

Music – The Hope Raiser

Dr. Karl Paulnack , pianist and director of the music division at the Boston Conservatory, gave this fantastic welcome address to the parents of incoming students at The Boston on September 1, 2004:

“One of my parents’ deepest fears, I suspect, is that society would not properly value me as a musician, that I wouldn’t be appreciated. I had very good grades in high school, I was good in science and math, and they imagined that as doctor or a research chemist or an engineer, I might be more appreciated than I would be as a musician. I still remember my mother’s remark when I announced my decision to apply to music school. She said, “You’re wasting your SAT scores!” On some level, I think, my parents were not sure what the value of music was, what its purpose was. And they loved music: they listened to classical music all the time. They just weren’t really clear about its function. So let me talk about that a little bit, because we live in a society that puts music in the “arts and entertainment” section of the newspaper. Serious music, the kind your kids are about to engage in, has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with entertainment, in fact it’s the opposite of entertainment. Let me talk a little bit about music, and how it works.

One of the first cultures to articulate how music really works was that of the ancient Greeks. And this is going to fascinate you: the Greeks said that music and astronomy were two sides of the same coin. Astronomy was seen as the study of relationships between observable, permanent, external objects, and music was seen as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects.

Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls and helping us figure out the position of things inside us. Let me give you some examples of how this works

One of the most profound musical compositions of all time is the “Quartet for the End of Time” written by a France composer Olivier Messiaen in 1940. Messiaen was 31 years old when France entered the war against Nazi Germany. He was captured by the Germans in June of 1940 and imprisoned in a prisoner – of –war camp.

He was fortunate to find a sympathetic prison guard who gave him paper and a place to compose, and was fortunate to have musician colleagues in the camp a cellist, a violinist and a clarinetist. Messiaen wrote his quartet with these specific players in mind. It was performed in January 1941 for four thousand prisoners and guards in the prison camp. Today it is one of the most famous masterworks in the repertoire.

Given what we have since learned about life in the Nazi camps, why would anyone in his right mind waster time and energy writing or playing music? There was barely enough energy on a good day to find food and water, to avoid a beating, to stay warm, to escape torture- why would anyone bother with music? And yet- even from the concentration camps, we have poetry, we have music, we have visual art; it wasn’t just this one fanatic Messiaen; many, many people

created art. Why? Well, in a place where people are only focused on survival, on the bare necessities, the obvious conclusion is that art must be, somehow, essential for life. The camps were without money, without hope, without commerce. Without recreation, without basic respect, but they were not without art. 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”.

In September of 2001 I was a resident of Manhattan; on the morning of September 12, 2001 I reached a new understanding of my art and its relationship to the world. I sat down at the piano that morning at 10 am to practice as was my daily routine; I did it by force of habit, without thinking about it. I lifted the cover on the keyboard, and opened my music, and put my hands on the keys and just as soon took my hands off it. And I sat there and thought, do this even matter? Isn't this completely irrelevant? Playing the piano right now, given what happened in this city yesterday, seems silly, absurd, irreverent, and pointless. Why am I here? What place has a musician in this moment in time? Who needs a piano player right now? I was completely lost. And then I, along with the rest of New York, went through the journey of getting through that week. I did not play the piano that day, and in fact I contemplated briefly whether I would ever want to play the piano again. And then I observed how we got through the day.

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