

MUSIC / CULTURE

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*Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*  
by Christopher Small

CHRISTOPHER SMALL



# Musicking

THE MEANINGS OF  
PERFORMING AND  
LISTENING



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*Prelude*  
Music and Musicking



**In a concert hall**, two thousand people settle in their seats, and an intense silence falls. A hundred musicians bring their instruments to the ready. The conductor raises his baton, and after a few moments the symphony begins. As the orchestra plays, each member of the audience sits alone, listening to the work of the great, dead, composer.

**In a supermarket**, loudspeakers fill the big space with anodyne melodies that envelop customers, checkout clerks, shelf assistants and managers, uniting them in their common purpose of buying and selling.

**In a big stadium**, fifty thousand voices cheer and fifty thousand pairs of hands applaud. A blaze of colored light and a crash of drums and amplified guitars greet the appearance onstage of the famous star of popular music, who is often heard on record and seen on video but whose presence here in the flesh is an experience of another kind. The noise is so great that the first few minutes of the performance are inaudible.

**A young man walks down a city street, his Walkman clamped across his ears**, isolating him from his surroundings. Inside his head is an infinite space charged with music that only he can hear.

**A saxophonist finishes his improvised solo** with a cascade of notes that ornament an old popular song. He wipes his forehead with a handkerchief and nods absently to acknowledge the applause of a hundred pairs of hands. The pianist takes up the tune.

**A church organist** plays the first line of a familiar hymn tune, and the congregation begins to sing, a medley of voices in ragged unison.

**At an outdoor rally**, with bodies erect and hands at the salute, fifty thousand men and women thunder out a patriotic song. The sounds they make rise toward the God whom they are imploring to make their country great. Others hear the singing and shiver with fear.

In an opera house, a soprano, in long blond wig and white gown streaked with red, reaches the climax of her mad scene and dies pathetically. Her death in song provokes not tears but a roar of satisfaction that echoes around the theater. As the curtain descends, hands clap thunderously and feet stamp on the floor. In a few moments, restored to life, she will appear before the curtain to receive her homage with a torrent of applause and a shower of roses thrown from the galleries.

A housewife making the beds in the morning sings to herself an old popular song, its words imperfectly remembered.

So many different settings, so many different kinds of action, so many different ways of organizing sounds into meanings, all of them given the name *music*. What is this thing called music, that human beings the world over should find in it such satisfaction, should invest in it so much of their lives and resources? The question has been asked many times over the centuries, and since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, scholars and musicians have tried to explain the nature and meaning of music and find the reason for its extraordinary power in the lives of human beings.

Many of these attempts have been complex and ingenious, and some have even possessed a kind of abstract beauty, reminding one in their complexity and ingenuity of those cycles and epicycles which astronomers invented to explain the movement of the planets before Copernicus simplified matters by placing the sun instead of the earth at the center of the system. But none has succeeded in giving a satisfactory answer to the question—or rather, pair of questions—*What is the meaning of music?* and *What is the function of music in human life?*—in the life, that is, of every member of the human species.

It is easy to understand why. Those are the wrong questions to ask. There is no such thing as music.

Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing “music” is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely. This habit of thinking in abstractions, of taking from an action what appears to be its essence and of giving that essence a name, is probably as old as language; it is useful in the conceptualizing of our world but it has its dangers. It is very easy to come to think of the abstraction as more real than the reality it represents, to think, for example, of those abstractions which we call love, hate, good and evil as having an existence apart from the acts of loving, hating, or performing good and evil deeds and even to think of them as being in some way more real than the acts themselves, a kind of universal or ideal lying behind and suffusing the actions. This is the trap of reification, and it has been a besetting fault of Western thinking ever since Plato, who was one of its earliest perpetrators.

If there is no such thing as music, then to ask “What is the meaning of music?” is to ask a question that has no possible answer. Scholars of Western music seem to have *have* sensed rather than understood that this is so; but rather than directing their attention to the activity we call music, whose meanings have to be grasped in time as it flies and cannot be fixed on paper, they have quietly carried out a process of elision by means of which the word *music* becomes equated with “works of music in the Western tradition.” Those at least do seem to have a real existence, even if the question of just *how* and *where* they exist does create problems. In this way the question “What is the meaning of music?” becomes the more manageable “What is the meaning of this work (or these works) of music?”—which is not the same question at all.

This privileging of Western classical music above all other musics is a strange and contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, it is claimed to be an intellectual and spiritual achievement that is unique in the world’s musical cultures (for me the claim is summed up by the reported remark of a famous scientist who, when asked what message should be included in a missile to be fired off in search of other intelligent life in the universe, replied, “We could send them Bach, but that would be *boasting*”); on the other hand, it appeals to only a very tiny minority of people, even within Western industrialized societies; classical music records account for only around 3 percent of all record sales.

We even see it in the way the word *music* is commonly used; we know what kind of music is dealt with in the music departments of universities and colleges and in schools and conservatories of music, and we know what kind of music an upmarket newspaper’s music critic will be writing about. In addition, musicology is, almost by definition, concerned with Western classical music, while other musics, including even Western popular musics, are dealt with under the rubric of ethnomusicology (the real musical study of Western popular musics, in their own terms rather than those of classical music, is only just beginning and does not yet dare to call itself musicology).

The contradiction extends to the nature of the music itself; on the one hand, it is regarded as the model and paradigm for all musical experience, as can be seen from the fact that a classical training is thought to be a fit preparation for any other kind of musical performance (a famous violinist records “jazz” duets with Stéphane Grappelli, and operatic divas record songs from Broadway musicals, all without apparently hearing their own stylistic *solecisms*); and on the other, it is regarded as somehow unique and not to be subjected to the same modes of inquiry as other musics, especially in respect to its social meanings; brave spirits who have attempted to do so have brought the *wrath* of the musicological establishment down on



their heads. Even those who try to right the balance by comparative study of other human musics most often avoid comparisons with Western classical music, thus emphasizing, if only in a negative way, its uniqueness and implicitly privileging it in reverse, although it is in fact a perfectly normal human music, an ethnic music if you like, like any other and, like any other, susceptible to social as well as purely musical comment.

So it is that while scholars of music may disagree of any number of matters, there is one matter on which there is virtually unanimous agreement, all the more powerful for being for the most part undiscussed and unspoken. It is that the essence of music and of whatever meanings it contains is to be found in those things called musical works—works, that is, of Western classical music. The most succinct modern formulation of the idea comes perhaps from the doyen of contemporary German musicologists, Carl Dalhaus (1983), who tells us, flatly, that “the subject matter of music is made up, primarily, of significant works of music that have outlived the culture of their age” and that “the concept ‘work’ and not ‘event’ is the cornerstone of music history.” Any history of music will bear out Dalhaus’s contention. They are primarily histories of those things which are works of music and of the people who made them, and they tell us about the circumstances of their creation, about the factors that influenced their nature, and about the influence they have had on subsequent works.

It is not only historians who assume the primacy of musical works but also musicologists, whose purpose is to ascertain the real nature and contours of musical works by recourse to original texts, as well as theorists, whose purpose is to discover the way in which the works are constructed as objects in themselves, and aestheticians, who deal with the meaning of sound objects and the reasons for their effect on a listener. All are concerned with things, with musical works. Even the recent area of study known as “reception history” deals not, as one might reasonably expect, with performance itself but with the changing ways in which musical works have been perceived by their audiences during the term of their existence. The part played by the performers in that perception does not come into consideration; when performance is discussed at all, it is spoken of as if it were nothing more than a presentation, and generally an approximate and imperfect presentation at that, of the work that is being performed. It is rare indeed to find the act of musical performance thought of as possessing, much less creating, meanings in its own right.

The presumed autonomous “thingness” of works of music is, of course, only part of the prevailing modern philosophy of art in general. What is valued is not the action of art, not the act of creating, and even less that of perceiving and responding, but the created art object itself. Whatever

meaning art may have is thought to reside in the object, persisting independently of what the perceiver may bring to it. It is simply there, floating through history untouched by time and change, waiting for the ideal perceiver to draw it out.

It is for the sake of that unchanging, immanent meaning that paintings, books, pieces of sculpture and other art objects (including musical works and the scores that in some not quite understood way are supposed to be the bearers of them) are cared for, lovingly exhibited in air-conditioned museums (and concert halls), sold for exorbitant prices (the autograph score of Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor was sold in London in 1989 for nearly one and a half million dollars), printed in luxurious editions, pursued to the creator’s manuscript (and performed in “authentic” versions). The critic Walter Benjamin encapsulated the idea in one memorable sentence: “The supreme reality of art,” he wrote, “is the isolated, self-contained work.”

This idea, that musical meaning resides uniquely in music objects, comes with a few corollaries. The first is that musical performance plays no part in the creative process, being only the medium through which the isolated, self-contained work has to pass in order to reach its goal, the listener. We read little in music literature about performance other than in the limited sense of following the composer’s notations and realizing them in sound, and we are left to conclude that the more transparent the medium the better.

There are even those who believe that, since each performance is at best only an imperfect and approximate representation of the work itself, it follows that music’s inner meanings can never be properly yielded up in performance. They can be discovered only by those who can read and study the score, like Johannes Brahms, who once refused an invitation to attend a performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, saying he would sooner stay home and read it. What Mozart, the supreme practical musician, would have had to say about that one can only imagine. We note the corollary to that idea, which is seriously held by many musical scholars and even musicians: only those who can read a score have access to the inner meanings of music. One wonders, in that case, why we should bother performing musical works at all, when we could just sit at home, like Brahms, and read them as if they were novels.

As for performers, we hear little about them either, at least not as creators of musical meaning. It seems that they can clarify or obscure a work, present it adequately or not, but they have nothing to contribute to it; its meaning has been completely determined before a performer ever lays eyes on the score. Composers, especially in the twentieth century, have often

railed against the “liberties” taken by performers who dare to interpose themselves, their personalities and their ideas between composer and listener. Igor Stravinsky (1947) was especially vehement in this regard, condemning “interpretation” in terms that seem as much moral as purely aesthetic and demanding from the performer a rigidly objective approach called by him “execution,” which he characterized as “the strict putting into effect of an explicit will that contains nothing beyond what it specifically commands.” The eagerness with which many composers took up electronic composition from the 1950s onward was motivated at least in part by the prospect of dispensing altogether with the services of those troublesome fellows.

The second corollary is that a musical performance is thought of as a one-way system of communication, running from composer to individual listener through the medium of the performer. This is perhaps just another way of stating the first, though it brings a change of emphasis, for it suggests that the listener’s task is simply to contemplate the work, to try to understand it and to respond to it, but that he or she has nothing to contribute to its meaning. That is the composer’s business.

It suggests also that music is an individual matter, that composing, performing and listening take place in a social vacuum; the presence of other listeners is at best an irrelevance and at worst an interference in the individual’s contemplation of the musical work as it is presented by the performers. A flowchart of communication during a performance might show arrows pointing from composer to performers and a multitude of arrows pointing from performers to as many listeners as are present; but what it will not show is any arrow pointing in the reverse direction, indicating feedback from listener to performers and certainly not to composer (who in any case is probably dead and so cannot possibly receive any feedback). Nor would it show any that ran from listener to listener; no interaction is assumed there.

A third corollary is that no performance can possibly be better than the work that is being performed. The quality of the work sets an upper limit to the possible quality of the performance, so an inferior work of music cannot possibly give rise to a good performance. We all know from experience that that is nonsense; performers are always capable of turning trivial material into great performances. Adelina Patti could reduce an audience to tears singing “Home Sweet Home,” while the wealth of meanings that Billie Holiday was able to create with her performances of the tritest of popular songs is both legendary and documented on record. Were it not so, then much of the culture of opera would collapse, for who would toler-

ate the musical and dramatic absurdities of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, for example, or of Gounod’s *Faust* if it were not for the opportunities the old warhorses give singers to show off their powers?

But I should go further and shall argue later that it is not just great performers who are capable of endowing such material with meaning and beauty. However trivial and banal the work may be that is the basis of the performance, meaning and beauty are created whenever any performer approaches it with love and with all the skill and care that he or she can bring to it. And of course it is also possible to give a beautiful performance without any work of music at all being involved, as thousands of improvising musicians have demonstrated.

A fourth corollary is that each musical work is autonomous, that is to say, it exists without necessary reference to any occasion, any ritual, or any particular set of religious, political, or social beliefs. It is there purely for what the philosopher Immanuel Kant called “disinterested contemplation” of its own inherent qualities. Even a work that started its life as integrally attached to a myth and to the ritual enactment of that myth, as, for example, did Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*, which was intended as part of the Good Friday obsequies of the Lutheran Church, is today performed in concert halls as a work of art in its own right, whose qualities and whose meaning for a modern listener are supposed to depend solely on its qualities “as music” and have nothing to do with the beliefs that Bach believed he had embodied in it.

My musical friends scoff at me when I say I can hardly bear to listen to the piece, so powerfully and so cogently does it embody a myth that to me is profoundly antipathetic. “Don’t bother about all that,” they say, “just listen to the marvelous music.” Marvelous music it is indeed, but marvelous for what? That is a question that seems never to be asked, let alone answered. Other musical cultures, including our own past, would find such attitudes curious; Bach himself, could he know about them, might well feel that his masterpiece was being trivialized.

Neither the idea that musical meaning resides uniquely in musical objects nor any of its corollaries bears much relation to music as it is actually practiced throughout the human race. Most of the world’s musicians—and by that word I mean, here and throughout this book, not just professional musicians, not just those who make a living from singing or playing or composing, but anyone who sings or plays or composes—have no use for musical scores and do not treasure musical works but simply play and sing, drawing on remembered melodies and rhythms and on their own powers of invention within the strict order of tradition. There may not even be any fixed and stable musical work, so the performer creates as he or she

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performs while the listeners, should there be any apart from the performers, have an important and acknowledged creative role to play in the performance through the energy they feed (or fail to feed), selectively and with discrimination, back to the performers.

But even within a literate musical culture such as the Western classical tradition the exclusive concentration on musical works and the relegation of the act of performance to subordinate status has resulted in a severe misunderstanding of what actually takes place during a performance. That misunderstanding has, as we shall see, had in turn its effect on the performance itself—on the experience, that is, of the performance, for both performers and listeners—an effect that I believe to have been more to impoverish than to enrich it. For *performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.*

That being so, a musical performance is a much richer and more complex affair than is allowed by those who concentrate their attention exclusively on the musical work and on its effect on an individual listener. If we widen the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music's primary meanings are not individual at all but social. Those social meanings are not to be hived off into something called a "sociology" of music that is separate from the meaning of the sounds but are fundamental to an understanding of the activity that is called music.

The fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfills in human life. Whatever that function may be, I am certain, first, that to take part in a music act is of central importance to our very humanness, as important as taking part in the act of speech, which it so resembles (but from which it also differs in important ways), and second, that everyone, every normally endowed human being, is born with the gift of music no less than with the gift of speech. If that is so, then our present-day concert life, whether "classical" or "popular," in which the "talented" few are empowered to produce music for the "untalented" majority, is based on a falsehood. It means that our powers of making music for ourselves have been hijacked and the majority of people robbed of the musicality that is theirs by right of birth, while a few stars, and their handlers, grow rich and famous through selling us what we have been led to believe we lack.

This book, then, is not so much about music as it is about people, about people as they play and sing, as they listen and compose, and even as they

dance (for in many cultures if no one is dancing then no music is happening, so integral is dance to the musical act), and about the ways in which they—we—go about singing and playing and composing and listening. It is also about the reasons we feel the urge to do these things and why we feel good when we do them well. We could say that it is not so much about music as about people musicking.

So far as I know the word *musicking* does not appear in any English dictionary, but it is too useful a conceptual tool to lie unused. It is the present participle, or gerund, of the verb *to music*. This verb does have an obscure existence in some larger dictionaries, but its potential goes unexploited because when it does appear it is used to mean roughly the same as "to perform" or "to make music"—a meaning that is already well covered by those two words. I have larger ambitions for this neglected verb.

I have proposed this definition: *To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.* We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are all contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance.

It will become clear as we go along how useful this verb—and especially its gerund—is (the added *k* is not just a caprice but has historical antecedents), and I shall use it from now on as if it were the proper English language verb that I hope it will become.

I have to make two things clear. The first is that to pay attention in any way to a musical performance, including a recorded performance, even to Muzak in an elevator, is to music. The second is related but needs to be stated separately: the verb *to music* is not concerned with valuation. It is descriptive, not prescriptive. It covers all participation in a musical performance, whether it takes place actively or passively, whether we like the way it happens or whether we do not, whether we consider it interesting or boring, constructive or destructive, sympathetic or antipathetic. The word will remain useful only for so long as we keep our own value judgments clear of it. Value-laden uses that I have heard, such as "Everyone ought to music" or "You can't call listening to a Walkman musicking," distort its meaning, weaken its usefulness as an investigative tool, and plunge us back into futile arguments about what music or musicking is. Value judgments come later, if they come at all.

Apart from favoring the idea that music is first and foremost action, the

also  
Blacking



word has other useful implications. In the first place, in making no distinction between what the performers are doing and what the rest of those present are doing, it reminds us that musicking (you see how easy it is to slip into using it) is an activity in which all those present are involved and for whose nature and quality, success or failure, everyone present bears some responsibility. It is not just a matter of composers, or even performers, actively doing something to, or for, passive listeners. Whatever it is we are doing, we are all doing it together—performers, listeners (should there be any apart from the performers), composer (should there be one apart from the performers), dancers, ticket collectors, piano movers, roadies, cleaners and all.

I am not, of course, so silly as to see no distinction between what the performers are doing and what the cleaners are doing; they are obviously doing different things, and when we want to distinguish between the two sets of activities we already have adequate words with which to do so. In using the verb *to music*, on the other hand, we are reminded that all these different activities add up to a single event, whose nature is affected by the ways in which all of them are carried out, and we have a tool by means of which we can begin to explore the meanings that the event as a whole is generating. We take into account not just what the performers are doing and certainly not just the piece that is being played or what the composer, should there be one, has done. We begin to see a musical performance as an encounter between human beings that takes place through the medium of sounds organized in specific ways. Like all human encounters, it takes place in a physical and a social setting, and those, too, have to be taken into account when we ask what meanings are being generated by a performance.

That being so, it is not enough to ask, *What is the nature or the meaning of this work of music?* To do so leaves us trapped in the assumptions of the modern Western concert tradition, and even within those limits, so narrow when one considers the whole field of human musicking, it will give answers that are at best partial and even contradictory. And of course, if there is no fixed and stable musical work, as is true of many cultures, then the question cannot even be asked. Using the concept of musicking as a human encounter, we can ask the wider and more interesting question: *What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?* Or to put it more simply, we can ask of the performance, any performance anywhere and at any time, *What's really going on here?* It is at that point, and not before, that we can allow our value judgments full rein—if we wish to do so.

In framing that question, I have placed the words “of this work” in parentheses to remind us that there may not necessarily be a musical work

but that when there is, then the nature of that work is part of the nature of the performance, and whatever meanings it may in itself possess are part of the meaning of the event—an important part but only a part. I do this in order to reassure those who fear that I am going to ignore the part that the nature of the work plays in the nature of the performance or even that I am going to deny its existence altogether. Of course not; those set sequences of sounds we call works, or pieces, of music form an important part of the musical economy of the modern world, from the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven to “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.”

But they are not the whole of musicking and in fact are not even necessary for it to take place, as can be seen from the large number of human musical cultures in which there is no such thing as a musical work, in which there are only the activities of singing, playing, listening—and most probably, dancing.

Thus we see that the second question does not exclude the first but rather subsumes it, into a larger and more comprehensive question. In addition, if the definition of musicking I have offered takes in all the activities that affect the nature of that event which is a performance; then that must include preparing for it. That means that composing, practicing and rehearsing, performing, and listening are not separate processes but are all aspects of the one great human activity that is called musicking. And if the meaning of the work is part of the meaning of the event, then the opposition between “work” and “event” expressed by Carl Dalhaus does not exist.

By expanding our questioning to the total performance we can escape from the assumptions of the Western concert tradition as it exists today, which continue to dominate the ways in which we think about music; and we can see that tradition, as it were from the outside, as a small and these days (it was not always so) tranquil (some might even say stagnant) lagoon of the great restless ocean of human musicking. We may see also that, when viewed from outside, it is less isolated from that great ocean than those who look only from inside may think and perhaps also that whatever vitality we can continue to find in it today is, as it always has been, produced by the quickening effect of the life-giving water of that great ocean.

Any theory of musicking, which is to say any attempt to explain its meaning and its function in human life, that cannot be used to account for all human musicking, no matter how strange, primitive or even antipathetic it may seem to our perceptions, is not worth the paper it is written on. It is not just a question of why the *Saint Matthew Passion* of J. S. Bach and the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven are great works—which they undoubtedly are, once we accept the premises on which they were composed. It is not even just a question of why people like to sing and to hear

"Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" or "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Over Night?" or why drunken ol' pals like to gather around the piano and sing bawdy songs together in rustic harmony. It must also explain why it is that taking part in a performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion* or the Ninth Symphony or "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" arouses in some a powerful and joyful emotional response while in others it induces only boredom and irritation.

But the theory must go further, and be able to explain why Indonesians enjoy taking part in performances of gamelan music, why the Ewe of Ghana like to play, sing and dance to Afro-Cuban popular music as well as the *adzida* dance, and why many, but by no means all, African Americans like to sing and to hear gospel songs. It must also be able to explain why so many white people go for African American blues, some of them even becoming successful and admired practitioners, why rap has become an important and influential way of musicking on both sides of the American color barrier, and how it is that reggae got big in Japan.

It must be able to explain, in fact, not just why members of one social and cultural group differ in their ways of musicking—from members of another group but how it is that members of one culture can come to understand and to enjoy, and perhaps creatively misunderstand, the musicking of others. It must explain also how some musical cultures become dominant, sometimes across the whole world, while others remain confined to the social group within which they originated. And of course it must be able to explain why people like to music at all.

There is no dearth of studies, many of them brilliant and illuminating, of musicking's social function, that show the ways in which musicking functions as a social and even a political act. Nor do we lack for studies of the dazzling series of interactions, fusions, crossovers and hybridizations that are taking place today between musicians the world over. In this book there is no way in which I could possibly deal with all these phenomena even if I had the knowledge and experience to do so. Nor am I trying to give an account of what musicking has become in our time or of how it got to be that way; I shall have little to say about recording, broadcasting or what has become known as the music industry.

My purpose here is different—at the same time more modest and more ambitious. It is to propose a framework for understanding all musicking as a human activity, to understand not just how but why taking part in a musical performance acts in such complex ways on our existence as individual, social and political beings. What I am proposing is a way of interpreting what we already know about human musicking, a theory of musicking if you like.

Who needs a theory of musicking? Surely, such a thing is too academic to be of either interest or use to ordinary people?

Everyone, whether aware of it or not, has what we can loosely call a theory of musicking, which is to say, an idea of what musicking is, of what it is not, and of the part it plays in our lives. As long as that theory remains unconscious and unthought about, it not only controls people and their musical activities, limiting and circumscribing their capabilities, but also renders them vulnerable to manipulation by those those who have an interest in doing so for purposes of power, status, or profit. It is one of my aims in this book to make readers more aware of the the nature of their "theories" of musicking and thus be in a better position to take control of their musical lives. A theory of musicking, like the act itself, is not just an affair for intellectuals and "cultured" people but an important component of our understanding of ourselves and of our relationships with other people and the other creatures with which we share our planet. It is a political matter in the widest sense. *Jordan W. ...*

If everyone is born musical, then everyone's musical experience is valid.

That being so, a theory of musicking, if it is to have any basis in real life, must stand up to being tested against the musical experience of every human being, no matter who he or she may be or how the experience was acquired. For that reason I shall write in terms that are as closely tied to concrete musical experience as I can make them, and I ask in turn that every reader test everything that I have to say against his or her own experience.

So if the meaning of music lies not just in musical works but in the totality of a musical performance, where do we start to look for insights that will unite the work and the event and allow us to understand it?

The answer I propose is this. The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. These are important matters, perhaps the most important in human life, and how we learn about them through musicking is what this book is about.

As we shall see, the relationships of a musical performance are enormously complex, too complex, ultimately, to be expressed in words. But that does not mean that they are too complex for our minds to encompass.



The act of musicking, in its totality, itself provides us with a language by means of which we can come to understand and articulate those relationships and through them to understand the relationships of our lives.

That being so, we need to look as well as listen around us during a performance, to find out **what relationships are being generated in the performance space**. To show the kind of questions we might ask of a performance, I shall be examining carefully an important event in Western musical culture, namely, a **symphony concert** as it might take place in a concert hall anywhere in the industrialized world. I am going to try to deconstruct it, which is to say, to decipher the signals that are everywhere being given and received, and to learn the meaning not just of the musical works that are being played there but of the **total event** that is a symphony concert. I have three reasons for taking this event as an example.

The first is that it is likely to be an experience that most readers of this book will have undergone at least once, and you will therefore be able to check my observations against your own.

**The second is that a symphony concert is a very sacred event in Western culture, sacred in the sense that its nature is assumed to be given and not open to question. I know of few writings that so much as attempt to describe it in detail, let alone question its nature. I shall therefore, and I cheerfully admit the fact, find it a pleasurable task to examine it and to ask the forbidden question, *What's really going on here?***

I have to pause here, remembering the response of some critics to my earlier attempts to deconstruct a symphony concert. It seems that I need to explain that to do this is not to anathematize or in any way pass judgment on either the event or the works that are played during its course. To try to tease out the complex texture of meanings that a musical performance—any musical performance, anywhere, at any time—generates is *not* reductive or destructive. Quite the contrary; it is to enrich our experience of it. And after all, at the very least, the ceremonies of the concert hall must, to the unbiased eye and ear, appear as strange as did those rituals of Africa and America which the first European travelers encountered and just as much in need of accounting for. As I said earlier, it is an ethnic music like any other.

Nor, in asking of a symphony concert the question *What's really going on here?* am I suggesting, as some critics seem to think, that what is going on is something sinister, something “dehumanizing” or “authoritarian” (two words recently used in this regard by a critic). It is no part of my purpose to characterize symphonic or indeed any other performance in such crude reductive terms. I simply want to show the kind of questions that we might ask of it, and I cannot help wondering if those who show such resistance to asking questions of a symphony concert might not themselves be a

little afraid that they will uncover meanings they would rather not know about.

Another caution that I have learned from my critics is that I am not making the logically quite unjustified jump from deconstructing a symphony concert to characterizing (and apparently, by implication condemning) classical music as a whole. As those critics have kindly pointed out to me, there are other kinds of event within the classical music culture: chamber music concerts and opera, for example, as well as solo recitals and record evenings; and while they clearly possess many features and meanings in common with symphony concerts, they also differ from them, as can be seen from the fact that their respective audiences, while they overlap, are not identical. To those critics I can only repeat that my intention is not to give a blanket characterization of classical music but simply to show the kinds of questions one can ask of a particular kind of musical performance.

All that said, I have to confess that there is a third, more personal reason for taking the symphony concert as example. It arises from my own continuing ambivalent relationship with the Western classical tradition, with the works that are assumed to comprise it, on the one hand, and, on the other, with the institutions through and in which it is disseminated, performed, and listened to today. Despite the fact that I grew up half a world away from its heartland, I was brought up in that tradition. I learned to play its piano repertory, I listened to records and went whenever opportunities presented themselves (very rarely up to my twenties) to attend performances of the symphonic and chamber repertory; opera did not come my way until I was too old to succumb to its charms. I still get a feeling in the seat of my pants every four minutes or so when I play my magnificent new CDs of wonderful old warhorses like the *Emperor* Concerto or the Rachmaninov Second Concerto, when I used to have to get up and turn over the twelve-inch, 78-rpm record.

It is my heritage and I cannot escape it, and I understand well the continuing urge on the part of performers, as well as of musicologists, theorists, and historians, to explore those repertoires and learn their secrets. I myself continue to love playing such piano works of that tradition as are within the reach of my modest technique and take every opportunity to do so, both in public and in private.

But from the moment when I began to attend large-scale public concerts, I have never felt at ease in that environment. Loving to hear and to play the works but feeling uncomfortable during the events at which they are presented has produced a deep ambivalence that has not lessened over the years. Now, in my seventy-first year, I have come nearer to pinning down what is wrong. I do not feel at ease with the social relationships of

concert halls. I can say that they do not correspond with my ideal of human relationships. **For me there is a dissonance between the meanings—the relationships—that are generated by the works that are being performed and those that are generated by the performance events.**

I have no desire to impose these feelings on anyone who might read this book, and I hope that by acknowledging them right at the start I can avoid even the appearance of wanting to do so. I strongly suspect, however, that I am not alone in feeling as I do; if so it may be that my exploration of my ambivalent feelings might be of use to others besides myself, including perhaps, *mutatis mutandis*, those who feel at ease in the concert hall environment but not in certain other musical environments—a jazz or rock concert, for example.

In any case, I do not regret the dissonance, which has over the years been a rich source of feelings and ideas, nor do I feel any resentment against the culture for what is apparently my own self-exclusion from it. It is this continuing ambivalent fascination with the culture of the concert hall that leads me to frame a question—a subquestion, if you like, of that which I framed a few pages back: ***What does it mean to take part in a performance of Western concert music in a concert hall in these closing years of the twentieth century?*** I shall be devoting a substantial part of this book to an exploration of this question.

There must be a link between the nature of symphonic works and the nature of the events at which they are played. That link is flexible, as we can see from the fact that most of them were first played to different audiences and under different conditions from those under which they are played and listened to today; but it must, on the other hand, exist, since only works from a certain specific repertory are displayed at modern symphony concerts. One does not hear “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” there, or “Black and Tan Fantasy” or “Please Please Me”; they are heard in other places, under other conditions. That leads me to a difficult question, which I hesitate to ask but must ask: *Is there something built into the nature of the works of that repertory that makes performing and listening to them under any circumstances go counter to the way I believe human relationships should be?* Do they sing a siren song? Or to put it in newspaper headline terms, *Was even Mozart wrong?* Many people whose views I respect would answer those questions with a firm yes.

Nevertheless, I feel the case for the prosecution has yet to be proved. The various counsels for the defense, in schools, music colleges, and universities, may be overemphatic in defense of their client and overeager to claim privilege for it, but we are not in a court of law, and an adversarial stance does little good for either side. Besides, as long as they center their

argument on music objects and ignore the music act, centering on music rather than musicking, the cycles and epicycles keep spinning merrily, and the question can never be answered. Maybe that is why they do it. In any case, that is one reason the question must be asked in a new way.

It seems obvious to me that performing these works under certain circumstances generates different meanings from performing them under others. For instance, when I, an amateur pianist using material provided by Josef Haydn under the name of Piano Sonata in E-flat and charging nothing for admission, play the piano to a couple hundred of my fellow citizens of the little Catalan town where I live, people from a variety of occupations that could be called working-class as well as middle-class, most of whom I know and who know me, at least by sight in the street, I think we are together making different meanings from those made when a famous virtuoso pianist performs from that same material to an anonymous paying audience in a big concert hall. At the same time, since we are both playing from the same material, making more or less the same sounds in the same relationships, there must also be a residue of meanings that are common to both performances. Maybe if we knew completely where the differences and the similarities lay, we should understand completely the nature of musical performance. In any case the first step is taken when we ask the question *What's really going on here?*

But do not expect from me any final or definite answer to that or any other questions that I may raise in this book. In the first place, I do not think there *are* final and definite answers to any of the really important questions in human life; there are only useful and useless answers—answers, that is, that lead in the direction of enrichment of experience or of its impoverishment. And in the second place, it is one of the assumptions on which I write that you, the reader, are perfectly capable of coming up with your own answers, just as you are capable of doing your own musicking. All I hope to do is help frame the questions, for if questions are not framed properly, then there is not much hope of coming up with right, or useful, answers.

There will be times when, in order to make a question clear, I have to propose an answer—and I do have answers of my own, many of them strongly felt, that I do not intend even to try to keep under wraps. But as I used to say to my students, I don't care whether or not you agree with my answers, so long as you see that there are questions to be asked.

The majority of this book, then, will be taken up with a description, as fine-grained as I can make it, of the ceremony in Symphony Hall and of the human and sonic relationships (and the relationships between those relationships) that are being generated there. I wish it were possible to run at



the same time, in counterpoint as it were, a parallel text that explains why I believe it is important to understand the nature of these relationships. But (and it is one of the themes of this book) while the gestures of musicking can articulate many kinds of relationship at once, words, on the other hand, can deal with things only one at a time, and there is no way they can be made to bear the cargo of multiple simultaneous meanings that the gestures of musicking can do. I shall therefore be obliged to pause from time to time in my description and to interpolate three interludes, which I hope will give a more theoretical understanding of my search for the meaning of a musical performance. They are only loosely attached to the description that precedes them, and readers who wish to continue following the description uninterrupted could leave them to one side and come back to them later.

So let us begin by looking and listening carefully around us at this symphony concert. It does not matter too much where it is taking place, for it is an international ceremony; that is part of its nature. It might be taking place in New York, London, Tokyo, Wellington, Taipei, Minsk, Reykjavik, or Denton, Texas. Wherever the Western scientific-industrial culture has gone and wherever a middle class has grown prosperous from its activities, there we shall find symphony concerts taking place and concert halls built to house them.

CHAPTER I

*A Place for Hearing*



The chances are that it is a modern building, built since the Second World War. The last fifty years or so have seen a doubling of the number of professional symphony orchestras in the world, as the Western classical music tradition has moved into regions where it was previously unheard, and an explosion of concert hall building has taken place to house those orchestras and their performances. Countries and cities that wish to signal their entry into the "developed" world often do so through the construction of a "center for the performing arts," of which the centerpiece is a big concert hall, and through the establishment of a symphony orchestra to play there. In addition, many cities in the older industrial countries have decided that their existing nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century hall is too small, or insufficiently specialized, or that it projects an image that is not up to date and have commissioned replacements. So today modern concert halls greatly outnumber older ones.

As we approach the building, our first impression is likely to be of its great size. It is a landmark in the cityscape, and even its external appearance tells us that it was built with no expense spared, probably in the forefront of the design and building technology of its day. It stands most likely on a prominent site, on a rise perhaps, in a park, beside a river or harbor, or as the focal point of a complex of civic buildings. It is probably located slightly apart from the commercial center of the city, possibly surrounded by gardens and fountains, and at night it will almost certainly be floodlit. In the winter darkness it blazes with light inside and out, a beacon of culture in the philistine world of commerce that surrounds it, welcoming the initiated with dignity and discreet opulence but making no attempt to attract the vulgar with those flashing neon signs and brightly colored posters which one sees outside cinemas and other places of popular entertainment.