

Music - inspiration, vision and challenge

by Laurence Perkins (solo bassoonist)

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I grew up in a family which appreciated music, but did not play or sing. My parents never had the chance to learn, as their school years were during the Second World War. However, even in those challenging times, their school teachers still managed to encourage a love and appetite for music, mainly through old gramophone records. When my sister and I were growing up in the 1960s, Mum and Dad shared this enthusiasm with us, and we enjoyed and explored a wide range of music, crossing many genres.

For me, playing and making music was an absolute necessity, and the music teaching at my school, plus a wonderful Saturday music centre, provided the means to make this possible. It was at the music centre that I discovered the bassoon, eventually leading to a solo and orchestral career which continues to be exciting, challenging, hard work but hugely satisfying despite the rather modest income it generates.

Three years ago, I did a solo concert tour around the UK, when I included free presentations in schools to inspire the children and support their teachers. In every single venue, I was told of cuts in the music teaching services, leaving many schools with little or no instrumental teaching, and often not much in the way of class music. This situation continues. Just weeks before lockdown, I signed four online petitions against cuts in instrumental teaching, one of which

was in a city which hosts one of the biggest music and arts festivals in the world.

This has been going on for some while now, and has already resulted in several generations of people who have very little knowledge of music beyond that which is regularly pushed through the commercial channels. Lack of knowledge means lack of appreciation and interest. You can't fall in love with something you don't know about. These people have effectively been denied the choice that education is meant to provide.

One important and valuable aspect that music-making shares with sport is the collective discipline that it generates. In this respect, a football team and an orchestra work in a very similar way. The successful ones consist of real team players who respect, cooperate and coordinate with their friends and colleagues to achieve the best possible results, whether it be a successful football match or a fine performance of a great symphony. It's a model for the best human societies.

However you look at it, music is far too important to be pushed to one side and randomly cut whenever school or educational authority budgets become stretched, or - worse still - if a head teacher is not interested in music. Sadly, this is frequently what happens, and the result of this (over a period of years) is a shortage of young musicians in a country that has previously had such an excellent track record for producing fine musicians.

This has also resulted (rather predictably) in a lack of knowledge, appreciation and enthusiasm, leading to

seriously reduced attendances at many concerts. A reason often given for this is that the cost of tickets is too high. Interesting point: a ticket for a Premier League match in the UK can cost up to three or four times more than the average price of a concert ticket, but this does not deter many thousands of people from attending a match. It's not about price - it's all about valuing, and that relates directly to personal experience. You can't fall in love with something you hardly know.

This brings me to what I call the 'Nessum Dorma' effect. Most of those football fans attending the World Cup back in 1990 would never have dreamt of listening to any Italian opera - it was 'not their sort of thing'. In truth, many of those fans would have actually had no knowledge or experience of any Italian opera. Then - suddenly - enter the World Cup and Pavarotti, and 'Nessum Dorma' became a massive hit with all those people who apparently did not like that type of music. In fact, what happened is that they discovered it for the first time - it was conveyed through a popular channel, and the rest was history.

No one should be denied the opportunity to discover and explore - this is what an education system should facilitate and encourage. Music has its own unique power. It works beyond the intellect. You don't need to know about it or have studied it in detail to enjoy and appreciate music. Far from being elitist, it is arguably the most accessible of all artforms for listeners. For those who play as well, there is the added bonus of an exciting journey into a collective activity which is deeply satisfying. Pretty well any amateur musician will tell you this. I'm using the term 'amateur' in its literal sense "for the love of" - these people do it not for

money, but because it's a wonderful and quite unique experience. The best professional musicians also love what they do. High standards are rightly expected of them, and they have to devote huge amounts of time and investment to achieve and maintain this. Contrary to some popular opinion, most professional musicians are not well paid. They will survive, even in difficult times, if what they do is valued and supported by audiences, managements and (where necessary) funding organisations.

In the last few weeks online music has been a lifeline for many people, with a new value attached to music at a level we've not seen recently. We are now at a crucial turning point, and it is essential that live music-making remains at the top of the agenda. If music is relegated to mostly a free online pushbutton commodity as far as audiences (consumers) are concerned, it will eventually die.

Live music-making is the life-blood of the culture, and a great live performance is a vibrant, engaging experience that cannot be replicated by any audio or video system. If it is explored, invested in and really valued by every one of us at every level, then live music in all its forms - every genre from every part of the world - will continue to blossom as the unique life force that it undoubtably is. Let's turn this situation round, start to develop better musical knowledge and appreciation with everyone at every level, and in particular encourage new generations to discover something which has been a vital element in every human society and civilisation since the beginning of time.

This lockdown has been a huge prompt to all of us who care about music. Please write to your MP, the Director of

Education and the Music Advisor in your region, Head Teachers in your local schools, and any local organisations and/or contacts that may have an influence in ensuring that music education not only continues without further cuts, but is invested in and where possible expanded. We are rapidly approaching a period of serious financial challenge following the Covid-19 pandemic, so it is more important than ever that we all emphasise the value and importance of music education, and the huge contribution that all musicians (amateur and professional) make to our society in so many different ways. We need to push our politicians beyond the vacuous media-training-driven “*we are committed to...*” statements on news programmes, along with the promise of a token payment to keep people quiet. It is now up to each one of us to make a BIG noise - a musical one that cannot be ignored!

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