

Music: The Chameleon Catalyst

Music is a life force. Those of us who love it and try to serve its cause know full well the impact it has upon our lives.

To love music and enjoy its mystery, its passion, and its hypnotic message, it is not necessary to be a professional musician. In fact, being a professional musician is not the aim of most who are touched by the structures of sound sculpture we call 'music' in all of its forms and guises.

Many people who make music a career in life limit their horizons to one or two *genres* at most. This can be beyond their control, or by preference. We are all very incomplete, therefore, as we try to place our pieces into our individual jigsaw puzzle of this Art. None of us can capture the complete picture of music's dimension. This is its magnetic field and its mystery. No matter how much we learn and digest, music will always be greater than our personal fragments of knowledge and understanding.

Many of us come to music because we were put before it at an early age. Far more reach out to it later in life, having found their own path towards its discovery. To go towards music willingly is to be lost in a labyrinth without issue, a rainbow without end.

Of all the instruments, the double reeds seem to enjoy many late starters. So often I receive an email from someone exclaiming, '*I heard that wonderful sound and just knew I had to make it myself!*' I used those same words when I first heard the oboe and later again, when I fell in love with the sound of the *oboe d'amore*, my personal pathway to what has developed into the diversity of my career.

We have just as much right to approach music and music making at a later stage in life, when, after all, mental dexterity can greatly compensate for stiffer fingers. At least, in today's computerised world, many fingers are exercising at keyboards. I am certain that teachers everywhere have discovered that dexterity on one keyboard will inevitably help and strengthen technique upon another.

So, let us brush away both the prejudices that still prevail: the taking on of the late starter as one's student, and the seeking out of a good teacher when starting late. Being able to work with the adult beginner is one of teaching's great joys. The satisfaction in awakening the mature mind to the beauty of music is a tremendous reward in itself. The fact that music is not going to be a career choice, in no way minimises the delight and positive influence it can bring to bear upon those who seek out this magnificent chameleon in any of its forms, at any stage of their lives.

I worked with children in the United States recently, using a therapy method I had devised. All had learning disorders of one sort or another, and in many cases there were additional factors and medical conditions present. Music became the catalyst, which triggered off better reading and an improved memory for detail. In some cases, music was the first thing to which they had reacted in a positive and interactive fashion during the entire school year. Working together with their class teachers, I was able to introduce a programme that took away stress and installed self-confidence.

The graph of music is easily logical to follow¹. After all, its axis north/south shows the pitch of notes, and its other, the east/west, their relative length. Reading and listening to Cathy Berberian's graphic score of '*Stripsody*'², an illustration in sound of silent strip cartoon characters, is an excellent illustration of this logic. She used three lines (low, medium and high) giving plenty of food for both imagination and reflection in this beautiful score, which is a work of art in itself (graphics by Roberto Zamarin), Fun it most certainly is, for beginners of all ages!

I created human characters for each note and illustrated them by simple poems that were easily learned by heart and chanted to a rap beat. Coloured crayons identified the note on the staff. The satisfaction of being able to interpret this new 'alphabet' became a positive force in mastering those elusive 26 letters. The children performed in front of each other, which helped to instil their new confidence and further strengthen it.

Separating word syllables, I wrote them beneath the notes. Reassured by the presence of the music, the student forgot her/his past failures at reading, and focused on finding the note on the keyboard and saying or singing the word fragment at the same time.

Most of the children with whom I worked were in the nine to ten-year-old bracket. One boy, at 11, was still unable to read. I gave him individual piano lessons. With the right hand, reading middle C and D and playing the notes consecutively with thumb and index was easy. The real test is always how to play from middle C down to B with the left-hand thumb and index. Going down to the left is invariably much harder than going up to the right (for the right handed). Working on this one problem of lack of co-ordination had the most amazing results. Dyslexia, word blindness, lack of concentration and memory; all these conditions improved dramatically.

When I read that music theory and language grammar are both lodged in the same part of the brain, I started to work out a plan for my project. The links between performance and speech, musical theory and grammatical construction were just crying out to me for a hands-on, musical approach. Music fulfils the

¹ For more information <http://www.dolmetsch.com/musictheory1.htm>

² Edition Peters No. 66164. For more information concerning the recording <http://www.cathyberberian.com>

criteria for the classification as 'language'. Controlling the learning of two subject matters together should therefore be no more difficult than raising a child to be bilingual, something I had done four times.

The school where I was applying these techniques followed the Reggio Emilia teaching philosophy. This approach shares much with that of Rudolph Steiner, whose pedagogy is such a constructive mixture of practical arts and appreciation of all a child's gifts. As Artist-in-Residence, I was able to work on my ideas, and planted a love of music in a very willing audience. I used a similar method for the teaching of French to native English speakers with equally positive results.

Playing an instrument such as the oboe or bassoon, as I do, one's initial focus at university or conservatoire was inevitably the brace of chairs available in the symphony orchestra of the Western culture. I fear that today, music is taught like an Olympic sport. So few people dare to play some of the most beautiful baroque concerti because they are 'not virtuosic enough'. To create the perfect 'Note Engineer', who plays faster, higher, more notes per square inch/centimetre, appears to be the direction of the apprenticeship of many. The beauty of the melodic line has so often been relegated to the status of a souvenir of times past. The production of the competitive musician, a noble stallion bred for the race, is the aim of many (happily not all) of today's musical education. *'How else can one survive the cattle market of the audition and competition circuit?'* This unanswered question reverberates around the halls of many a School of Music. Training the nerves instead of learning about the magic of musicianship appears to be the present fashion in far too many cases everywhere. Competitiveness is encouraged as a vital artistic ingredient. Olympia is omnipresent.

Music is so much more than the symphony orchestra. After all, someone chose the music that is performed, engaged the soloist, published the work, composed and commissioned it, promoted and recorded it, advertised the event and engaged the conductor. Someone coordinated with the radio or TV producers and sponsors, and held a larger vision of the whole than either performer or listener could. All these other professions, which bring music to the consumer to woo her/his ear and enrich her/his life, are as important as the drawing of a string across a bow or the scraping of a reed. Instruments are designed, manufactured, exported and retailed. Their accessories and individual repertoires alone are the work of many. Music is a universe. Being involved in it in any one branch in any one capacity is simply a drop in any one ocean.

Music, the joy, the treasure, the inspiration, the divine, and the profane, will forever be open to all those who can listen to its many levels and drink from each individual inspirational chalice. The place of the musician in this entire puzzle is to be eclectic rather than Olympic. Of course, the trained professional performer can play a concerto, sit in an orchestra, accompany a ballet or participate in the pit for an operatic performance. S(h)e can also soothe the crying child with the *'Mozart effect'*, and inspire the 'word-blind' reader to an awakening.

Communicating through the gift of music, (s)he can instil the essence of communication itself. These variations in, and deviations from an original career path - the seeking out and finding of additional pathways - should in no way be viewed as 'lowering one's goals'. In the overall scheme of not only the musician's life, but also the lives of the others touched by her/his talent, they are very important. Multi-uses of Music are the foundation stones of the pyramid of which performing was initially, undoubtedly, considered the pinnacle of personal achievement. Horizons can broaden. Personally, I think that they should be encouraged to diversify. This enriches every plain and aspect of an individual's artistic merit and growth process. After all, do frogs deserve to corner the multiple benefits of *metamorphosis*?

Our Art can accomplish so much. Being a performer is a wonderful gift, but in the end, it is still only one part of the enigma. I advocate and encourage a wider, more flexible approach to everything we do with and for Music.

We haven't even begun to see what we can give back to Music in exchange for that, which the Muse of Music continues to bring to us!

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