

Upgrade Your Listening (to music)

We live in a world full of a rich variety of music of all kinds, music from all over the world, music which caters to all tastes. How many people however really listen to all of this music? When I say listen I mean really consciously listening without simultaneously doing something else or without even just thinking about something else. Music is indeed with us in nearly every situation in which we find ourselves. It's with us in the supermarket, in the car, in the restaurant and in innumerable other places including of course our own homes, but almost no one really consciously listens to it and many probably don't really actively choose or even really quite "know" what to listen to. But then again, what does it mean to "know" what to listen to? Then again what does it actually mean to listen? Where can music take me and how do I unleash the immense power which it is purported to possess in order to enrich my life? These are questions which I have heard from innumerable people and which I will seek to address in this brief talk.

Perhaps because I am a musician myself and indeed a teacher of music, I get asked almost every day by countless people the following question: "you know about music, what should I be listening to?" Well, in today's world, where so much music of various genres and origins is continuously pumped into our ears, it's understandable that people can indeed be rather

confused about what to actually choose to listen to. However, there are no “experts” to come to the rescue here when it comes to something as personal and idiosyncratic as one’s taste in music. The only “expert” when it comes to which music a person should be listening to is the person him or herself. In my view the problem is not *what* to listen to, the problem is much more that very few people *do* actually really listen to music. In other words it is much more a question of *how* we listen to music than of *what* we listen to. When I say “listen to music” I don’t mean to merely have the radio on while we wash the dishes, or to drive in city traffic with a CD or a USB playlist blaring in the background. Unfortunately though, this for many people does indeed constitute the bulk of their experience of listening to music. Don’t get me wrong though, listening to music in this way is by no means undesirable or “wrong”. On the contrary it can indeed be most enjoyable and indeed beneficial. However listening to music in this way *alone* is simply not going to be sufficient to reveal to us its vast and rich gamut of dimensions and secrets which can potentially bring a significant upgrade to the quality to our lives.

Most of my friends are musicians, but even they, by their own admission, don’t actually listen to music in the way in which I will presently describe. They frequently fall into the trap of listening analytically to music out of professional interest, resulting in their missing out on the very basic but highly important act of just simply listening. An old Lyra player here on Crete, when

I once visited him and asked him to play something for me, agreed to do so on the condition that I would sit at a distance of approximately four meters and that I would look in the opposite direction to where he himself sat. I agreed to this all the while imagining that he sought in this way to guard the secrets of his art, rather like many of the other players of his generation. I did however follow his instruction as I sat back quietly and listened to him play. When he had finished playing, he called me over to come and sit beside him. He then explained to me that the reason that he sent me four meters away looking in the opposite direction was because he knew that, as a student of the Lyra myself, if I sat close to him, I would be trying to analyze what he was doing with his fingers and with the bow and I would not really be listening to the music. Following this explanation of what seemed to be a rather unusual request, he then said to me, "Now that you have actually listened to the music, I will show you whatever you want to know."

The technology of our time has afforded us with the ability to have music in just about every one of the many circumstances of our lives. This however has the result that music is very often used merely as a backdrop for whatever else we happen to be doing. It's always there in the background and, in many instances, we have come to feel ill at ease without it's all-pervading presence. Indeed we have actually gone to the other extreme of feeling ill at ease in the presence of *silence*. This however has the

unfortunate result of desensitizing us to the magic of music and of frequently rendering us quite indifferent to it. Just imagine people one or two centuries ago here in villages on the island of Crete, or anywhere else for that matter. In many cases they would have only heard music played by actual ensembles with instruments and singers maybe 4 or 5 times in a year. Recorded music of course didn't exist then so their only experience of music was that of live music. Imagine what a truly awe-inspiring experience it would have been for those people on those special occasions, occasions whose very rarity would most certainly have augmented the intensity of the experience itself to levels quite unimaginable to us today. We have become so accustomed to the ubiquitous presence of music in our lives that for us to imagine the experience of our ancestors would seem to be practically impossible. I myself however do actually have one memory which might just be comparable in its intensity. In 2004, in the context of the Olympic Games here in Greece, I was called upon to organize a series of cultural events in the city of Heraklion here on Crete. In one of the events, an ensemble comprised of 100 bagpipe players from Bulgaria was to participate by parading through the streets of the city playing all together. Their parade began in front of the municipal building of Heraklion and I still remember as one of the most astounding moments of my musical life the moment when they played their very first note. A single note coming simultaneously from 100 bagpipes. It goes without saying that every hair

on my head and body stood on end and my jaw dropped to the floor. What a sound! 100 bagpipes! Well... a villager, 100 or more years ago here on Crete, would have probably experienced the same degree of awe and wonder upon hearing a mere two or three instruments. For us today it takes something to the order of a hundred Bulgarian bagpipes to engender in us an experience of the same intensity. That in itself is a clear indication of the degree to which we have become desensitized by the ubiquity *primarily* of recorded music.

So, what do we do today to somehow recapture the experience of the magic and unique power which is inherent in music and which is purported by many people, myself included, to be so potentially beneficial in our lives?

Well, here's one suggestion: Take half an hour (or maybe even just 15 minutes) out of your every day to do the following: Choose at random a piece of music of any genre, load it onto your CD player (almost obsolete today), computer or whatever other device you might have at your disposal. Before listening to it, sit in silence for even just one minute allowing your thoughts to gradually dissipate and cease. Then listen to your selected piece of music without doing something else simultaneously, without trying to analyze what you're listening to and, as best you can, without paying attention to the background chatter which is almost always going on in all of our minds. After listening to the piece, remain in silence for at least another minute before simply observing how the experience affected you. Did

you enjoy what you heard? Did it generate in you the desire to listen again to the piece which you chose? Was it perhaps boring or did it maybe fail to inspire you in any way? Or perhaps it left you wanting to find something else similar? All of these reactions and many more are possible and indeed legitimate. There is no "correct" way to react. As an example, let's say that you have chosen a piece composed by none other than the venerable Johann Sebastian Bach himself, performed by a highly skilled and renowned orchestra. Many people would say that this is "good" music, maybe even the "best" and that you *should* enjoy and appreciate it. But let's say that you didn't particularly enjoy the experience of listening to it. Well, there's nothing wrong or culpable about that. Just accept it and proceed subsequently to something else, something different. Once you do actually find something that you enjoy, it will engender in you the desire either to listen to it again or to listen to something else which is somehow similar or related to it. This marks, the beginning of what we might call a personal "musical trajectory". On this trajectory we will gradually see how different musical styles and idioms interact with our personal aesthetic which, in turn, will be affected by what we listen to as our experience broadens. Maybe the Bach piece that you didn't like very much will come back through another "route" six months, a year or two years later and you will then love and appreciate it. Maybe this won't happen. In either case there is no right or wrong reaction. The fact that it's Bach doesn't mean that

you *have* to appreciate it otherwise you're an uneducated and senseless boor. There are plenty of well-educated music lovers who don't happen to appreciate Bach or Beethoven or Stravinsky or any other broadly revered "sacred cow" of the world of Western classical music. Equally there are musical genres originating in one part of the world which people in another region are quite unable to appreciate simply because they have no prior experience of them and subsequently no point of reference to facilitate their appreciation of them. For some people such a lack of prior experience is an obstacle to their appreciation, for others it can even be an unexpected opening to a whole new world initiated by a pleasant surprise. For each person the experience will be different and indeed unique and that is actually how it should be. That which gradually develops through the above described listening process is a musical world and experience entirely of your own, and that, for me, is precisely what each person needs. Of course any reasonable and open-minded person will always take an avid interest in the experiences of other people, and that is an important and essential part of our interaction with our fellow human beings. However, each person has their own aesthetic, their own taste and preferences, and to live according to the dictates and choices of others would simply be a betrayal of oneself.

I frequently visit schools and do presentations of rare musical instruments and musical idioms deriving from distant regions of the world to groups of children, usually of

grammar school age. Either before or after the presentation I inevitably ask them what they enjoy listening to. I get of course a variety of answers to this question and that always pleases me, but there is one answer that I get far more frequently than all of the others and, I'm sad to say, it disappoints me rather. That answer is "whatever is playing on the radio". Of course I don't suggest that there's anything inherently wrong with listening to the radio, but to simply be a sponge absorbing whatever "the radio" (a nebulous term at best) pumps out in our direction is not a healthy state of affairs. Who is in charge of "the radio"? What are they trying to promote or force upon us? Do they have any understanding of my aesthetic sense? let alone interest in understanding it..... is surrendering my right and ability to choose what I will listen to going to in any way improve my experience of the vast universe of music? The answer to the last question is of course a resounding *no*. The vast majority of radio stations tend to broadcast music of a particular genre and are not especially noted for their plurality. Some broadcast this or that type of pop music, others broadcast only classical music, folk music, or jazz. This in itself is already somewhat unnatural. I've very rarely heard radio programs in which different types of music intertwine, intersect and interact with one another. Usually each program, if not each station, caters to a specific genre to the exclusion of others. In the listening process which I described previously, I would definitely suggest giving a chance to as many musical genres as

possible and seeing how they work for you. Be daring and experimental in your listening experience, welcome surprises, and do your best to avoid the preconceived ideas and choices that the music industry and the various “experts” and critics will try to foist onto you. Regardless of what it is, if you like it, go for more of it, if you don’t, move on to something else. Where you will eventually end up is beyond the ability of anyone, even yourself, to predict and that only makes the journey all the more exciting.

Another question which many people ask is what exactly can we expect from music? Where can it take us and to what degree can it affect our lives, for either better or worse....?

My answer to this question is that music can indeed give to us whatever we might ask of it. It all depends on how we approach it, what we ask of it, and what we give of ourselves in order to receive what it has to offer us. For some, music is simply something which offers them light entertainment. Something which helps them to “pass their time” more pleasantly, or which accompanies them at a party or other such social event. For others, it’s an accompaniment to their physical exercise routine in their continuing struggle against fat. For others music is even something sacred which brings them into communion with what they perceive to be a deity, and yet for others music is that which opens up for them new horizons and actually takes them beyond the boundaries of their very selves. Music can do all of these things and many many more and its ability to do any of these things depends

heavily on our openness to it and on our ability to receive what it has to offer us. If all that we desire is light entertainment then this does not demand much from us and our experience of music will most likely not go beyond what we ask of it. If however we approach it seeking with profound respect and devotion ever deeper spiritual experiences, we will inevitably be eventually guided to music which will indeed afford us with such experiences and this can often be a life-changing experience. Equally, just as the approach of the listener to music, to a large degree, governs that person's experience of it, so too does the approach of the creator of music affect decisively the content and the nature of the end result. The music created by someone whose goal is financial gain will almost certainly not be in any way comparable to that created by someone who perceives themselves to be a servant of a sacred art. Having said this however the question which arises is "is music actually our creation, or do we somehow channel it into our world from a vast realm of possibility? The possible combinations of the notes which are found within our hearing range are incalculable in number, but not infinite. Equally the possible combinations which exist within the rhythmic patterns which we employ are huge in number but again, not infinite. No one composes music in $12,435/4$ time, yet such a time signature does indeed exist as a mathematical possibility. The largest rhythmic cycle which I personally have encountered is one employed in Ottoman urban music known as Zencir in $120/4$ time. Indeed

everything in music preexists as a mathematical possibility and cannot in any strict sense be considered to be *our* creation. I would actually suggest that a new composition is much more in the nature of a new revelation than it is of a new creation. Many people throughout history have made allusions to the affinity of music with mathematics. It is said that musical talent and mathematical ability frequently are found as traits in the same person. I'm no expert in mathematics but I do sense that there is some truth to this. Mathematics are at the very core of existence itself and in its own way so is music. Both draw upon a near endless reservoir of possibilities and broaden our understanding of reality and of our very consciousness and awareness. For some people music is a form of intellectual stimulation which addresses the mind, for others it works on an essentially emotional level generating primarily feelings, for others still music addresses the body in a more visceral and primal way. My view is that music is actually the ideal means of balancing and uniting our intellect, our emotions and our physical sense into a deeper awareness in which these three no longer exist separately from one another. In a way it's rather like putting our consciousness into a higher "gear". The beauty of it is that this experience is available to all of us. Each person has the ability to realize it in his or her own way. Personally I believe that a very good way to begin one's journey of discovery of this experience is to seek one's own "musical trajectory" and subsequently one's personal musical world

through the means of the very simple process which I described in the beginning of this talk. Through this very simple process of truly and consciously listening to music, even just for 15 or 30 minutes a day, we will gradually see a whole musical world unfold in front of our eyes. A musical world of our very own, informed by our aesthetic sense and which informs our aesthetic sense in such a way as to influence perhaps every other aspect of our lives as well. We will almost certainly see that certain types of music benefit greatly from being listened to consciously in this manner and are subsequently able to bequeath to us the full richness of their content, whereas other genres, usually those generated solely by interest in financial gain, will usually not fare well when our full attention is directed towards them. Music is a whole universe in itself, possessing massive transformative spiritual power. This power is accessible to any and every one of us and it has the potential to bring quite extraordinary richness and depth of meaning to our lives. It's very simple and easy and most definitely worth our while to afford it with the opportunity to do so.