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The World Without Music

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News from Nowhere

*A letter from
Christopher Dobrian*

Imagine There's No Music

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When we hear a strange sound — thinking "What was that?"...we try to identify it...

Occasionally we pay attention to the sound itself. Then it is more than a cue, and we are listening in another mode, music mode, regardless of the source of the sound.¹

Imagine a thing called music. We once listened to sounds attentively, just because we wanted to. We found direct, immediate pleasure and interest in the sound itself, the rhythm with which that sound occurred, and the thoughts and feelings the music evoked.

In a world without music, what music will we make? What will we teach our children of music?

Remember your earliest experience of music? Remember the naïve pleasure you took in music? Remember what made you excited and passionate about music in the first place?

How do we rediscover and give renewed life to those primal attractions of music? How do we teach music as a path to pleasure, excitement, joy, and love?

If we're to start anew, what do we value, and what do we teach?

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The question of what we value in music is as much a philosophical question as an aesthetic one. Every now and then it's good to pause and question, in a fundamental and naïve way, how and why we do what we do. This leads almost inevitably to questioning, "What's worth doing?" and "What's it for?", both in an immediate practical sense and in a larger philosophical sense.

As a composer, I question myself in this way every time I begin to compose a piece of music. As a teacher of music, I question myself every time I plan a new class or lesson. I question the ways we think of music, the ways we use it in our culture, and the ancillary cultures we have created around it.

And who is this "we", anyway? Music has been practiced throughout the world, and has performed many different societal functions, so it's nearly impossible to say anything about music that one can claim to be universally true. Each person has his or her own subjective relationship to and experience of music, which can only be incompletely shared with others. It's best not to try to make grandiose or universal statements about music. Nevertheless, through questioning one can seek some personal truths about music,

¹ Robert Erickson. *Sound Structure in Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975. p. 1.

as a way of better understanding it and one's own relationship to it. Once some of these questions have been asked and answered, we can begin to see what truths we agree upon.

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The origins of music are prehistoric, but it's commonly assumed that music originated with percussion and/or singing. Nobody has any proof of that, of course, but it makes sense that music had to exist before any specialized tools or instruments could be invented to make music. So the first music had to have been made from sounds that occur without specially constructed instruments, namely the percussive sounds that naturally occur from one thing coming into contact with another, and the sounds that emanate voluntarily or involuntarily from our vocal cords.

The intentional production of percussion sounds might have arisen from people taking pleasure in rhythmic sounds (periodic dripping of water on a log, for example, or the cyclic sound produced by a spinning or rolling object) and imitating them. Song, that is to say pitched vocal sound, can be thought of as extending from involuntary vocal expressions such as moans, groans, and sighs, and also as a heightened form of speech — shouting, whining, cooing, etc. All of these most likely took place before anyone conceived of a separate activity that was formalized as making music.

Communication is a naturally occurring and needed phenomenon for nearly all species, and sound is a common communication medium. When humans produce sound expressly, when they speak and play music, they do so with the intention of it being heard by others and communicating with others. One can certainly identify plenty of examples of music being used for representational communication, to signify something specific; but more commonly the meaning that music conveys is ambiguous. There is common agreement that music can evoke emotion and can also induce physicality such as dance. The motions and emotions expressed by music are subject to a fairly wide variety of listener interpretation, generally more so than is the case with speech or the written word.

Music communicates, but the question of *what* it is communicating is subject to widely varying interpretation by its listeners. The meaning of music is not just embodied in the sound or its structures, but is also actively constructed by the listener and by the context in which it occurs. Music can evoke physicality and emotion, but the mechanism by which that happens is not well understood.

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Imagine no instruments. No established sounds officially designated as musical. No established technique for producing musical sound as distinct from other sound. Imagine no theory. No tomes of prescriptive rules based on music of the past. Imagine no recording. No freezing of the ephemeral phenomenon of sound for its conservation and fetishization as a fixed object.

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The thing about music that most attracted me initially was the sheer beauty of sound for its own sake: the warmth and richness and immediacy of the singing voice, the balance of consonance and dissonance in ingeniously constructed harmonies, and the fascinating and

intriguing quality of previously unknown sounds. As a musically educated adult listener, I was taught to refer to that appreciation of sound quality with words like "timbre" and "harmony", but on my own I've come to think of timbre and harmony as just two ways of describing the same traits: the sensual appeal of sound, the appreciation of sonorous patterns within a sound, and changes that occur in a sound over time.

Music — playing it, composing it, listening to it — is meant to be enjoyed. I refer to enjoyment in its various meanings, not only as the derivation of pleasure but also of benefit. That enjoyment may well include the sensual pleasure of beautiful sound and ingenious organizations of sound, and/or it may also include profound benefits of intellectual insight, emotional empathy, and a sense of community through shared experience. The content could be happy or sad, soothing or invigorating, reassuring or dissonant, no matter. Viewed as an intense and focused life experience that makes us more mindful and compassionate people and makes us more at one with our fellow beings, music is — and should always be — a source of joy.

Communication, community, sharing, and compassion are lofty ideals. Yet we strive to keep our ideals in mind as we proceed with our quotidian lives. As musicians and teachers, how can we work toward our ideals, our fundamental principles? I use the word "principle" advisedly, not only to describe foundational beliefs and practices, but also to describe principled, ethical behaviors that support a belief system. How can our actions best support our principles, musical and moral?

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When we teach music, are we trying to pass on a well established body of factual technical knowledge — the names and dates of historically "important" events, works, and personalities, theories of harmonic relationships of pitched sounds, stylistic conventions — and the expert manipulation of a specific instrument and technique, or are we trying to share and pass on access to the joys and insights that music provides? These types of teaching are not mutually exclusive, but framing the question in this way points to a distinction between vocational training and liberal arts exploration.

The attainment of skills and establishment of a career are not themselves the goals; they are merely useful means to assist us in sharing the joy of music. Development of technical skills can give us greater access to the joy of music making, and pre-professional training can prepare us for a joyful livelihood in music making. Yet, technical mastery, professional employment, even wealth, adulation, and fame, none of these is the goal of music, and indeed are distractions from it. Profound experience, mindfulness, and understanding, these are the benefits that lead us to joy through music.

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Imagine there's no music industry. How would that change your music practices? Re-imagine your relationship to music making and music teaching in a way that focuses on the direct enjoyment of the benefits of communication, community, and sharing through music, independent of considerations of commerce and competition, fame and fortune.

The use of the word industry is indicative of the capitalist consideration of music making as a form of commercial production, and of music as a tangible salable commodity. As such, it gives rise to all the expected aspects of capitalist commerce, such as the pursuit of wealth, competition, advertising, potential for exploitation, and the notion that a "free market" results in success for the fittest.

You're familiar with the elements of the music industry — the star system, competitions, awards ceremonies, entertainment magazines, endorsements, ticket sales, and all the commerce that surrounds music — but they should not be confused with, or allowed to interfere with, the enjoyment of music.

The greatest! The best! The best-selling! This sort of superlative expression can be applied to athletes, cars, anything that's treated as a commodity, including music and musicians. It can be based on an organized competition, or based on statistical evaluation, or even with no specific supporting evidence whatsoever. In sports, an inherently competitive endeavor, designation of a single champion through organized play-offs is the norm. In the music industry there exist numerous quasi-sporting competitions in which a panel selects a single winner, a "best of show". Prizes are awarded subjectively, by a vote of a panel or academy. In the case of such awards, as in the case of sports, the one designated best is distinguished from all the rest, often by an incalculably narrow margin or for reasons and factors largely unknown. These prizes are then used in subsequent advertising as a marker of guaranteed quality, resulting in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: the award-winning pianist or violinist or composer or recording artist is given more opportunity and exposure, accompanied by a certification of quality, which in turn gives credence to the very notion of there being a "best". Sales statistics are then used in advertising as a supposed indicator of certified quality, be it the best-selling song on the popular music chart, or the fast-food restaurant with the most hamburgers sold.

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As educators we might well ask ourselves whether we are preparing our students for a life in music or a career in the music industry. The music industry creates "star" performers and composers, who are differentiated from the rest. It employs resources and technology (dynamic compression, autotuning, etc.) to polish performances and recordings to surreal levels of refinement, with the concomitant loss of the potentially interesting abnormalities and detail that refinement so often incurs. It glorifies the flashy, the virtuosic, and the immediately attractive, and it by and large eschews the complex and the challenging.

The music education that takes place in academic institutions — in schools, universities, and conservatories — implicitly establishes a canon of importance and greatness. Certain music practices and styles are given cultural status by virtue of their recognition in academia, and others are deprecated, either explicitly or by omission. Thus, teachers convey not only the contents and techniques of a musical culture (or subculture), but also an inherent set of societal attitudes and values.

The weight and focus that are applied to rote technical training, and how that training is balanced with a more philosophical understanding of the phenomenon of music in our lives, establishes the relative importance and value we attribute to each. Music teaching

in these specialized institutions of advanced learning, by virtue of the status accorded the institutions themselves and the teachers in them, plays a serious role in establishing how musicians, many of whom will be tomorrow's professionals in the field, view and practice the art of music and its role in society.

By questioning the cultural importance of the note-perfect virtuosic performance, the autotuned vocal recording, and the lavishly expensive rock concert or grand opera production, I am not suggesting a devaluation of quality, but rather a focus on musical content more than on presentational form, on immanent substance more than superficial glitz. By musical content, I don't mean just the sounds in the air or notes on a page, but rather the ideas being expressed and shared in a musical experience. Meaningful musical experiences occur in amateur settings, in inexpensive professional settings, in private settings, even in impoverished and adverse settings. They occur — and often occur differently — in different musical styles and cultures. In an increasingly global community, there is all the more reason to promote stylistic and cultural "multilingualism" in music — an awareness and understanding of as many musics as possible, not merely a narrowly focused expertise in one musical style or subculture.

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Imagine young musicians playing without the stressful fear of wrong notes (wrong only in relation to an established text or a theoretic ideal). Imagine what students could learn in the time they once spent repeating orchestral excerpts in preparation for competitive auditions for a slot in an elite orchestra. Imagine if instrumental practice were a group activity rather than solo repetition in an isolated cubicle. Imagine if composition were a shared activity of experimentation and discovery — as it already is in many jazz and rock groups — rather than a solitary process of putting dots on paper to be rehearsed and reproduced verbatim by others at a later date. Imagine if an understanding of music were gained through doing and listening, rather than reading a textbook or following diagrams in a lecture hall. Imagine if musicians were trained not just to be masters of a particular style, but to be informed citizens in an increasingly interdisciplinary, intercultural music world.

These are but a few examples of possible alternatives to established methodologies. They emphasize revelation of the new over conservation of the old. The introduction of new approaches does not prohibit the continued use of old methods, but one can always question the effectiveness and the underlying assumptions of the way things are being done. Are we doing and teaching the things we are, in the ways we are, because of a carefully evaluated determination that they will best serve others' enjoyment of the benefits of music, or are we merely repeating established patterns? This question arises in composing and performing, just as in teaching. How do we best communicate the *joy* of music?

When composing, performing, or teaching music, the more we focus on the joy of making and sharing musical experiences, the joy that attracted us to music in the first place, the more we create and promote a culture in which music plays a healthy and enriching role.

Imagine there's no music, then imagine what you want music to be.