

St Cecilia, patron saint of music

St Cecilia, patroness of music who “heard music in her heart”, is traditionally celebrated and remembered on 22nd November which is, coincidentally, also Benjamin Britten’s birthday. It marks an opportunity to reflect on the role that music plays in society and what it means to us.

Classical music has, over the last twenty years, faced severe cuts in funding and government support. It survives thanks to lottery funding, arts council funding, individuals, wealthy patronage, fundraising and clever marketing.

Many people might argue that classical music is dead and irrelevant in our society; that it is outdated - written during times so different to the world in which we inhabit that it is a non-essential luxury, bleeding the economy and detracting from essential services such as health, education and crime-prevention. We live in a global community with 24-hour news access, instant access to information, social media, meals that microwave in minutes, global travel and instant access to recorded music. What could possibly connect our lives with the lives of people two or even three hundred years ago? What does music provide that might give it status to compete with education, healthcare, and crime prevention?

I googled for answers. Definitions ranging from ‘organisation of sounds..’ to ‘comprises building blocks of harmony, rhythm and melody..’ returned. The most thought-provoking definition seemed also the most simplistic: *“Music is a pattern of sounds made by musical instruments, voices, or computers, or a combination of these, intended to give pleasure to people listening to it.”*

Whilst this definition seems to raise more questions than it answers, it does hint towards music’s role or purpose. It necessitates discussion around the meaning of music – is it a mathematical discipline or a humanistic means of communication? It leans toward the philosophy of music; what makes music pleasurable? What is pleasure? Should all music be pleasurable?

These thoughts highlight a lack of dialogue and debate around the role, purpose, and philosophy of music in our society. What a colossal oversight and tragically missed opportunity this silence is, regarding an art form deriving from nature’s building blocks.

Nature contains rhythm and harmony at every turn, for example the rhythm of the Fibonacci sequence, the Golden Ratio, or the DNA double helix. It’s no coincidence that some harmonies are more pleasing to us than others; the frequencies of differing soundwaves create overtones and harmonics which resonate either in sympathy with each other or not. All human beings resonate with these harmonic and dissonant effects on a deep and unconscious level as tension and release. It follows then, that there could be discussion with focus on the similarities between the most diverse communities across the globe. Instead, we hear statistics and incidences of mounting intolerance, increasing crime rates, terrorism, war, suffering and difficulty.

Whilst music does not contain the power magically to reverse violence and hatred, it does act as a stimulus for the initiation of discussion around the infrastructure of what it is to be human; what it is to suffer the horrors of oppression and violence, to

experience the security of belonging, the joy of birth, the mystery of God, the integrity of tolerance, the yielding to hatred or love. In short, music provides a “way in” to experiencing our similarities as a species together. It provides capacity for great mutual understanding. It is interesting that Benjamin Britten, who had seen so much violence by means of corporal punishment by the time he was seventeen, and would later declare that this influenced his pacifism and his refusal to fight in the second world war, celebrated his birthday on the same day as music is celebrated as an art form.

Much of our culture currently exists at surface level. The pursuit of values such as love, purpose and tolerance cannot be denied, yet we live in a phase where we address those needs by means that cannot fulfil us or resonate on a deep level, for example, celebrity, popularity, money or image. These things operate on a surface level and don't address the deeper part of our experience. Their rewards are instant and pass quickly, leaving inside us the same empty space as before.

Perhaps the measure of great music is not how many people have heard it, how much airspace it has been allocated or how much revenue it has generated. Perhaps great music carries something so universal and fundamental to our nature as human beings that it has survived centuries of changing governments, fashion, culture and politics. If we listen actively and allow our deepest responses to music, we can feel the truth of our experiences rise to the front of our minds; we can feel our hearts moving and whispering secrets, sometimes painful, sometimes joyful. It takes patience and courage to listen, we need space and quiet to understand and learn from ourselves. But music gives us a channel to our deepest selves, down to our roots and our nature. That is where we find our darkest fears, our deepest love, our joy, our compassion and our bliss.

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