

Lessons from Musicians with Disabilities

Dine nunc ardorem mentibus addunt,
Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?

Virgil, Aeneid, Book IX, Lines 184-185

Do the Gods, Euryalus, put this fire into men's hearts,
or does his own wild longing become to each man a god?"

Virgil, (trans. 1918, Fairclough version)

Each time I read the lines above, I am reminded not of the blood lust to which Virgil intended, but of the mysterious passion for music making that so many humans experience. My mind is led in this direction because of the irrational, mysterious, and ubiquitous nature of musical desire. As a musician, for me it is natural to associate Virgil's "fire in men's hearts" with the desire to make music. Take a journey down the rabbit hole of musical desire through some mystifying examples of irrational musical passion that both inspire and confound.

Begin with Ludwig van Beethoven, born in 1770. Today Beethoven's music retains the power to move millions of souls to rapture, hopelessness, laughter or tears, and this is more than 200 years after the music was created. Countless of our greatest musical minds have held Beethoven's music with deep fascination, including Franz Schubert, Leonard Bernstein, Wynton Marsalis, and Herbert von Karajan. Beethoven has the rare distinction of having earned a place in American popular culture, quite uncommon for a Classical music composer. Even today, everyone recognizes his name. Schroeder, the piano player in the Peanuts gang, may have played a role in this. My own fascination with Ludwig van Beethoven began when I first studied

Beethoven's music, and for about 15 years I had a five-foot-tall poster of Beethoven's likeness in my bedroom. My poster gradually became scratched, worn, and faded over the years, but my admiration for the music has never faded. It has grown over time.

Consider the fact that Beethoven wrote most of his greatest works when he was deaf. As a young adult, Beethoven was the victim of a mysterious malady that took his hearing when he was about 30 years old. The great majority of his most important works were written after the onset of his deafness. In fact, Beethoven never actually heard many his own musical works that still speak so many of us.

When trying to understand Beethoven's example, the best we can do is to use the available information of how people, particularly people with disabilities, interact with music. A look at some contemporary musicians with disabilities will illustrate my ultimate argument best. Take a moment to read through the following factual accounts.

A compelling scene from 2016 remains vivid in my own memory. A small recital hall at Cincinnati's Xavier University contained about 50 seats, the air stirred with excited voices. On a small stage at the front of the stage a cello rested horizontally in a specialized cello stand. Few cellists or experienced music aficionados would recognize the stand supporting the cello in a way that allows access to the strings and the fingerboard without distorting its tone or resonance.

A young woman enters a stage. She places herself on a tall stool facing the cello and speaks to the audience, "Hi, my name is Inga, and I'm going to play 'The Swan' by Saint-Saens" (Nabb, 2017). Inga was born with no arms; she uses the toes on her left foot to grasp an adaptive device attached to her cello bow. Inga proceeds to play Saint-Saens by stopping the cello strings with the toes on her right foot, while bowing with the left. The specialized floor stand makes this

technique possible. Inga's face is intent and focused, she does not grimace with effort or wince in discomfort. The specialized cello stand and bow holder that allow Inga to play the cello were developed by a group of engineers called “May We Help” who volunteer time and expertise to assist the young musicians with disabilities at the Cincinnati Adapted Music Camp (<http://cincinnatiadaptivemusiccamp.org>). The cello's characteristic tone is expressive, in-tune and beautiful by any standard.

Harry Wentworth was a professional saxophonist playing in American big bands in the 1920's, 30's and 40's. In 1946 Harry lost his right hand in an industrial accident. For the next three decades, Harry continued to make music part-time by singing and playing trumpet with one hand. Although he was still making music, Harry Wentworth sorely missed playing the saxophone. One day 32 years after losing his hand, Harry learned of a new saxophone developed more than 2000 miles away that could be played by an amputee. The next day Harry traveled with his wife to the University of Alberta in Canada to be fitted for the adapted saxophone (J. Wentworth, personal communication, June 25, 2007).

Edit van der Burg Meyer is a Hungarian flutist. When Edit was 16 years old, she survived a violent attack from some young men that left her in a coma for 2 weeks. Edit survived the incident, but lives today with a serious head injury. The neurological damage from the incident has left Edit with limited the use of her right hand and leg. She is unable to play a conventional flute. Thanks to the work of Maarten Visser, a specialist in musical instrument adaptations working in Holland, Edit is once again playing the flute. Since 2000 she has played a flute adapted for one handed playing by Visser. In 2003, Edit van der Burg-Mayer won the first prize in the 20th Dutch National Flute contest in the category C (17-33 years old).

In 2006, I spoke with Edit and her husband Theo and asked, “It’s a lot of trouble to continue playing the flute given the challenges you face. Why not just quit flute playing and give it up?” Theo told me,

1. . . . You know, a couple years ago I asked Edit, ‘If you had to make a choice between your flute, me (your husband), or Theodor (our son) what would you choose?’ Edit was silent for a moment and then she said only, ‘I’m sorry...’ and so I [Theo] had my answer (Nabb, 2007).

These stories of contemporary musicians with disabilities above can give us some clues to the "WHY?" in my Beethoven question. For example, consider Edit. With a one-handed flute, she out-performed able-bodied flutists to win a flute competition. Her husband tells us that playing the flute is as important to her as breathing, in fact she suggested it may be more important to her than her husband and son. It’s clear that she LOVES music very deeply, with an intensity few of us can understand.

Harry Wentworth’s story is equally compelling. After not playing the saxophone for 32 years, Harry learned of an adapted saxophone he might be able to play. The next morning he flew to Canada with his wife to meet the engineers who might help him return to the saxophone. It sounds more like an impossible to believe love story than a story about saxophone. It’s a story about music, and an intense, personal identity this man held for it. (Nabb, 2009). Could it be explained as anything other than a dramatic love story?

Finally, what could motivate Inga to play cello with her feet? She is a normal sixteen-year-old girl, with all the dreams and aspirations one would expect in a bright sixteen-year old. For any musician, performance always involves some risk of failure. Teenagers

are particularly vulnerable to peer pressures that push them to conform with behaviors and practices that appear “normal.” Yet Inga chooses to continue making music in a way that differentiates her from her peers. What enormous desire she must have!

It’s worth mentioning that remarkable developments have taken place recently with respect to musical instrument adaptations for persons with disabilities. The three individuals mentioned above are each products of these advancements. Leadership in this progress comes from groups like OHMI (the One-handed Musical Instrument Trust), the Drake Music Project, Open-Up Music, and the Cincinnati Adaptive Music Camp.

The fact that Beethoven loved music seems indisputable. But there is love as most people know it, and then there is this. It almost seems to be something different, with an intensity and passion that few people ever experience for any aspect of their life. Beethoven composed music throughout his entire life, both before and after his hearing loss. It seems to have been the one unifying factor in his life, he never married and after becoming estranged from his brothers he basically lived alone and without family connections.

We can learn a lot about humanity by examining those among us who go through enormous effort and inconvenience to include music making in their lives. If we choose to look exclusively through the old “nature versus nurture” paradigm in which psychologists and teachers have traditionally modeled learning, and we ignore the role that personal identity, intimacy, devotion, or perhaps better said “love” plays in stimulating outstanding work, we choose to look away from one of the most powerful strengths that humans employ to challenge the obstacles we face in today’s world.

I believe that music making is an essential part of the human experience, as natural as wanting to hold a baby or falling in love. It would be dangerous to draw broad conclusions from the few examples above, but I think we can agree that they lend evidence to the following valuable insights: a) many human beings (in this case, persons with disabilities) have an intense and remarkable need or desire to make music, and further, b) human beings under the influence of a powerfully motivating force are capable of unforeseen and unimaginable accomplishments.

References

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