Music and Social Justice: Musicians Effecting Change

By Sebastian Ruth

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This summer I've been reconsidering the connection between music and social justice, and specifically the role music can play in a community to bring about change.

As a bit of background, I met Jonathan Biss in 2004 when I had the great pleasure of playing Brahms with him. He had been serving on the advisory council for Community MusicWorks, a program I started in 1997 that connects a professional string quartet with several inner–city neighborhoods in Providence, Rhode Island. Jonathan came to Providence to perform two concerts with our quartet – one in a museum for fans of Brahms and one on a basketball court for people who had never heard of Brahms. That second concert was a highlight in the 10–year history of Community MusicWorks, and it is an example of the kind of experience I want to highlight with this column.

A message of excellence: the gym concert

Recently I visited the New York Public Library – the beautiful old research library on 42nd Street with the lions on the steps – and inside inscribed on the floor was a dedication to past library president Vartan Gregorian. The dedication paraphrases an important vision of Gregorian's that also sums up the significance of the concert with Jonathan in the gym: democracy and excellence need not be mutually exclusive.

The concert in the gym, much like the New York Public Library itself, was an opportunity for everyone – regardless of their means or educational background – to engage in an experience of excellence.

Why is this significant? For starters, kids growing up in the West End of Providence experience the worst of the factors facing kids in cities: the rates of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, gang violence, and high school dropout are the highest in the city. The daily itinerary of these kids includes attending inferior public schools, playing on inferior playgrounds, and even walking on inferior streets and sidewalks. It's maddening to on the one hand honor the ideals of equality that people have fought for in this country and then to consider the vast inequities that poor kids face growing up in these kinds of neighborhoods.

Beyond the injustice of inferior schools and streets, there is an injustice in the message this sends to kids: that they are inferior, or that they deserve less. At Community MusicWorks one of the core ingredients in our approach is that we try to offer kids a dramatically different kind of message.

The concert with Jonathan at the gym of the West End Community Center was an opportunity to offer one such message: that the residents of this community deserve to see and hear one of the world's great pianists, not by leaving the neighborhood, but by coming to its Center.

So that is the basis of the intersection between music and social justice, and indeed of Community MusicWorks' philosophy. First, let's change the messages kids are getting about the quality they deserve. Then let's see how this shift changes the expectations kids have for themselves. Once we start doing this, won't kids then, as Maxine Greene says, have openings in their lives to realize that they deserve the best not only in music, but from their schools and programs, and indeed that they deserve the opportunity to imagine and pursue the brightest futures?

Music as an essential human experience, or why it is unjust to deny it

In recent years arts advocates and arts organizations have been trying in various ways to articulate the benefits of arts participation so as to justify to legislators

that they should not cut arts funding. We've seen the myriad of justifications including the idea that arts training improves social interactions and the one that music improves math scores. In 2004 the Rand Corporation published a report surveying the various literature on the subject and concluding that these "instrumental" justifications for arts – justifications based on the premise that the arts are instrumental to achieving other goals – were only capturing a small percentage of the impact arts can have. The authors of the report tried to highlight the "intrinsic" benefits of arts participation – the essential effects on an individual from his/her experiences in the arts. These include awakening of creative thought, pleasure from intense mental focus, and an expanded capacity for empathy. They argue that these key factors of an arts experience lead to individual growth as well as societal benefits.

This summer I met kids from the Baltimore Algebra Project, a branch of Bob Moses' national Algebra Project that introduces kids to math and social justice issues together. The program combines an ingenious curriculum for teaching math with a tiered tutoring program in which kids teach other kids. And on top of all that, kids learn about why it is they need mathematics and how they can go about taking political action to ensure they get the quality math instruction they deserve. In the terms of the Rand report, these students are learning to demand quality math instruction because they're taught to understand the instrumental and intrinsic benefits of doing math.

Meeting these math–loving Baltimore teenagers inspired me to think about what experiences and skills – both instrumental (no pun intended) and intrinsic – music gives kids that they don't get otherwise, and why it is in fact a social injustice that poor kids don't have access to it.

Here is the list I came up with, moving from the instrumental to the intrinsic:

* Music is part of civilization, and always has been. Kids deserve to know not only contemporary music, but music from various points in history as a way of understanding the history of our civilization, and as a way of putting contemporary music in a historical context.

* Music lessons teach us to how to teach ourselves. In order to practice a musical instrument, we need to be able to be aware of what we're doing, and we need to develop ways of improving it. This skill is transferable to nearly anything: learning a sport, memorizing biology definitions, improving language skills, to give but a few examples.

* Music develops networks. Playing music with other people forces us to connect in ways that other social interactions simply don't. These connections lead to strong social networks, which more and more are being shown to be central to our health and success in the world. Much has been written recently about social capital, or the personal benefits in having networks of people connected. Networks can help us find jobs, get help in crises, expand opportunity in business interactions.

* Music develops communication and listening skills. People playing chamber music need to learn how to work together in a group, listen to colleagues, and achieve consensus for performance.

* Music composition and improvisation develop visualization and imagination not just as skills but as habits. This can transfer beyond music to imagining new possibilities for our lives and our communities.

* Playing music teaches us about creativity. Musical performers have the opportunity to be, as the violin pedagogue Carl Flesch said, "re-creators" of works of art. Unlike in the visual arts where a painting or sculpture exists regardless of the observer, music must be performed in order to be heard. We

have opportunities as performers to experience great moments of creativity unfold from within the works of art themselves, almost as if we were experiencing the repainting of a Van Gogh each time we saw it.

* Music can connect us to an experience of the infinite – to an experience of something meaningful and much larger than ourselves. Such experiences are of course often associated with religion, and yet having opportunity for spiritual experiences in secular life is increasingly important.

* Music develops a sense of empathy in us, and an expanded understanding of what's out there in the world of human experience. When we hear a Mahler Symphony or a late Beethoven Quartet we may hear a pain or spiritual longing far more intense than we experience on a daily basis. We get the opportunity to experience new emotional states through the music. How might such knowledge help us in our lives? We may have, for instance, a way to empathize with the experience of refugees of a war–torn Darfur or Somalia because of our emotional experiences with music. Contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum talks about the connection between literature and empathy in her 1995 book Poetic Justice, and she argues that reading literature may in fact generate in lawyers and judges the capacity to understand the lives of the people whose crimes they assess in a courtroom. While Nussbaum herself doesn't assign the same potential to music, I think there is a very deep empathy that can be developed through our musical experiences.

* Through developing empathy, music can expand people's definitions of community. When we regularly get exposed to a wider range of human experiences, we begin to see our community not as simply the neighborhood around us or indeed the city or state around us, but in fact as a global human community, and one that spans history as well as distances.

* Music focuses the mind. Practicing or performing a piece of music can get us into a groove – what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow" – where we achieve a singularity of mind that enables us to work for long periods of time without getting distracted. The skill of focusing the mind can help us learn, organize our lives, and find mental calm.

Of course music is not the only vehicle through which a young person can acquire the skills and experiences mentioned above. Then again, given the focus that recent legislation has put on testing math and reading skills above all else, it can be argued that music brings kids into experiences and skills they very well may not be getting anywhere else in their educations.

How does this relate to social justice? What we're talking about is an educational opportunity that develops the whole person, teaching young people empathy and initiating them into the notion that they are citizens of the world. If music is the only place they will have this opportunity, isn't it in fact an injustice that urban kids aren't given access? By posing this question, I hope to be pushing hard against the idea, however old, that classical music is an activity for the privileged. With benefits so fundamental to the human experience, we have to realize that the activity of learning music should be a basic element of education.

The economics of musicians working for social justice

I've been highlighting this radical idea that music can lead to social justice for urban youth, and you might be thinking to yourself that you haven't recently seen kids gathering on street corners to demand more classical music in their lives. So what's the connection? There's a calculated gamble involved in the following supply and demand analysis.

The classical music world suffers from a substantially higher supply of musicians than there is demand for their music. Although I never attended a conservatory, I know that graduating from one can be a rather bleak prospect given that there

are so few available jobs relative to the number of graduates. And among those available jobs, very few enable a musician to play the concerts they most want to. At the same time, many classical music organizations are worrying about the demand problem: that their audiences are largely made up of older people, and that there isn't a demand from younger audiences for classical music.

Perhaps, then, it is time to rethink the demand side. Urban communities, as I discussed earlier, lack experiences of excellence, and the educational opportunities that enable their young people to become citizens of the world. Therefore, in terms of supply and demand, there might be an incredible demand among young people for music if they only knew to demand it.

The Algebra Project takes up the idea of demand in this way: young people may not yet know they should demand a better math education, and so part of their curriculum is about showing them how such an education will lead them to have greater success in their lives and in society.

In classical music, therefore, there may indeed be a great demand for the music if we take the opportunity to locate our musical careers in the heart of an urban community so that we can generate the enthusiasm among young people that will lead them to demand more.

At Community MusicWorks, we've taken a calculated risk with our careers based on this idea. We've established, with the advocating support of musicians like Jonathan, a full-time position in this neighborhood for a string quartet to rehearse, teach, perform, and build community around music. The idea was that by playing music in a storefront in their neighborhood, we as musicians have something positive to contribute to the daily itinerary of these kids. And that this career isn't about sacrifice or even about outreach. This is about building a career full of the kinds of performing we most want to do, within the context of a neighborhood not used to having a string quartet as one of its local features.

Through the process of teaching young people and playing Brahms in gyms with great musicians like Jonathan Biss, we're hopefully changing the expectations young people have of themselves, and of what they deserve.

Closing: the sounds of social justice

I'd like to close this column by invoking ancestors who played music for social action. Casals particularly comes to mind with his efforts for justice during and after the Spanish Civil War. I think also of Vedran Smailovic, the cellist in Sarajevo who played his instrument on the street in the 1990s amid Serbian artillery fire to mourn civilians killed in a bread line there. And then there is Yehudi Menuhin, who called Soviet authorities upon learning that David Oistrakh wasn't ill as announced, but that he was not being allowed out of the U.S.S.R. to play a concert with Menuhin. In his phone call, Menuhin told the Soviet cultural office in no uncertain terms that unless they allowed Oistrakh to come for the concert, he would announce to the world the lies they were telling about their artists.

The question I close with is how our obligation to humanity impacts the depth of the music we make. I would love to have heard the concert Menuhin and Oistrakh played after the famous phone call, or the tone of Smailovic's cello. I can't help but think that their devotion to their causes came through in the music. Perhaps the connection between music and social justice goes beyond how music impacts justice, but in fact how the reverse is also true. That playing cello for victims of war in Spain or Sarajevo, or playing Brahms in a gym brings a depth of humanity and and purpose to music that indeed fuels the life of the art itself.