

Higher Ground: Music and Spirituality

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Last year, I had the opportunity to be part of a music camp --- "Camp MMW" --- one week in the Catskills with about 40 other musicians, led by the jazz group Medeski, Martin and Wood. I consider myself a much stronger classical pianist than a jazz pianist, but I have always enjoyed jazz, and more recently funk, and Medeski, Martin and Wood are, in my opinion, one of the best jazz-funk bands playing now. They are pretty experimental, and in their concerts they typically have long improvisations (otherwise known as "jams"), so I certainly hoped to gain some skills in jamming and improvisation, from both them and the other musicians. I was also excited by the uncertainty of what exactly to expect. At the very least, I thought, I would be able to listen to some great musicians and perhaps pick up a few good riffs.

When we sat down that first evening after dinner for the opening address, John Medeski, the pianist in the band, told us that although we would certainly have a lot of fun in our time here, he said that we should always remember that what we were doing was serious --- we were creating something very special, both as musicians and as listeners. Anytime musicians play, he said, it was a spiritual experience --- a sacred space was made for both the musicians and the audience. It was not just a gift, he said, but also a responsibility to our audience that we should always remember.

So, performing music, improvising, composing, and listening are spiritual acts --- or at least, by understanding the artistic creative process in this way, we give it that quality and deepen our own understanding of ourselves and each other. All artistic creation, I think, can be thought of as an attempt to "reach" the audience, to create a bond. When the painter draws on the canvas, when the actor struts and frets upon the stage, when the dancer soars through the air, and when the saxophone hits that certain note --- a space is created between the artist and the audience, created by what the artist has taken from within, from experience and nature and memory --- but also from something unknown, something deeper than all of these --- something transcendent.

For Johann Sebastian Bach, devotion to God and his gifts of composition and performance went hand in hand. He is more recognized now for his composition, but in his time he was more highly respected as an organist. In the prelude I played Bach's famous composition "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring". Bach

was a prolific composer, and many but certainly not all of his compositions were religious. His extensive knowledge of the Christian Liturgy is thought to have informed his compositional technique. Bach worked within the structure of Baroque music, the musical style of his time. I don't think he pushed the boundaries of the music of his time, as Beethoven did by pushing the boundaries of Classical music towards Romantic music, but instead enriched Baroque music through his use of counterpoint, harmonies, and repeated forms ("motifs") in subtly different ways. I think that Bach thought of his own gifts of composition as a responsibility to be used in service of his Christian God. By taking that responsibility seriously he was able to create music of sublime beauty and simplicity.

The ability of music to transcend our human limitations is a recurring theme in myths, going back to ancient times. In Greek mythology, the hero Orpheus is known as "the father of songs", revered by the Greeks as a great poet and musician, both as a singer and as the player of the lyre. His powers of music and singing were so powerful that he was able to go down to the Underworld --- even to Hades --- and bring his wife Euridice back from the dead. This story is told in the opera "Orpheus and Euridice", composed in the 18th century by Christoph Willibald Gluck. The opera starts Euridice's funeral, with a chorus of nymphs and shepherds singing, and all that Orpheus can sing is his wife's name. The part of Orpheus was composed for a high voice, in the 1700's a castrato, and in our times a male counter-tenor or a female will sing this part.

[play selection from Orpheus and Euridice]

The connection of music to spirituality can also be expressed through improvisation. In Persian classical music, which dates back to at least the 7th century, the improvisation is based on a series of scales in a different key than Western music, called modal scales, with approximately two hundred different melodic movements called gusheh. This form is still practiced today, with masters such as Shajarian. A typical piece can last up to an hour, with a beginning rhythmic instrumental prelude, then a less rhythmic more free instrumental part, next an improvised non-rhythmic vocal part, and finally a combined vocal and instrumental rhythmic part. I will play a brief selection from the beginning rhythmic prelude.

[play Persian music selection]

Originally the music would contain religious text as lyrics, and later might have

medieval Sufi poetry, such as by Hafez or Rumi. In my listening to Persian classical music, both instrumental and vocal, it feels to me very introspective and mystical, as if the musician is trying to distance himself from the physical world and create music purely from his own mind --- from spirit.

The recognition of the responsibility of the musician, and association with spirituality can be what makes the music become something more, to transcend the physical sounds produced. For John Coltrane, as for Bach, his musical gift was not purely his but something more, due to a higher power. In A Love Supreme, Coltrane takes a basic musical theme and creates something much more. The album has four parts, a suite, the first part named "Acknowledgement".

[play "Acknowledgement" from A Love Supreme]

When John Coltrane created A Love Supreme in 1964, he was 38 years old, and considered at the peak of his career. He had been playing since 1962 with his quartet, which consisted of John Coltrane on saxophone, McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums. Coltrane was born a Christian, but later had many spiritual influences, including Islam from his first wife Naima, Hinduism, and African spirituality. A Love Supreme is a recognition of a higher power in his music. He only lived two more years afterwards, dying of liver cancer when he was 40. His musical legacy lives on to this day, with most jazz musicians acknowledging his influence on their own work.

I chose some of my favorite music to share with you today. There is so much wonderful music, so much possibility in the creation of music, and in the listening. What makes that possibility something more, what makes music transcend, is more than just technical skill. It is the intention of the musician to push beyond boundaries to create something new, to risk, and also to trust in the power of the musical gift and acknowledge the responsibility to use it well. And finally, the musician, like all artists, must be prepared to give it all away --- since all great music and art is no longer only the artist's, but part of all of us who have experienced it.