



We Need Music to Survive

By Karl Paulnack from June 4, 2009

One of my parents' deepest fears, I suspect, is that society would not value me as a musician. I remember my mother's reaction when I announced my decision to study music instead of medicine: "You're wasting your SAT scores!" My parents love music, but at the time they were unclear about its value.

The confusion is understandable: We put music in the "arts and entertainment" section of the newspaper. But music often has little to do with entertainment. Quite the opposite.

The ancient Greeks had a fascinating way of articulating how music works. In their quadrivium – geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music – astronomy and music are two sides of the same coin. Astronomy describes relationships between observable, external, permanent objects.

Music illuminates relationships between invisible, internal, transient objects. I imagine us having internal planets, constellations of complicated thoughts and feelings. Music finds the invisible pieces inside our hearts and souls and helps describe the position of things inside us, like a telescope that looks in rather than out.

In June 1940, French composer Olivier Messiaen was captured by the Germans and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. There, he finished a quartet for piano, cello, violin, and clarinet, and performed it, with three other imprisoned musicians, for the inmates and guards of that camp. The piece ("Quartet for the End of Time") is arguably one of the greatest successes in the history of music.

Given what we have since learned about life under Nazi occupation, why would anyone write music there? If you're just trying to stay alive, why bother with music? And yet – even from concentration camps themselves, we have surviving evidence of poetry, music, and visual art – many people made art. Why?

Art must be, somehow, essential for life. In fact, art is part of survival; art is part of the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are; art is one of the ways in which we say, "I am alive, and my life has meaning."

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was a resident of Manhattan. Later that day I reached a new understanding of my art. Given the day's events, the idea of playing the piano seemed absurd, disrespectful, and pointless. Amid ambulances, firefighters, and fighter jets, I heard an inner voice ask: "Why am I here? What place has a musician in this moment?"

Then I saw how we survived. The first group activity in my neighborhood that night was singing. People sang. They sang around firehouses; they sang "We Shall Overcome," "America the Beautiful," "The Star-Spangled Banner"; they sang songs learned in elementary school, which some hadn't sung since then.

Within days, we gathered at Lincoln Center for the Brahms Requiem. Along with firefighters and fighter jets, artists were "first responders" in this disaster, too. The military secured our airspace, but musicians led the recovery. In measuring the revival of New York, the return of Broadway – another art form – was as significant a milestone as the reopening of the stock markets.



I now understand that music is not part of "arts and entertainment." It's not a luxury, something we fund from budget leftovers. Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of things, a way to express feelings when we have no words, a way to understand things with our hearts when we cannot grasp them with our minds. Music is the language we choose when we are speechless.

Imagine a graduation with absolutely no music – or a wedding, a presidential inauguration, or a service celebrating the life and death of a close friend – imagine these with no music whatsoever. What's missing – entertainment? Hardly.

What's missing is the capacity to meaningfully experience these events, as though eating great food without tasting it. Music functions as a container for experience – it augments capacity to grasp complex things. Without music, the events of our lives slip like water through cupped hands. Music increases our capacity to hold life experiences, to celebrate them, to survive them.

The performance I think of as my most important concert took place in a nursing home in a small Midwestern town. I was playing with a dear friend of mine, a violinist. We began with Aaron Copland's "Sonata," which was written during World War II and dedicated to a young pilot who was shot down during the war.

Midway through the piece, an elderly man seated in a wheelchair near the front of the concert hall began to weep. After we finished, we mentioned that the piece was dedicated to a downed pilot. The man became so disturbed he had to leave the auditorium, but showed up backstage afterward, tears and all, to explain himself.

He told us that during World War II, as a pilot, he was in an aerial combat situation where one of his team's planes was hit. He watched his friend bail out and his parachute open. But the Japanese planes returned and machine-gunned across the parachute chords, separating the parachute from the pilot. He then watched his friend drop away into the ocean, lost. He said he had not thought about that for years, but during that first piece of music we played, this memory returned to him so vividly that it was as though he was reliving it.

How did Copland manage to capture that picture of internal planets so clearly?

People walk into concert halls as they walk into emergency rooms, in need of healing. They may bring a broken body to a hospital, but they often bring with them to the concert a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again depends partly on how well musicians do their craft.

A musician is more of a paramedic than an entertainer. I'm not interested in entertaining you; I'm interested in keeping you alive. Fully alive. We're a lot like cardiac surgeons; we hold people's hearts in our hands every day. We just use different instruments.

What should we expect from young people who choose a future in music? Frankly, I expect them to save the planet.

If there is a future wave of wellness, of harmony, of peace, an end to war, mutual understanding, equality, fairness, I don't expect it to come from a government, a military force, or a corporation.

If there is a future of peace for humankind, if we are to have an understanding of how these invisible, internal things should fit together, I expect it will come from the artists, because that's what we do.

As we did in the Nazi camps and on the evening of 9/11, the artists are the ones who might be able to help us with our internal, invisible lives.

Karl Paulnack is a pianist and director of the music division at the Boston Conservatory. This essay is adapted from a welcome speech he gave to incoming freshman.

<http://www.bostonconservatory.edu/s/940/Bio.aspx?sid=940&qid=1&pgid=1241>