

# Concerning “The Important Things”

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The great composer, Gustav Mahler, once observed, “The important things in Music are not found in the notes.” What did he mean by this?

We all understand that English is a symbolic language. When we see “CAT” written on paper, we understand that “CAT” is not the real animal but only three letters which stand as a symbol for the real animal. Mahler was reminding us that the same is true for music notation, another symbolic language. Indeed, some languages do not even use the word “music” when referring to the notation on paper. They have some other word for that, so as not to confuse anyone into thinking they mean what you listen to (music). Unfortunately, in English we have only one word, “music,” to cover everything. Because of this, we sometimes carelessly think of those little black dots on paper as being music. They are not music. These symbols, as in English, belong only to the grammar of music. Notation, again, is not music.

Philosophers and writers of all kinds over the past three thousand years all agree that what music is, above all else, is a special language for the communication of emotion. Everyone understands this; music does this well and ordinary

language does not. Music is called “the International Language” because the basic emotions are genetic and identical in all cultures on Earth and because all people are also born with some basic musical information which allows them to be proficient in understanding the emotional language in music as listeners with no academic training in music whatsoever.

For most of the history of music there was no notation at all. In ancient Egypt music played an important role in society and in education for a thousand years even though the Egyptians had no notational system. In ancient Greece, at least during the period of Plato and Aristotle, there was still no notation system. In fact, the ancient Greeks of that period did not even have names for the individual notes or pitches.

A dramatic change in the role of music occurred with the arrival of the Christian Era. The early Christian leaders were determined to stamp out everything “pagan” in order to create a new kind of Roman citizen. They placed much emphasis on trying to remove all association with emotion from the lives of the Christians. For example, the Church officials ordered Christians not to go to the theater, because the emotions they

were exposed to there were the first steps toward sin. St. Ambrose (4th century) even argued that a good Christian should not even laugh, for laughter is an expression of emotion. The early Church fathers also attempted (and largely succeeded) to destroy all the books of the “pagans” (Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, etc.) and they closed all the schools.

When eventually the Church decided to re-establish schools, the inclusion of Music was a major problem because of its association with the emotions. They resolved this problem with a neat little slight-of-hand by declaring that Music was a branch of Mathematics! The Church philosophers would write things like, “Music is the part of Arithmetic that you can hear.” And so, for the next thousand years (6th through 16th centuries) of European history all music treatises were written by mathematicians and not by musicians!

It was during this period that our current music notation system was developed by Church mathematicians. It is basically a mathematical system. When we speak of an eighth-note representing two sixteenth-notes, etc., we are speaking of arithmetic. And, even more important, it is

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directly the result of this medieval Church philosophy that we are left today with a notational system which has not a single symbol of any kind to represent any feeling or emotion. The very essence and value of music does not appear on paper, hence Mahler's famous observation quoted above.

What is notated on paper, and that which constitutes the realm of music theory, is only the grammar of music. The problem for the conductor is that a study of the grammar of music, as for example in chordal and harmonic analysis, serves only to clarify the grammar and does not necessarily reveal “the important things.” In fact, theoretical analysis by the conductor (or any performer) often results only in useless information. By that we mean information which cannot be used. Consider, for example, how we are taught to learn form. An instructor writes at the top of the blackboard, “Sonata.” Then, below that, under a large bracket, he writes the names of the three major sections of the sonata form, Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. Below that he writes the four parts of the Expositions section, and so on. On the board it looks like someone's family tree spreading downward. It is true information, but it is information that you cannot ever use because neither the composer, conductor, performer nor listener ever perceive music “from the side” as it appears on the board. If the perception of form is to have any practical application it needs to be an understanding from the left side of the blackboard, traveling to the right, so to speak. That is, it must be an understanding that allows one to stand at the beginning of a composition and perceive the form as something occurring in time. European conductors learn just such a system and it helps to reveal “the important things.”

For the high school band and orchestra director the implication of Mahler's famous phrase is nowhere

more evident than in how we adjudicate our festivals. We hand the adjudicator a form dedicated almost entirely to the grammar of music. But the conductor, like any musician during performance, is experiencing the music and is filled with its emotional content, “the important things.” The conductor, filled with the experience of music, steps down from the podium only to be confronted by pages of written comments about the grammar of music. Is it any wonder that the adjudication experience can leave the conductor and his band in an uneasy and even confused state?

I believe it would be a wonderful experiment if someone were to organize a festival in which the adjudicator serves only as an experienced listener judging a single criteria “Is it musical?” The adjudicator should award the usual marks of accomplishment, I, II, III, etc., but he should be given no forms, no pencil or paper and no scores. By holding the adjudicator responsible for listening to musicianship, rather than accounting for errors in grammar, we would also open the door for service by non-band directors. Wouldn't it be interesting to have, say, Van Cliburn as an adjudicator of a band festival?

Such a format would return the focus to listening and in this change of focus we might encourage more bands to stay and to listen to other bands after their own performance. Music is, after all, for the ear. Adjudication forms and scores are designed for the eye. Maybe we do ourselves an injustice by obligating our adjudicators to dig so minutely in the mine of musical grammar that they are distracted from hearing in our performances, “The Important Things.”

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