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Musical Crossroads

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Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
While recently serving as a judge for a local piano competition, I met a fellow judge who, like me, taught piano and music theory at the college level. As we talked after the competition, we naturally began to compare notes on our teaching. Our talk had turned to music theory textbooks, when my new acquaintance suddenly interrupted. "But I didn't get into this to teach theory," he said, "I got into this to play."

He could hardly have said anything with which I could concur more! I enjoy teaching, but it was not the prospect of an academic career that led me to study music when young. It was love for the music and love for the process of making music, that led me to make that choice. If only I could earn a living playing the piano! Some teaching, yes, but not the rigors of a full-time teaching position. But the harsh reality was there: almost no one earns their living by performance alone, at least not those of us who have trained to perform Western European art music, and are sometimes called by that strange appellation, "concert pianist." Nor is the situation any better for those of us pursuing my other musical love, composition. William Bolcom is a Pulitzer-prize winning composer, but he has summarized the difficulties of earning a living as a composer well:

I am, in effect, the proprietor of a small and unprofitable business. When I receive a commission, it is out of this money that I must pay all expenses, and I am lucky when copying costs alone do not consume most of my commission fee! One can do relatively well in serious composition, as I have, and still realize that no one can live an ordinary middle-class American life exclusively on the money it brings.
The only option for a composer (or performer) is to find patronage in a college or university. Thus we make a bargain with academia. We will put up with the necessary teaching requirements, and the institution will pay our salary so we can live. But our real work, the work that truly energizes our imagination and our best efforts, is the work of making music, either as performers or composers. And many feel it should be that way; as George Rochberg says, the composer "... must resist identifying himself as an 'academic' and maintain himself as an artist."²

This is the musical form of the problem identified by Mark Schwehn at the beginning of his book, *Exiles from Eden*. Schwehn identifies three tasks proper to university faculty members: "... making knowledge, transmitting knowledge and skills, and helping students learn how to lead more ethical, fulfilling lives."³ It is the first, making knowledge, which for the musician translates into making music, either as composer or performer. It is the conflict of this desire to make music with the necessity of the other two obligations that leads me to my two most frequently voiced complaints: "I have no time to write! I have no time to practice!" Thus I am challenged by Schwehn to examine the nature of my vocation as a teacher and artist.

But this is only one side of the problem. Surely I must determine and understand my role as a teacher. But beyond that lies a further question: why is it that a pianist and composer can no longer earn a living? Igor Stravinsky, who did earn his living as a composer, is cited by George Rochberg for his warnings against university teaching. Rochberg, who has held an academic appointment, has to say that the "... single decent option left the American composer... is the academic life."⁴ What has happened, in a relatively short period of time, to bring this about? This is the crisis of music in the Western European Art-Music tradition. The orchestras are still there,
but they are playing the same music again and again, the audiences are getting steadily older, and
the general public is overwhelmingly apathetic towards music in this tradition. Yet it is this
music which forms the core of most college-level music schools.

A musician today has seemingly two paths from which to choose. On the one hand is the
commercial music industry, where one can earn a living, but where music exists only as a
commodity (the recording), which must be sold in as great a quantity as possible. On the other
hand are the musical traditions which are either not present in commercial music or are
marginalized by it. Among these is the tradition popularly known as "classical," which is
becoming only a museum of the past. Thus a new understanding of the academic vocation in
music must come to terms with this situation. The musical tradition which forms the core of most
college teaching, and is at the center of my own music-making, appears to have nothing more to
say, and may be dying.

Of course, these two problems will not be solved in a vacuum. All of us, both academics
and musicians, will approach them from our own perspectives. As a Christian who teaches at a
Christian college, I am especially interested in the relation of these problems to my faith. So as I
look at the conflicting demands of academia (which of my jobs is my "real" work?), and at the
current crisis in the musical world, my understanding of the situation and of the next steps to take
will necessarily be shaped by this point of view. As I examine the crisis in both academia and the
musical world, I will be allowing the religious tradition from which I speak to inform, and
perhaps aid, possible avenues of renewal.

Before examining solutions to the problem, it will be necessary to examine how things
came to their present status, something which has implications both for music and academia. It
has been apparent to musicians for some time now that we are living in a time of change. For me the recognition began in the early seventies when I heard that George Rochberg had changed from twelve-tone composition to a more romantic style. It was confirmed over the next decades as I saw the tradition of classical music retreat more and more into the background of our society. Both of these occurrences—the emergence of neo-romanticism, minimalism, and eclecticism among serious composers, and the growing irrelevance of classical music—signaled a significant change. From the current perspective, it is clear that this change in the musical world reflected a philosophical shift in the world at large.

The history of music in Western Europe is often treated as a unified development from medieval times to the present. During that time, however, major paradigm shifts occurred—from medieval to renaissance, from renaissance to the modern era. The changes noted above in the world of music were signaling the end of the modern era, and the movement into postmodernism. The history of this music is often taught as the history of style—baroque, classical, romantic, impressionistic, and contemporary. But it can also be seen as an historical development that reflects the philosophy of the era.

Although definitions of the modern era change slightly from one writer to the next, there is general agreement that the era begins with the philosophy of Descartes. The epistemological understanding that originated with Descartes, that all knowledge could be built on foundations that were self-evident to any rational person, has parallels in music. For the seventeenth century, the time of Descartes, also saw the origins of functional harmony, which was first codified and explained in Rameau’s *Traité de l’harmonie* in 1722. As Susan McLary says,
Rameau, in a striking reworking of Descartes' *Cogito* manifesto, declared this earlier [renaissance] tradition moribund and, in seeking to build a musical system from reason and science, hailed the triad as the basis of music.

Now to be sure, the major triad can be generated from very simple mathematical principles, and its pitches occur in the overtone series. It appears thus to be inscribed in nature (not invented arbitrarily by culture), and its music seems to be therefore the music dictated by the very laws of physics.  

And so the musical foundations were laid; and the appeal to foundations continues into our own century, as Anton Webern again refers to the foundation of the overtone series:

I repeat: the diatonic scale wasn't invented, it was discovered. So it's given, and its corollary was very simple and clear: the overtones from the "parallelogram of forces" of the three adjoining, related notes form the notes of the scale. So it's just the most important overtones, those that are in the closest relationship--something natural, not thought up--that form the diatonic scale. . .

The triad, the disappearance of which so provokes people, and which has played such a role in music up to now: what, then, is this triad? The first overtone different from the fundamental, plus the second one--that's to say a reconstruction of these overtones, and an imitation of nature. . .

Nancey Murphy and James McClendon identify foundationalism as an axis, at the other end of which is skepticism. As the foundations are no longer accepted, the result is skepticism. In the same way, the breakdown of tonality in the twentieth century can be seen as a musical reflection of the movement from foundationalism to skepticism.

Murphy and McClendon also identify a linguistic axis for the modern era, an axis with representational speech at one end, and expressive speech at the other. Representational speech works "by referring to (naming) objects and by reflecting or representing facts about those objects." This rational view of language is certainly reflected by the rational musical styles of the eighteenth century. It is no surprise that Jacques Attali titles a chapter dealing with tonal music, especially that of the eighteenth century, "Representing."
Make people believe. The entire history of tonal music, like that of classical political economy, amounts to an attempt to make people believe in a consensual representation of the world... In order to stamp upon the spectators the faith that there is a harmony in order. In order to etch in their minds the image of the ultimate social cohesion, achieved through commercial exchange and the progress of rational knowledge.\(^\text{11}\)

The "progress of rational knowledge," this says much about the modern era, and this progress would be realized through the scientific method. But music, of course, cannot use the scientific method, so in the nineteenth century it went to the other end of the axis. Returning to Murphy and McClendon, expressivism "holds that ethical discourse (and all other discourse that is taken to be significant but not referential) merely expresses the attitudes or emotions of the speaker."\(^\text{12}\) Those who hold that all music is romantic are echoing this view of language; for music clearly cannot be truly representational except in very specific and isolated cases, but it is an excellent tool for representing inner emotional states. This takes music away from the "progress of rational knowledge," but gives it the role (with the other arts) of bringing meaning to our lives.

While linguistic expressivism and musical romanticism can be seen as reflections of each other, music continued to be influenced by the concept of the "progress of rational knowledge" as well. A tension holds between the poles of both axes: foundations (tonality)—skepticism (chromaticism and atonality), representation (rational music)—expressivism (romantic music). The idea of progress, progress built upon foundations, influenced the world of music as well.

Composers began to look for the next step. Consider the terms in which Webern speaks of Schönberg’s use of dissonance:

We do not know what will be the end of the battle against Schoenberg, which starts with accusations that he uses dissonances too much. Naturally that’s nonsense; that’s the battle music has waged since time immemorial. It’s an accusation leveled at everyone who has
dared to take a step forward. However, in the last quarter of a century the step forward has been a really vehement one, and of a magnitude never before known in the history of music—one need have no doubts about saying that.\textsuperscript{13}

This idea of "the step forward" was something new. But foundationalism demanded it. The belief that constant building on the foundations would ultimately lead to a knowledge of the truth—an idea of the scientific world—was reflected in music by this need to always supersede what had gone before. Webern quite logically saw Schönberg's music (and his own) as fulfilling this need. He sees that step forward as a vehement, major step, but in many ways it was a conservative action. Schönberg’s school maintained the classical forms, and merely continued the process of increasing chromaticism that had been taking place since the time of Beethoven.

The case of Schönberg and his students is illustrative of another aspect of modernity in its latter years. The twelve-tone method of composition, which Schönberg developed, is one of the few instances in music history that a theoretical system was developed before the music was written. Not only must the composer create the music, but the very method of writing, and the musical style that results, must be created as well. Mark Schwehn, citing Hannah Arendt, speaks of "the ascendancy of \textit{homo faber} over \textit{homo sapiens}, the triumph of the human being understood as the one who seeks or possesses wisdom."\textsuperscript{14} It fell to \textit{homo faber} to not only write music well, but also to create a new method with which to write. This Schönberg did, and it became the \textit{modus operandi} of the remainder of the modern period. This can be seen in a figure such as John Cage, who throughout his career was looking for new ways to go about writing music. Robert Silverman has referred to "John Cage's abominations,"\textsuperscript{15} but Cage was logically continuing the musical tradition of the modern era. In this way of thinking, creativity was shown more in the method of
writing than in the music itself. Yet another example of this attitude is cited by Jacques Attali, who quotes Pierre Boulez: "Our period will be occupied, and for several generations, with the construction and structuration of a new language, which will be the vehicle of the masterpieces of the future." Here this process of creating a new style, a new language is the work of generations! This is a truly daunting task, to create this new language and be able to communicate with it.

In this understanding, the artist is a lonely individual, set apart from society, creating great works that will eventually be understood. It is expected that the music will not be liked initially; but its eventual acceptance is equally expected. Nicolas Slonimsky has said that new music takes forty years to win acceptance; and he cites the time between the 1913 premier of *Le Sacre du Printemps* and Stravinsky’s return to Paris in 1952 as a conquering hero as evidence. But the difference between that scenario and current reality is instructive. The premiere of *Le Sacre* was well-attended and created a riot; new music premiere’s today rarely create more than a bored yawn. Orchestra concerts are typically received with polite applause, and little more. A riot would be a pleasant change in many ways; at least the music would make an impact. Instead these concerts are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

The image of the lonely artist has another aspect in the modern era which is also important for the future. As stated earlier, music could not represent truth, but it could express feelings and thus give meaning to a life. Hans Georg Gadamer has said:

... a cultured society that has fallen away from its religious traditions expects more from art than aesthetic consciousness and the "standpoint of art" can deliver. The romantic demand for a new mythology ... gives the artist and his task in the world the consciousness of a new consecration. He is something like a "secular savior"
(Immermann), for his creations are expected to achieve on a small scale the propitiation of disaster for which an unsaved world hopes. ¹⁸

So the burden on the composer becomes even greater. Not only must a new language be created for the work, it must be filled with mythological meaning and replace the religious traditions of the society.

The end of the modern era was signaled when the search for adequate foundations was abandoned. No longer was there a need to take the next step on the path to truth (or, in the case of music, to greater meaning); there was no truth at the end of the path, because the foundations were not certain. The implications of this for the classical tradition were enormous. No longer could this tradition claim to be superior; no longer was its basis in the overtone series unique. It soon became clear that musical languages that did not use the diatonic scale or triads were also based, in some ways, on the overtone series. This tradition, in its push to find the next "step forward," had become increasingly isolated and separated from its audience; now it suddenly became irrelevant as well.

It is no wonder, then, that the "... single decent option left the American composer... is the academic life." How can a musician earn a living writing music for a tradition that is part of the old way of thinking? This is especially so when the final years of that tradition deliberately distance the composer from any audience, or any common musical language. Schwenk's reference to "making knowledge" also takes on new meaning. For the academy is deeply steeped in the Enlightenment ideas of knowledge; making knowledge, for most of this century, has meant expanding our knowledge of the truth based on rational foundations. For the composer, this has meant not only writing music well, but also creating a new musical language (preferably for each
piece), and putting religious significance back into empty lives. All of us have been trained to think of composition in these terms.

This paradigm shift away from foundationalism also elucidates the dilemma of the classical performer. We can continue to play the music of the past, but it will be to fewer and fewer people, for the philosophical and social milieu in which it was created have ceased to exist.

Of course, it is not only the shift from the modern era which has changed music in our century. Technology has altered music making in countless ways, often for the good. All of us have access to far more varieties of music than could be possible were it not for the invention of recordings and playback systems. This access has come with a price, however, an altering of the musical world that is irrevocable.

Recordings were initially thought of as a permanent document of a live performance. Now the performances of great artists would not be lost, but could be frozen in time on vinyl. The live performance was what really mattered; the recording was only documentation. In the early days of recording this was true, but as the quality of recording technology advanced, the relationship between recording and live performance was reversed. Now the work was the recording; the live concert existed, if it happened at all, for the purpose of selling the recording and giving the public some contact with the performer. This has been as true of classical music as of other styles. Whereas music was once an ephemeral, once only event (for no two performances are ever the same), now it could be frozen into one performance, never changing. Not only that, but the sound of the recording could be electronically manipulated, making the recording technology itself a musical instrument, and giving even the listener at home some control over the sound of the performance. In this view of things, music is created not only by
performers and composers, but also by those who manipulate the recording technology. Music making becomes the work of a production team.

The ease of playback gives us a wonderful access to a wide variety of music; but it also gives us constant exposure to music. We are surrounded by music as we shop, eat, drive, watch television, or see movies. We have the option of hearing music from our radios and stereos at any time of the day, and we can carry it with us anywhere via a Walkman. It is difficult to see that this has not de-sensitized us to music. For if we so often hear music in the background, it is sure that we are not really listening. Music becomes an aural wallpaper for our lives, a background that we train ourselves to ignore. In this context it is little wonder that the music must often be so loud; the physical sensation of extreme volume may be the only thing that gets our attention. And when journals dealing with electronic music making must repeatedly carry articles describing the proper ear plugs musicians should wear for protection, it is clear that something is wrong. Music should not destroy the very sense through which it is received.

The challenges facing musicians are many. The modern era, of which the classical tradition was such an integral part, has passed, leaving those of us who practice this art hanging between musical worlds. The technology of our time has changed the nature of music making in ways that were not anticipated when the technology was invented. New ways of making music with computers and electronic instruments are too new to know the full extent of their influence. Already, however, electronic keyboards and computer notation software has changed my own working environment as both a pianist and composer. As with the recording technology, the computer and the synthesizer are new musical instruments, and like all new instruments they will demand new musical styles to use them to their fullest. It is also possible that the acoustic piano
is already an historical instrument, like the harpsichord. The acoustic piano, though much in
evidence throughout our society, is not the basis for any important new repertoire of music at this
time; it is used for older styles, both classical and jazz.

It is in this environment of challenge that the musician enters postmodernity. And it is in
this environment that the college teacher of music must find a way to teach. There have been
paradigm shifts before, but the movement into postmodernity is one of the bleakest, because we
have seemingly given up on declaring anything of better quality than something else. If all
understanding, all knowledge can only be apprehended through the context of my prejudices,
culture, and traditions, then nothing can be preferred to anything else. Postmodernity, as applied
to music, means many different things to different people. But this essential relativism of
postmodernity has two related results for music. The first is the obliteraion of the idea of "high"
or "low" culture, and related to this is an eclecticism of style.

We see the results of this all around us. I went through eight and a half years of college
without once analyzing music outside of the classical tradition. Today it is not uncommon, in
academic publications, to see Schenkerian analyses of Beatles' tunes. Now I also enjoy the
Beatles, but what a shift this is, in the relatively short time of fifteen to twenty years! Popular
music, in my time in school, was treated with total indifference. One would never have known it
existed. And the broad range of eclecticism present in much new music: borrowing from
baroque, classical, and romantic styles, borrowing from jazz, American standard pop songs, and
rock music, and borrowing from music of other cultures. All in an effort to communicate again,
after the alienation of the lonely artist at the end of the modern era.
In this confused state, I return again to the challenge of Mark Schwehn: the role of an academic is "...making knowledge, transmitting knowledge and skills, and helping students learn how to lead more ethical, fulfilling lives." This is the definition of a teacher; and at a confused time such as this, teaching is needed more than ever. But this is the teaching of the musician; it is not the teaching of one who views music from the outside, but of the practitioner. In this view there is no dichotomy between music-making and teaching: the performing and writing of music will be teaching, and will inform the classroom, while the classroom will also inform the music-making. Whether I call myself a musician or a teacher is irrelevant, because I am both, and to be one is to be the other.

But I am also a musician who has been trained in the classical tradition of Western Europe, a tradition that is dying. What will I teach? This question holds not only for me, but for most of the music schools in our society. The classical tradition has been the core of our training, with other musics (jazz, popular, or world musics) thrown in for spice. Jazz and popular music programs include theory and history courses based on the classical tradition, but not the other way around. How will our curricula be structured in the future?

A useful analogy may be classical studies—not the classical music tradition, but Greek and Latin classics. The classics in this sense formed the basis of a college or university education for several hundred years. It was the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science that moved a classical education from the center of the university, to be replaced by the natural sciences. In the same way, postmodernity has signaled the end of the classical musical tradition as the core for a musical education. Like Greek and Latin, and Plato and Aristotle, this tradition will remain and
while others quickly grow tiring. One piece may be technically well-written, but say nothing; another may be expressive but trite; another may be complex but boring; or another may be simple and show perfection of technique and expression. It is only the musician who lives with this music daily, or the serious listener, who can judge these things, and then only within the practice which is well known and understood.

This manner of defining standards leaves no room for the traditional dominance of the classical tradition. It gives no way of comparing one tradition to another. But those of us who teach from this tradition have no choice but to assume this perspective in our teaching, and to evaluate other musics from this perspective. This does not mean that all musical traditions are of equal value; clearly, some traditions have greater ability to transcend their original culture than others.

Again MacIntyre is helpful. In speaking of "traditions of enquiry" he shows that a tradition may come to an "epistemological crisis," where it cannot solve its problems by its own methods:

Every tradition, whether it recognizes the fact or not, confronts the possibility that at some future time it will fall into a state of epistemological crisis, recognizable as such by its own standards of rational justification, which have themselves been vindicated up to that time as the best to emerge from the history of that particular tradition. All attempts to deploy the imaginative and inventive resources which the adherents of the tradition can provide may founder, either merely by doing nothing to remedy the condition of sterility and incoherence into which the enquiry has fallen or by also revealing or creating new problems, and revealing new flaws and new limitations. Time may elapse, and no further resources or solutions emerge.²¹

The classical tradition, of course is not experiencing an "epistemological crisis." Ours is a crisis of irrelevance, of not communicating to the present time. But MacIntyre's description holds in other aspects. This is a crisis within the practice itself, for new music has no meaningful place
among the majority of the performers and listeners to this music. New music has failed to win a
substantial audience within the tradition, and this is the crisis. We are at the end of the twentieth
century, yet programs within this musical tradition are still predominantly filled with music
written in the nineteenth century or earlier. There is no crisis with this older music; it is simply a
question of how we may become part of a living tradition of new music again, rather than
keepers of the museum.

MacIntyre continues his argument by saying that the epistemological crisis may be solved
from within a tradition; but if not, those within a tradition in crisis will begin to look to an "alien
tradition" for help. As they begin to understand the alien tradition,

...they may find themselves compelled to recognize that within this other tradition it is
possible to construct from the concepts and theories peculiar to it what they were unable
to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating
explanation--cogent and illuminating, that is, by their own standards—of why their own
intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems or restore its coherence. The
standards by which they judge this explanation to be cogent and illuminating will be the
very same standards by which they have found their tradition wanting in the face of
epistemological crisis.32

The eclecticism of composers within the classical tradition, mentioned earlier, finds explanation
in this statement of MacIntyre. "By their own standards," that is, by the standards of the classical
tradition, composers are bringing elements of the past, elements of popular styles, or elements of
non-western musical traditions into their music in an effort at renewal.

One such attempt has been described by the composer William Bolcom. After discussing
the outstanding work of American songwriters, both popular and from the classical tradition, he
says:

I have always felt that the nucleus of a culture's musical style is a synthesis of word and
note. This synthesis is the chief distinction among Italian, French, and German music; the
melodic shape of its song permeates every aspect of any nation’s musical culture. In a culture made up of as many sources as ours, the synthesis of diverse musics can be potentially broader than any previously experienced in history. Now we need a pedagogic structure that will bring the various musical strains together under the same roof, in a kind of musically beneficial cohabitation.23

The emphasis on word and note has wonderful implications for the Christian musician, because there is no such thing as Christian or non-Christian music. But it is with words that we praise God, it is with words that we tell the story of God’s work in his people’s lives, and in our lives, and it is with words that we cry out to God when we experience injustice or grief. The wedding of these words with music can deepen their expression. It also shows a way forward for the composer, who may wish to use musical ideas taken from the worship music of the broader church, or even of one church tradition. Something like this can be seen in Arvo Pärt’s use of Gregorian Chant; the same can be done with American folk hymns, or contemporary worship music. This music may be adopted by the composer, not as it would be used in worship, but rather by the standards of the classical tradition. Or in MacIntyre’s words, by "the very same standards by which they have found their tradition wanting in the face of epistemological crisis."

This opening of the classical tradition to other traditions, whether Christian or not, will alter its nature. It will not replace the older music, which will stay with us just as Plato and Aristotle have. In fact, it will be necessary to teach and perform the older music. But our musical life must begin to revolve around new music, new music of the best quality possible within the "practice." We should change our teaching as well; if we wish to make new music the center of our performing, then more musicians must write music, and thus all students should be trained in composition. This has become a standard of the National Association of Schools of Music, but it does not require that the writing and performing of new music become central to the
music-making of our students. All college students are trained to write with words; in the same way, all music students should be trained to write music. This does not mean they will become composers, any more than freshman English composition classes mean that all students will become novelists. I am simply envisioning a music department where all students and faculty are involved in the task of writing and performing new music.

In writing music, of course, students should not be burdened with the need to create a new musical language for each piece, for the idea of finding the next "step forward" is no longer valid. As has been the case for most musicians in other times, they should write the best music possible using a language that is at hand, a language that will result from opening the classical tradition to "alien traditions."

If students and faculty are involved primarily with new music, recording and computer technologies can be used in the creation of music. The new instruments will require changes in musical styles, even as the change from harpsichord to piano did. The new electronic instruments can work with traditional technologies (i.e., traditional acoustical instruments) in a back and forth adaptation of styles. At the same time, it will be important to continue the traditions of live performance. Recordings are a wonderful tool, but no substitute for the human communication possible in live performance (just as E-mail is a wonderful tool, but no substitute for face to face conversation).

In this view, teaching (transmitting knowledge and skills) and making music are joined together. Performing and writing music are always a part of teaching: as example for students, or in building audiences in the community. And teaching leads also to the performing and writing
of music by students. There need be no tension between the two if both are aspects of the same process, and if both can contribute to musical renewal.

Of course, Schwehn suggests one other function of the college or university teacher:

"helping students learn how to lead more ethical, fulfilling lives." This brings us back to the final notion of modernity: that art can give meaning to life. That this idea is not dead is illustrated by philosopher Richard Rorty, who writes:

At about the same time, the Romantic poets were showing what happens when art is thought of no longer as imitation but, rather, as the artist’s self-creation. The poets claimed for art the place in culture traditionally held by religion and philosophy, the place which the Enlightenment had claimed for science. The precedent the Romantics set lent initial plausibility to their claim. . . For most contemporary intellectuals, questions of ends as opposed to means—questions about how to give a sense to one’s own life or that of one’s community—are questions for art or politics. . .24

Rorty later goes on to develop, with reference to Nietzsche and Harold Bloom, the idea of the "strong poet:"

The line between weakness and strength is thus the line between using language which is familiar and universal and producing language which, though initially unfamiliar and idiosyncratic, somehow makes tangible the blind impress all one’s behavings bear. With luck—the sort of luck which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity—that language will also strike the next generation as inevitable.25

Here is the postmodern version of finding meaning in art—or at least in creativity. Here the artist must create a new language (and it must be completely new—"unfamiliar and idiosyncratic") that somehow, by luck, strikes a chord with the "next generation." This new language is no longer a "step forward." It is just different, and just happens, by luck, to make connections with someone at a later time.

Now this is a very gloomy, bleak vision of the role of creativity, and of the role of art in giving people more fulfilling lives. In this vision, only the rare genius can validate their life in
any way, and that only by being different, and by luck! If the composer bore an intolerable
burden at the end of the modern era, it has become far worse here.

Rorty comes to these conclusions writing from naturalistic assumptions. My assumptions
are different. As George Marsden has written in a footnote,

It is on this crucial point (naturalism) that I part ways with the postmodernists . . . If . . .
one believes, as I do, that humans are not the primary creators of reality, then . . . belief in
a creator who has created both us and reality throws into an entirely different context
questions concerning epistemology, science, and the superiority of some human beliefs to
others.26

It is from this perspective that I teach, write music, and perform. In this context, using art to give
meaning to life is worshipping the creature rather than the creator. It places a burden on music
that music cannot bear, for music is also contingent, a language that communicates by
associations that are not inherent in the sound, but are learned by listening. When music is
understood as something human, a gift and creation of God, then we are freed to make music, for
our creativity need not be a stab in the dark, an effort by luck to give some small meaning to a
contingent life. Instead our creativity is a reflection, an imaging of God’s creative work. And
now it is clear teaching music does fulfill Schwenn’s final area of teaching. Music itself cannot
teach ethics (though in some ways the practice of it can), but it can help students lead more
fulfilling lives. For the experience of music, or any art, teaches and changes us. In the words of
Gadamer,

The pantheon of art is not a timeless present that presents itself to a pure aesthetic
consciousness, but the act of a mind and spirit that has collected and gathered itself
historically. Our experience of the aesthetic too is a mode of self-understanding.
Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self,
and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world
and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien
universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it...27

This self-understanding has been my constant experience in my music-making. But Flannery O'Connor adds more:

The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge, not narrow, his field of vision.28

In this enlarged vision, the encounter with art deepens in its meaning. Music need not bear the weight of giving value to life, for what could surpass the value God has given it? Instead, music can fill its proper role of expressing those things we cannot express with words. And finally,

Reverence for wood and for art in my father; reverence for the land and the animals in my uncles, sometimes even for machinery; longing reverence for music in my aunt; reverence for the life of the intellect in everybody. In the tenth book of his Confessions Augustine imagines the things of the world speaking, saying to him: Do not attend to us, turn away, attend to God. I was taught instead to hear the things of the world saying: Reverence us; for God made us as a gift for you. Accept us in gratitude.29

So writes Nicholas Wolterstorff of his childhood and his family. Music is a gift; it is ours to offer, with all that we are, back to God.


4. Rochberg, op. cit., 162.

5. For simplicity, in this paper I will use the term classical in its vernacular usage to refer to the Western European tradition of art music, and not in the technical sense used by musicians to refer to a specific style.

6. Postmodern is a word with many meanings, especially for musicians; I will not use it to denote any particular style or aesthetic of music, but will give it its most obvious meaning, i.e. after the modern.


10. Ibid., 193.


12. Murphy and McClendon, op. cit., 194.


20. Ibid., 177.


22. Ibid., 364.


25. Ibid., 28-29.


