interest to connect with and move the average general-public listener. The cost of that inherited mindset among both composers and performers, of our 'not caring if you listen,' has been nothing short of devastating.

Consider, never in human history have people had easier access to music. As studies such as the 2016 Music Consumer Insider Report and Nielsen Music 360 Study of 2015 have revealed, a large portion (over 90%) of the U.S. population listens to music beyond 20 hours each week, and young people are especially engaged with music. While there is broad engagement with music, there are two musical genres which have increasingly moved to the periphery of ordinary life; the very two genres that I would argue have become unusually comfortable ignoring emotional connection between music performer and the general-public listener. It should come as no surprise when we learn (as we do annually now from the Nielsen Music Year End Report) that public consumption of classical or jazz music recordings typically hovers at around 1% of such consumption. As the jazz pianist Bill Anschell bluntly explained with only slight exaggeration, "People who want to play jazz actually outnumber those who enjoy or even tolerate it, let alone pay to hear it." The decline has been a long time coming. Classical music appears to have represented around 25% of all albums sold in the United States in 1950, and jazz represented approximately 35% of sales for record companies in the early 1960s.

In the more recent past, our schools have increasingly responded to the above-named dichotomy with tweaks to curriculum: new courses for students in social media branding, marketing, entrepreneurship! And many of us leaders have replied to the unpopularity issue with a sigh, lamenting the many external reasons jazz and classical music have become tied for least popular musical genre. We can list many culprits: diminishing attention spans; the proliferation of entertainment options for audiences; the more sophisticated (i.e., slick) use of marketing and promotion by popular music agencies and artists; waves of anti-intellectualism; the lack of our own attention to marketing; and worse-than-ever level of pre-college education (including general music education).

Many of our performance-oriented artist faculty have been less concerned regarding the above-named realities. Their viewpoint is understandable. Buoyed by the success that they and their most fortunate student performers have had and continue to have as performers within major venues, buoyed by a well-developed and reliable audience base for traditional programming within their own institutions, and having in front of them a repertoire and discipline worthy of life-long examination, why should they care much about issues of general popularity or the employment marketplace facing the typical graduating music performer? It's a question that tuition-paying-parents of those same graduating students are more than happy to answer.²

WAYS WE IN HIGHER EDUCATION MAY HELP?

I sense that there are ways we in higher education could help this state of affairs; ways that we could fundamentally reshape general BM/MM/DMA performance degrees not only to continue the development and promotion of exceptional artistry (we MUST stand for that), but also to help strengthen the orientation of our young musicians towards connection-making.³

The following list of strategies is but a starting point. And to be clear, I suspect that even their full employment would not radically improve the popularity of our musical genres or ease the tough employment landscape facing our graduating students anytime soon. Given the state of things, however, we must do still more to move things in the right direction.

To begin with, our music schools would need to reimagine the very concept of musicianship; enlarging our shared working definition to include not only beauty of sound, brilliance of technique, and authenticity of expression, but also a central concern with connecting with general-public listeners. As we're reminded weekly, this additional concern is being embraced by an extraordinary array of forward-looking professional ensembles and companies – consider the experiments of California Symphony or Opera Philadelphia for just two recent examples.

Along similar lines, we would need to reshape our apprenticeship model, ensuring that evaluations in our BM/MM/DMA performance degrees—whether end-of-semester juries or recitals—reflected that larger understanding of musicianship, focused not only on how well a student sounded and played/sang, but to what extent she was able to connect with and engage members of the general public in and through her musical performance. I think here of teachers like Midori who often push students to perform not in a recital hall but in unorthodox public spaces and in front of people typically unfamiliar with our music genres. (Even this approach—hardly radical to be sure—remains far outside the norm in our conservatories and music schools.) Yes, we would need to develop new evaluation methods. Our music schools have multiple ways of measuring how well a student sounds and plays/sings, but we certainly don't have robust ways to measure a student's achievement in "attracting and engaging members of the general public." Creating a relevant evaluation tool would be exceptionally difficult, but likely not impossible. Of course, some may be scandalized by the idea of attempts to assess something so extraordinarily personal and subjective. But if we are to evaluate music performance in the academy (and it seems we must), shouldn't we be taking honest steps to evaluate what has long been one of the chief aims of music making, namely, the ability to connect with and move a typical fellow human being?

I beg the reader's patience to consider an anecdote that might illuminate this further. A few months ago, I was chatting with a musician I've admired for decades. Beyond being one of the leading jazz and classical performers of our time, he directs a top conservatory-based jazz program. While talking about the latest crop of new students, he paused to reflect on one audition this year that particularly stood out for him and his faculty. He described (with ongoing fascination) what happened at the end of that audition. I paraphrase. "My faculty always have a lot to say. But after this kid played, well, no one was saying a thing. And I asked him—this kid from [a northern European country]—'where did you learn to play like that?' He talked about having grown up listening to various recordings of major jazz artists and feeling the music as they felt it. I asked him again, 'Yeah, but how did you learn to play like that?' The kid finally explained that for the past few years, he and a couple of his friends would regularly go to nursing homes and other small venues and perform in front of people in his community." The point was clear: this student's performance evidenced more than just beauty and brilliance and skill in expression; it revealed a richly developed sensitivity to connecting with fellow human beings. It was a sensitivity made possible by his pursuit of a path far outside the norm of how we train and evaluate musicians. It is precisely that quality which I am suggesting we help promote, including (especially) during moments of formal assessment.

Related to the strategy above, we could reshape hiring practices. Hiring decisions for typical performance faculty could increasingly incorporate questions such as the following: "How will this applicant strengthen our ability to train musicians who might not only perform brilliantly but also connect with general members of the public?" Our investment in strengthening connection to members of a diverse population would also require a greater commitment to diversity and inclusion. (Yes, classical music in particular continues to have a diversity problem.) And a relevant hiring question would certainly be "How will this faculty or staff applicant help strengthen our commitment to excellence, including inclusion and diversity?"

It might be too obvious to state, but our efforts to tackle this issue seriously would likely fail without us better ensuring that performance students received regular mentorship from and had access to meaningful internships with artists (both regular faculty and external professionals) who were not only committed to the heritage and future of their musical genre, but were also skilled in effectively building programs of great music (whether old or new) to engage members of the general public—from young to old—where they were. Those locations might include places such as schools or retirement homes, community centers or hospitals for children, pubs or libraries. I mention children for a specific reason. For too long, our conservatories and music schools have perceived the hard work of imagining and creating meaningful musical experiences for families and children as—at best—a distraction from the central work of developing artistry. There are many artists who are making strides in this area. One thinks, for example, of Orli Shaham's Baby Got Bach concert series, the family-oriented performances delivered by groups such as the extraordinary reed quintet Calefax, or the outreach efforts for younger people by Jazz at Lincoln Center. Given the need to build audiences, and the paucity of music in public schools across this country, it's past time we helped more of our undergraduate and graduate students develop skills relevant to the joyful and difficult work of connecting with young audiences. We should not assume that all students have an interest in focusing on children or family programming, but more of our students deserve an opportunity to develop skillfulness in that area.

Advancement towards the above goal would probably also require us to be more diligent in building strategic and three-way partnerships between our schools and those artists and arts presenting organizations that share a dedication to beauty, brilliance, and music's capacity to communicate to and move the person with no classical/jazz experience or training. There are many such presenting organizations and artists around. As my own conservatory has learned working with certain artists and the nearby Washington Performing Arts or the Ryuji Ueno Foundation, that type of triple partnership provides many benefits, ranging from opportunities for more authentic connection-making with regional communities to financial advantages for all.

We would likely also need to make hiring and funding decisions for music ensembles with a greater eye to impact connection-making. Music schools and programs that elevated human connection to a central value in musicianship training would certainly be interested to judge the success of a training orchestra or jazz ensemble (and its director) not only according to how well it executed a repertoire/program, but also regarding how successful its programming and performance was in attracting and connecting with new audience members from the surrounding local region. Without diminishing commitment to technical excellence and artistry, ensemble directors and leaders would be challenged to assume a new and central role in strengthening the impact and relevance of our music to those around.

And yes, the pursuit of the radical change being considered here would require us to better help undergraduate and graduate students develop practical skills especially relevant to navigating and succeeding in contemporary society. As we're constantly reminded, the surrounding marketplace rewards technological savviness, marketing acumen, and the ability to utilize social media and online platforms. This added area of instruction and learning represents an opportunity for us to further build organic partnerships with cutting-edge programs and faculty in business, marketing, and related university departments or schools. That type of collaboration and expertise sharing can not only strengthen the preparation of our students for professional success and increase their networks of colleagues, it can also create opportunities for instructional cost sharing.

SOME LIKELY CRITICISMS

I know that fellow colleagues may well have criticisms of what has been outlined and proposed...⁴

Some heads of future-oriented music schools might well argue that their institutions are in fact making good progress in helping graduates better navigate an extraordinarily challenging marketplace that cares quite little for our music. One thinks, for example, of DePauw's unusually comprehensive 21st Century Musician initiative. Or the multiple initiatives being pursued at Eastman, SMU, Oberlin, FSU, New England Conservatory, Juilliard, and elsewhere (including my own school). While helpful, the strategies being currently promoted and undertaken in many schools, I would argue, don't go anywhere far enough. Pursuing tweaks at the edges of curricula, these strategies do not truly get at the core of what needs fixing.

The individual passionate about traditional repertoire and the integrity of either of these two musical genres may certainly be wondering whether these changes, focused as they are upon the interest of members of the general public, wouldn't simply end up producing a hodge-podge of crossover artists. Wouldn't changes such as those outlined above simply produce young creative types who neither advanced jazz nor classical music, but crafted experiences which temporarily beguiled general audiences with music that represented watered-down versions of multiple styles? The question and related concern is understandable. Many professional orchestras and music organizations, after all, have resorted to crafting those exact experiences in hopes of attracting and connecting with new ticket-purchasing audience members. I believe that this concern is misplaced. Our music students bring with them an exceptional range of interests and sensitivities. Yes, some might end up becoming crossover artists. But a far greater number would likely remain singularly committed to their musical heritage and repertoire and successfully advance the field in ways that had both authenticity and integrity, especially if mentored by faculty possessing those very same values and goals.

Other readers may be dismissive of core aspects of the above argument, pointing out that artist-teachers in our music schools and conservatories have in fact long focused on connection-making. After all, those readers might posit, our performance faculty typically give marked attention to a student's skill to communicate a mood or idea clearly through her singing or playing. That contention is true, but misses the mark. Expression is no substitute for connection of the type advocated here, where what is prized is not only a performer's clear expression but his/her interest in the general-public listener's engagement and emotional response. Again, I would argue that our training and apprenticeship model in classical and jazz performance pays little attention to the orientation or attitude of the performer towards listeners unfamiliar with our exceptionally-developed musical genres. Indeed, the degree of a performer's aloofness or disinterest in the experience of the general-public listener is typically deemed irrelevant to the judged quality of the related music performance. The clearest expression of that assumption is found in our primary methods of performance evaluation – whether beginning-of-semester ensemble auditions, jury rubrics, recital evaluations, or studio grades – virtually none of which evaluate a performer's interest or ability to connect with general-public listeners.

Still other readers may be asserting that now is the most extraordinary of times for our two music genres, and that the concerns raised here are of the 'sky-is-falling' variety. I am as hesitant to admit our situation is hopeless as I am to claim it is free of pernicious flaws. (To be fair, it is much too complicated to be described in any straightforward way.) Like many fellow classical musicians, I read with some interest the energetic exchange a few years ago between Greg Sandow and Heather Mac Donald (as carried out in Sandow's blog and Mac Donald's writing in City Journal). As readers here likely know, their argument outlined two seemingly opposite positions: that classical music was dangerously in decline (Sandow) or within a golden era (Mac Donald). I was one of the many readers who agreed with a fair bit of what both Mac Donald and Sandow outlined. We have done well in the academy to highlight and contribute to the latter quality (i.e., a golden era) – at no time has the performance level been greater, or pursued by a greater variety of ensembles and performers in more locales. But we have been far less courageous in admitting to the former.

Other readers might be questioning the relevance and viability of the above strategies for our conservatories and most focused young performers. I agree that a tiny portion of our young (and sometimes most gifted) musicians have limited ability and interest in connecting and giving attention to what others around them think and feel. Given their potential capacity to also enrich our musical landscape, there is strong argument for keeping their training as is. And highly-specialized degree tracks within our conservatories, such as the Performance Certificate and Artist Diploma, I would argue, offer those students exceptional and best support.

The great majority of our young and gifted musicians, however, seem entirely prepared to learn and thrive within music programs that would newly dedicate themselves to beauty, brilliance, expression, and music's capacity for building human connection. Indeed, we shouldn't underestimate the capacity of these students to be thought leaders in this work. As a cherished friend and veteran music school leader recently reflected, "we can take comfort in the fact that more young people today want to engage in meaningful music making than in any time in history." Note that he wasn't referencing faculty or our current model of instruction. His point was that an unusual percentage of students seem ready to address the challenges our genres face. We can and must support them better.

OUR STUDENTS

In the end, the quality and character of our students is perhaps the single greatest source of hope for the futures of these two musical genres. Yes, a not insignificant portion of our conservatory and music school faculty likely understand the dire circumstances surrounding our musical genres. And some of them would no doubt be willing to embrace the considerable challenge of enlarging our definition of musicianship and adding the above-named core value to their work, helping to begin strengthening the relevance of our musical genres to everyday life. Their willingness to overhaul entire curricula would, of course, be vital to any progress. It seems clear that such willingness would be more than matched by the readiness of our young musicians to tackle the issue described here. Beyond bringing great passion for their music, they bring a readiness and interest to newly invest in human interconnectedness.

To put it simply, we are surrounded by a next generation ready to play a key role in strengthening the relevance of our cherished musical genres to those around. We can and must do better to support them in that task.

NOTES

¹ Like cogs in wheels within wheels, none of us can easily claim moral responsibility for the overabundance of graduates entering our professional fields.

² A small but important aside regarding our higher education landscape. Some readers of this journal may have already read Atar Arad’s warm-hearted essay in the recent August 15 issue of Strings magazine. He described in that article something that many of our music performance faculty wish: that we could support the development of young musicians who enter higher education with an unconditional love for music by providing them with a learning and teaching environment relative free of the myriad practical concerns related to marketplace and career pathways. (It’s certainly something I wish.) But what would it actually take for us to be able to teach art-for-art’s sake in a way that was also responsible to the realities of the marketplace? At the very least, it would likely require a radical reduction (10-fold? 20-fold?) in the number of music performance programs and graduating students. As far as I can tell, though, there are too many compelling justifications to continue the status quo. No, it is unlikely that we will pursue any reduction in the number of music performance programs, faculty, and students voluntarily.

³ The potential role of specialized Certificate and Diploma degrees within our conservatories is discussed later in the essay.

⁴ For practical purposes, only a handful of the more likely areas of disagreement are discussed here. As many readers will understand, the interconnectedness and complexity of issues relevant to this topic are of stunning variety and number.

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