

# **Response to Bennett Reimer's "Why Do Humans Value Music?"**

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Let me begin by offering commendations to Professor Reimer for an excellent paper. Like a good piece of music, this paper reads better and my understanding is enhanced with each successive reading. It is well crafted and it is highly comprehensive for its relative brevity. In other words, it is concise, efficient, and effective! I would expect no less from Bennett Reimer, having known and admired him and his work for some thirty-five years.

In this response I will try to add to, rather than refute or refine, anything Professor Reimer has presented. His five dimensions of musical value are comprehensive in scope and obviously reflect a lifetime of thought and study on these matters. I will very briefly suggest some additional values from my own experience and perspective—a kind of overlay of my words over his—and then offer some thoughts about why humans may find even greater need for musical knowledge and skills in the future.

## **Additional "Values"**

### *The Combination of Intellect and Emotion*

In answering for myself the question "Why do humans value music?" I have long believed that we are drawn to music because it is the most powerful combination of intellect and emotion that we know. Do I believe that most people intentionally seek out intellectual qualities when they invest their time in musical experiences? No, not most people. But as Reimer has said in his presentation at this conference, humans have a need to find meaning. The search for meaning in music naturally includes a search for more than pure emotion.

Music is the most abstract of the arts, and in the combining of emotion and intellect music's abstractness is an advantage. While it may be true that some kinds of music can be experienced as predominantly intellectual and others as predominantly emotional, it is impossible to separate intellect from emotion in music of substance. If we think of intellect and emotion as opposite poles on a continuum of objective to subjective, even our strongest emotions are not devoid of rationality, and our purest intellectual endeavors are not entirely objective and devoid of emotion.

It is possible that some of the satisfaction one derives from a substantive musical experience is the fulfillment of our need to combine intellect and emotion. And certainly, when we analyze and make normative judgments about music, we are attending to the

effective combination of thought and feeling. As Reimer has stated in his paper (p. 35): "The growing recognition of the role of feeling in human cognitive functioning—in the human capacity to be intelligent—shifts the grounding of music's value from the 'merely pleasant' to the profound."

Reimer also makes a critically important point for music educators and for anyone who cares deeply about the place of music in formal education in discussing the dimension of musical values that he labels "Music encompasses mind, body, feeling." He says (p. 32): "The belief that the intellect, or intelligence, is separate from and of higher value than the body or the feelings has so pervaded Western culture for so long as to be, for most, a 'given,' no longer subject to examination.... Something else is needed if music is ever to be regarded as equal in value to the basic subjects required to be studied by all who are to be considered 'educated.'" The problem here, of course, is that most people, and certainly most educators, define "intellect" or "intelligence" as having to do only with verbal and quantitative skills and knowledge. We are indebted to Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences for shedding light on this subject, but I fear that Gardner's theory has not been generally understood nor accepted by the educational, establishment in general.

#### *Expression of Our Most Intense Emotions*

Observation would lead us to believe that music is virtually a *requirement* for expressing our most intense feelings of joy, or our most intense emotions of sadness or grief. Music as an expression of intense feelings supersedes verbal expression, perhaps partly because most of us are not capable of satisfactorily expressing those intense feelings verbally, and partly because in those moments we do not *wish* to express ourselves verbally. We refer again to music's ability to combine intellect and emotion. As we seek to express our most intense feelings we recognize that the capabilities of our verbal language are too limited. Reimer, discussing the dimension he calls "Music is pleasurable and profound," says (p. 41), "Music, in its capacity to achieve a sense of deep significance by going beyond the meanings made available by words to meanings only sounds can bring into being, has always been a major source of, or an important accompaniment to, the quest for profound experience."

#### *Music as a Mental Discipline*

For some, music has value strictly as a mental discipline, as a mental exercise. This, of course, is dependent on one's knowledge and musical skills. For those who can realize it, the value of music as an exercise in mental discipline is learned, but like mathematics, there is beauty in the structures and organization of music that brings great satisfaction to people who have the opportunity to learn music in that way.

#### *Communal Value*

Music has great communal, meaning "shared experience," value for many people. This is certainly true for those who perform music with others. The experience of sharing

communication and understandings of musical meaning through ensemble performance is a special one. Musicians, who have had the opportunity to play chamber music, or to sing in a barbershop quartet, or to participate in any nonconducted ensemble, recognize the unique thrill of communication that occurs in the process of making music together. The same may be said of social dancing, whether ballroom or folk dancing. Dancers communicate with each other, with rhythmic coordination and through the mood of the music, and the shared experience is unlike any other for most people.

The communal value is powerful for listeners as well. The powerful emotions and stimuli that each one of us feels as an individual is enhanced by the belief that others are sharing that same experience. Perhaps this is made all the more powerful because we cannot express that satisfaction verbally. It is impossible to describe in words our reactions and responses while listening to music, yet we know, or at least we assume, that fellow audience members are experiencing many of the same responses. The communal experience of listening to music in a concert situation is special—it is just one of the reasons that live concerts continue to bring greater satisfaction than listening privately to even the most perfect recordings.

### *An Outlet for Creative Energies*

For many people, music has great value as an outlet for their creative energies. This is true not just for those who compose or those who improvise, but also for those who perform and interpret music. Musicians understand the special thrill of discovery when they have created something original. Originality in this case may pertain only to their own experience, but a new discovery expressed musically is nonetheless a satisfying accomplishment, whether while singing in the shower or performing in a jazz club. It is my belief that most of us, perhaps all of us, have the ability to be musically creative if we are given the encouragement and the right environment in which to exercise our creativity.

### *A Medium for Communication*

Because music can express feelings and emotions in ways that defy precise verbal definition, it has intrinsic, communicative value. It crosses barriers of verbal language, certainly, although the oft-heard reference to music as a "universal language" may be exaggerated. Cultures do not all share the same musical understandings. While it is true that for those within one cultural set—those who at least share a common musical vocabulary—there is a universality about music as a means of expression, it is also true that for people who have not benefited from musical education, the music of another culture can be quite strange indeed. We can learn to be crosscultural or multicultural in our tastes and understandings, but such appreciation is definitely a learned skill and attitude. This is a special challenge for music educators, not just to teach the music of cultures outside Western culture but also to teach respect and understanding for musical expressions that emanate from subcultures within our own culture.

## Additional Thoughts

The question Why do humans value music, is probably less pertinent here than the question Do we value music enough to teach it to our young? There seems to be ample evidence that music is fundamental in people's lives, at least for societies collectively even if not for every individual. As Bennett Reimer points out (p. 29), "Cultures have often, even routinely, regarded their music as a profoundly important dimension of their identity, to be protected and treasured, in and of itself, as among their greatest achievements." I also recognized that music must be important in contemporary society when I heard on NPR's *Morning Edition*, on Labor Day of this year, that MP3 (CD audio-quality sound files) had replaced Sex as the most searched for item on the Internet.

Is music, however, so fundamental to our quality of life that we should teach it thoroughly to our young? Or does it suffice to let our youngsters absorb what they will through popular culture? In other words, are skills and knowledge important enough to justify precious school time, or do we assume that a casual approach will suffice?

The question of music's value, more appropriately stated for our purposes, has to do with its social and quality-of-life-enhancing value for all people. We recognize, certainly, that the very talented, the very interested, will, can, and do learn a great deal on their own without formal education. But we also know that *most* will not learn enough useable skills without some formal instruction and encouragement. So, does music have sufficient value for our society that our schools should assure musical learning for all?

A tribal society that *uses* music in its daily life—a society that relies on music as fundamental in the rituals of ordinary life—would not take the chance of neglecting to teach the practice of music to its young. In "more developed" societies throughout the world, certainly in our U.S. society, we seem to assume that music is a casual thing, a recreational or entertainment pursuit that is not fundamental to our intellectual or social health. Therefore, there is little importance placed on learning how to "do" music. I can testify from firsthand listening experience, speaking as one who lives in the middle of a campus, next door to a fraternity house, that today's young people are *not* learning to sing.

The notion that music is no more than a casual pursuit is one that we must challenge vociferously. First of all, even if music's value for most people is no more than recreational, as the world becomes more and more technology assisted and information-driven, one of our principal concerns should be, will be, about how we will find humanizing influences. I have read the prediction that by 2020, perhaps sooner, 60 to 80 percent of the workforce will be working at home in front of a computer. If and when that occurs, what experiences will we truly share as human beings? What experiences or activities will help us to know ourselves, to relate to others through stimuli that evoke common feelings and reactions?

Perhaps if we think about music in a tribal culture we can learn why it is so important to us as humans. Music provides a common framework whereby people can engage

together for the common, shared celebration of joy, for dance or movement activities, for worship or contemplation, or for shared expressions of grief. It is simpler than text in many respects, yet more complex in others and certainly more emotive. Music is important because it affords us another common language through which to express our emotions—individually as well as collectively. We need that humanizing influence.

At some point, we as a society may come to realize how critical the nonmaterial values are to our quality of life. At the present time technology continues to drive us (and our economy) by intriguing us with what *can* be. The ease and immediacy of communication is wonderful today and will only be enhanced in the future. But at some point all this technology will "settle in," as the automobile and electric power have in the past. We will take for granted the ease and immediacy of communication, and then what?

I suggest that music as a means of "communication" (i.e., the sharing of emotions and common reaction to expressions of joy, of triumph, of grief, of serenity)—as intellectual stimuli, or romance, or humor, you name it—will be all the more important as our connections with each other become more and more technologically based.

Music will change as people change, of course, but what better link to traditions or styles of the past do we have? The music of popular culture has the capacity to take each of us back to our youth. Whom do you know who doesn't like the music of his or her youth? For many, *that* is their favorite music, for all time. But further, for the learned, music provides a reflection of style and perspective of past generations, of past centuries. We learn and feel something about people who lived centuries ago because we can recreate their music.

Technology has made music more ubiquitous, after all—whether in elevators or supermarkets and shopping malls or in our personal compact disc collections of music of all ages and all genres. How many could have imagined, at the turn of the last century, that we could have individual collections of music, from many centuries ago or newly composed last year, at our fingertips for listening whenever the whim captures us? And while that is wonderful, it is also a situation that tends to numb us. We do not listen as carefully because we are constantly surrounded by musical stimuli and our choices are almost limitless. We will not change that, of course, and in one respect the ubiquity of music is simply further testimony to the value that it holds for people—all people. But it does present another special challenge for music educators: the teaching of listening skills.

Whether or not we should teach musical skills and knowledge to our young is not, after all, a philosophical question—it is a political and economic one. Can we afford to teach music? Of course we can. The real question is, can our society afford *not* to?

Most of us would agree that we would like our schools to give more attention to the life of the mind—to intellect for its own sake, to higher expectations of learning for our young. I submit that the teaching of music is entirely consistent with that. We should not rely on arguments for music as a "mental ability enhancer," the so-called Mozart Effect,

but neither should we be shy about promulgating musical activity as intellectual in nature, as a great connector between the intellectual and the emotional in our thinking processes.

I will not enter into arguments about what music we should teach, or *how* we should teach it. That is left to others at this conference. Furthermore, although I once had strong feelings about that, I am now more concerned about fundamental skills. I am sorry to report that from my observation, we have *lost ground* since the Yale Seminar of 1963, the report of which intrigued me to the point of passion about the prospect of teaching the literature of music in schools on a par with teaching the literature of the language. That was a dream then that I did not think unrealistic, but unfortunately we are farther from the realization of such a dream now than we were in the 1960s. I am now convinced that we must focus on teaching our young basic musical skills—like how to sing (even if not how to read) and how to "feel" and emote through music. We have much too much to lose in humanizing influences for future generations if we fail to do that.