



THE EAR OF THE beholder

Every chamber music series, every musician seeks to uphold “the highest musical standards.” But what are these standards? A longtime performer meditates on an elusive concept—artistry.

By John Steinmetz

I used to know what artistry was. I believed that if musicians performed or composed with honesty and heart, giving voice to their personal understanding of music, and did this skillfully and eloquently, then the audience would connect.

Well, I was wrong, but I didn't realize it for decades, until a colleague inadvertently punctured my naïveté. He was talking about being a judge at international competitions. The purpose of these competitions is to select the best performer and to reward the highest-quality music-making; but there's one big problem. According to my colleague, the judges at competitions don't agree about what is beautiful.

When he first told me this, I was startled. People don't agree about what is beautiful? That had never occurred to me, but I saw right away what he meant. The tone that sends the Italian judge into a swoon might

That scared me. It meant that even if I could play exactly the way I meant to, even if I managed to embody my particular feeling for the instrument and the music and the deepest realities of the universe, my approach was bound to make somebody mad.

Of course that's true, and competition judges are not the only people getting mad. All my life I have seen the evidence: a review trashing a concert that I thought was gorgeous; listeners storming out during a piece that moved me; a connoisseur ranting about offenses I hadn't even noticed; a friend so irate that it seemed we had attended different concerts. Maybe I imagined that these were exceptions, or the ravings of unhinged curmudgeons, but after my veil of ignorance lifted, I saw that it was perfectly normal for wonderful music-making to inspire both rapture and rage. (I also remembered times when I came unhinged myself, ranting about music that others loved.)

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seem, to the German judge, utterly immature. The English and Russian judges probably don't see eye to eye about phrasing. Tempos that seem just right to the Korean judge might give the Venezuelan a headache.

This disagreement about what is beautiful, my friend said, explains why the most exciting contestants may not win. “The only thing the judges can agree on is whether or not a mistake has been made,” he said. So the winner is often somebody who doesn't make mistakes.

I already knew that people's tastes differed—I wasn't that naïve. But my colleague was pointing out something else. He was saying that honest, heartfelt, craftsmanlike music-making is likely to upset someone. One discerning listener might hate a performance that another discerning listener loves.

Many of the issues that make people mad are technical: wrong vibrato, illegal trills, unacceptable intonation, unforgivable phrasing. But there are deeper issues, too, having to do with emotional stance and perceptual style. Some listeners crave drama and vividness, while others seek refinement and subtlety. For some ears complexity is exciting, but for others it's annoying. Some people want music to be orderly and rational, while others yearn for contact with mystery or the unexplainable.

Such deep differences help to explain certain abiding arguments between music lovers: Beatles versus Stones, Verdi versus Wagner, “period” versus “modern,” Babbitt versus Reich. When people argue about music, they often proceed from wildly different assumptions about what matters.

Sometimes they're not really arguing about the music; they're arguing about criteria.

Despite such disagreements, some works have managed to become “classics.” I spend a lot of time playing music that many people, over many years, have found beautiful, vital, compelling and worthwhile. Doesn't this prove that there's a certain amount of agreement about musical quality?

I'm not so sure. First of all, most of us musicians don't evaluate the classic pieces; we just program them because everybody else does. We might have a feeling about whether a piece is enjoyable to play, and certainly we take delight in wonderful moments, but do we love every Mozart minuet, every Beethoven finale? We're often too busy playing the music to think about whether it's any good. To some extent, the classics are just habits.

And then there's the ongoing disagreement about what belongs in the canon. For example, even though Brahms long ago joined the pantheon of Immortal Masters, I know of two highly trained, experienced musicians—one is an eloquent, music-smitten critic, and the other is a wonderful composer—who loathe Brahms. Brahms makes them both mad. (Brahms made George Bernard Shaw mad, too.) Maybe the “standard repertory” is just a bunch of lists to argue about.

Reputations, too, change over time. Yesterday's failed composition is today's masterwork, on its way to becoming tomorrow's abandoned relic. Bizet died thinking that his *Carmen* was a failure; now it is the most-performed opera. During their lifetimes, the sons of Bach were much more famous than their father; now J.S. is revered, while his sons' terrific music goes largely unplayed. Hummel was more popular than Beethoven in their day; now look whose bin is bigger.

During my musical life, I have watched multiple reversals. Remember all those serial compositions that were so highly regarded in the '60s and '70s? Remember when Handel's operas had nearly vanished from the stage? Remember when John Adams was a fringe figure? And look at Haydn, probably the most popular living composer ever. When I was in college, only a few Haydn

works got performed regularly. Now he seems to have made a comeback, with multiple recordings of his complete string quartets and frequent performances of music that used to be ignored.

Performance practice goes through similar mood swings. One of my teachers said that Beethoven's way of playing would be laughed off the stage today. Mahler's orchestrations of Bach, with their written-out trills, show that his interpretation differed totally from today's. Recordings show how much ideals of tempo, tone, vibrato, and phrasing have changed over time.

Let's admit it: fashions change, tastes change, definitions of excellence seem unsteady at best, and people don't agree about what matters. In fact, I don't even

excellence, I suspect that our organizations, like competition judges, sometimes reduce artistic excellence to technical excellence. (When they say, "Highest artistic standard," perhaps they really mean, "We don't make mistakes.") In other cases, artistic success gets confused with business success ("We sell lots of tickets"), with popularity ("We are a household name"), or even with unpopularity! ("We are so cutting edge that nobody comes to hear us.")

Wonderful art certainly exists, and sometimes an artist or an ensemble becomes widely popular, but that doesn't mean that "artistic excellence" is anything real. It might just be an abstraction—or a fantasy.

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times playing music does feel unsafe, with potential disapproval looming.) Maybe you sense that avoiding mistakes is a good strategy. After all, it seems to win competitions. Yet middle-of-the road performances don't guarantee happy outcomes, because somebody is likely to get mad no matter what.

Maybe, though, your goal is to make people mad on purpose. (Now and then that goal becomes fashionable.) Perhaps you want to defy expectations, to challenge assumptions, or to create controversy. Perhaps you want to invent a transgressive art that will shock, or a sophisticated art that will baffle. Occasionally posterity rewards such goals by sainting a former rebel (how strange that iconoclasts can become icons!), but sometimes musical rebelliousness is just a backhanded way of deferring to other people's taste. In any case, making the audience mad, like every other artistic approach, eventually goes out of fashion.

These three kinds of goals—pleasing, playing it safe, and rebelling—all rely on other people's reactions to determine quality. But there are some other options to explore.

Lately, I'm trying to be truer to my own enthusiasms. Maybe now I'm a little less worried about what colleagues and former teachers want to hear, and a little more curious about what I want to hear. In some ways, playing and composing are harder now, because I'm not too easy to please. And since I don't always agree with myself about what is beautiful, I can get really confused. Still, facing my confusion is probably easier than dealing with other people's contradictory tastes.

To follow your own taste you have to find out what your taste is, and that might surprise you. When a percussionist friend started composing a few years ago, his preferences startled him. He told me, "As a player, I play different pieces in different styles, and I enjoy adapting myself to the needs of each piece. But when I started composing, I had to find out what I like." His smile was almost rueful as he confessed, "I found out that I really like melody."

Once I met a cellist who told me about her composition lessons with Joan Tower. The student, who had never written music, started composing a concerto for cello and orchestra. Each composition lesson began

with teacher and student playing through the piece together on cello and piano. After playing, Tower asked the student, "How do you like it?" and together they explored the student's responses to her own piece. After reworking the piece, the student brought it back for another lesson, and they played it again, and the question was the same: "How do you like it?" This process went on, I gathered, through months of listening and revising. When I heard the finished piece, I was astonished that a first composition could be so fully realized, with such a clear personal voice.

I like Joan Tower's question, "How do you like it?" Answering that question helps develop the student's own perceptions and skills, as well as musical taste, and can lead to all kinds of fruitful inquiry. It can accommodate ideas from the teacher, too. Such a fine question gave me a fresh perspective on the work of music teachers: teaching means helping students to cultivate and meet their own standards.

I learned more about this approach from a young professional musician who took some lessons from me. Let's say that the musician's name was Mike. A successful freelancer, Mike was a skilled and soulful player, but he was losing enthusiasm for music. Before deciding to quit, he wanted to try to recover his love of playing. He didn't need help with his instrument (which in any case was different from mine); he was looking for an attitude adjustment.

As we talked together over the course of a few lessons, I gathered that Mike had assumed, without quite realizing it, that some players knew more than he did about what sounded good. He imagined that these special players were successful because they knew more about musical excellence. It was as though they had access to secret rules. When I invited him to visualize the situation, Mike pictured an exclusive gathering in a special room set aside for the best and most prominent players of his instrument. Bouncers kept Mike out of this imaginary room because he didn't know enough about quality. His fatal flaw was incomplete knowledge about standards of excellence.

Not surprisingly, Mike always felt inadequate when he played. No matter how hard he tried or how beautiful his performance,

satisfaction always eluded him. Since he didn't know what it took to measure up, he could never measure up. He was doomed to failure before his first note. Mike's assumptions had taken the joy out of playing. (Fortunately, he was confronting related issues in therapy, learning how to deal with a father who had always disapproved.)

Mike was genuinely surprised to learn that people don't agree about what is good, that there is no single set of criteria, secret or otherwise, to define excellence in music. As he began to understand that different musicians have different ideas about what sounds good, Mike began to consider his own ideas, and his enthusiasm for music started to return. He realized that his natural musicality, a gift that had been present from a very young age, had gotten disconnected from his playing, but he easily remembered how to trust his own ear and his own heart. Now it was my turn to be surprised as he quickly reconnected with his native ability. He mobilized his own standards and discovered a way of playing that fit them. From my perspective, the more his performance was guided by his own taste and musical instincts, the more his playing took on personality and a vivid, detailed liveliness. His own musical taste, it seemed to me, led him to artistry.

Adopting a "please yourself" approach to music-making might seem dangerously myopic. But personal taste doesn't develop in isolation. My taste was formed not only by my temperament and personality, but also by the culture and subcultures around me and by a host of influences: teachers, colleagues, performances I loved, the musical traditions I have encountered, other people's taste, audience reactions, favorite recordings, and things people said to me years ago and yesterday. As a distillation of multiple influences, personal taste can be a rich and inspiring guide, more helpful than imaginary "standards of artistic excellence," and far more supple and adaptable than any artistic standard that could be codified. Personal taste isn't a static set of rules; it keeps developing in response to new inputs.

Eventually these questions of quality and taste drew me back to Robert Pirsig's amazing book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle*

Maintenance. Through much of the book, Pirsig wrestles with an old problem in philosophy and the arts, trying to define quality (goodness, beauty, excellence). Some people say that quality is an ingredient or attribute that exists in the world, ready to be noticed and appreciated wherever it is found. Others say that quality isn't "out there" in the world, but that it resides inside the observer—that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Pirsig finds a new way through this problem. He discovers that quality is neither in the observer nor in the thing observed. Yet he is certain that quality exists, because people do encounter it and recognize it. Eventually, he realizes that quality is an event, and it can happen only when an object and an observer—such as some music and a listener—come together. To put it in musical terms, if the music and the listener resonate, then Quality happens.

That's a way to recognize excellence, and a way to cultivate it: look for resonance.

When we're at our best, I think this is what musicians do. We don't measure music against some set of criteria; we check for resonance. We can't define excellence, and we don't agree about where to find it, but we can recognize it, we can foster it, we can try to serve it. Fortunately, many audience members—probably most of them—come to concerts not to judge or to evaluate, but to experience the music and to be affected by it. Most listeners bring their hearts, not their clipboards. At our best, all of us—musicians and listeners—come together to share an experience. We are, all of us, seeking moments of resonance.

I don't know how it happens, but many of the sounds that resonate for me also resonate for others. Not everyone is moved in the same way, of course, and somebody will probably get mad, but some listeners do seem to receive something like what I meant to send. And that's more than enough.

Bassoonist John Steinmetz, a Los Angeles freelancer, plays chamber music with XTET and Camerata Pacifica. He is principal bassoonist for the Los Angeles Opera. Steinmetz's compositions have been released on Crystal, Helicon, and Albany CDs. In June 2006 he completes his term as a CMA board member. Contact him at bsncmp@hotmail.com, or visit www.johnsteinmetz.org.

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agree with myself about what matters. My reactions can be highly inconsistent. I remember sitting in a university library, wearing headphones, listening to a stack of recordings. I put on a record of Donald Martino's *Notturmo*, but after the opening notes, I stopped it, thinking, "Oh no, not that kind of thing!" and I switched to something else. After listening to several other somethings, I tried Martino's piece again. This time it sounded exquisitely beautiful. Go figure.

Despite so much disagreement and fickleness about what is excellent, many of us musicians (my previous self included) go on assuming that certain musical ideals are universally shared and eternal. Music organizations have mission statements about "artistic quality" or "the highest standards"—as if somebody knows what those things are, as if there is consensus about quality. Now that I no longer imagine any agreement about

mad, if artistic quality is a myth and people find quality in conflicting places, then what is a musician to do? How can we tell if what we're doing is any good? What should we aspire to? Whose opinion should we trust?

As usual, it depends on what you want to accomplish. If your goal is to please others, then you should try to compose or perform for like-minded people. Either become like your audience or find an audience that resembles you. Find out all you can about their taste. Keep checking on whether they like what you're doing. Good luck.

Perhaps your goal is not to please others but to stay out of trouble, to avoid making anybody mad. This goal might lie behind performances that take a sort of "generic" approach; it might explain why performers sometimes "play it safe." (Isn't it odd that musicians even need to talk about "playing it safe"? What could possibly be "unsafe" about a way of playing music? Yet some-