

The Seven Deadly Sins of Music Making

Richard Floyd

For centuries mankind has viewed the Seven Deadly Sins to be those transgressions that are fatal to spiritual progress. With subtle variations they are referenced in the religion, literature and arts of countless cultures. We know them today as lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

It has occurred to me that as a result of our desire to objectify every measurable aspect of music making we perhaps have created our own set of “deadly sins.” These sins are a detriment to true musical progress. We obsess over every detail of notation that we view on a printed page of music. We study it, we analyze it, we strategize how we will teach it and we develop elaborate rubrics to judge it. In truth, nothing we see in terms of printed notation is actually music. It is composer code. It doesn't become music until we “crack the code,” solve the mystery and bring it to life. As is the case with most mysteries, the truth is rarely obvious.

Unfortunately, if we accept every aspect of musical notation literally we run the risk of totally missing the essence of what the music has to say. We may achieve the objective of being “correct” but in actuality that rarely makes it “right.” The results, while being measurable, are sterile and lacking in those

expressive, human qualities we refer to as artistry. So what are our deadly sins?

Generic Articulation

If we are not careful we will commit the sin of using articulation primarily to create precision and achieve (and I hate this term) vertical alignment. Yet, in reality, the role of articulation is to create note shape and musical personality. Precision is a by-product.

Unconvincing Dynamics

As we strive to refine balance, blend and tuning be aware of the sin of understating dynamic contrasts. We are seduced into the act of compressing dynamic range to such a degree that, while the resulting sonority “sounds good” there is no perceived dynamic contrast. We have achieved our objective but in doing so sacrificed one of the most expressive elements of music making in the process.

Absence of Line

Never forget, music travels linearly. It tells a story, explores emotions and takes the listener on a journey. In reality it is a sin to obsess over the vertical factors and objective content of the music to the extent that there is little or no consideration given to how the music unfolds from measure to measure, from phrase to phrase or from beginning to end.

Being a Slave to Tempo Markings

Certainly tempo markings are there for a reason and they offer valuable insight in terms of the composer's intent. There is no question that some must be precisely observed. But to embrace every metronome marking literally and precisely is a sin. There are countless factors that can influence tempo selection including but not limited to the size of the ensemble, maturity of the musicians and even the acoustics of the performance space. Paul Hindemith perhaps said it best, “Do not play the tempo that is written, play the tempo that is right!”

Ignoring the Role of Silence.

Silence is a priceless quality. Leopold Stokowski proclaimed that silence is the canvas upon which we paint our music. It is an integral component of music making. How long should it last? Is it passive or does it contain quiet energy? How does the music emerge from the silence and then return to the silence? To fail to consider these limitless options is a sin.

Neglect of Proportion

Proportion is an essential component in all of the arts. Again in our desire to “get it right” we fail to consider the relationships between dynamics, tempos, note

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lengths and articulations. We commit the sin of being confined and limited by the notes on the printed stage. According to Pablo Casals, “Notes are like straight jackets.” He went on to say, “They have no ability to create music.”

Perceiving Rhythms Literally

As much as we would like to believe otherwise musical rhythm is not finite. According to Bruno Walter its measurability and therefore the accurateness of its notation is only approximate. Divergence from the arithmetical exactness can and should occur. Especially in the case of the short notes in dotted rhythms, which might be felt a little shorter, and therefore placed a little later than

prescribed by notation. Or, perhaps a single note or small note grouping that might be elongated to add nuance to a particular phrase or arrival point. If every beat, every measure and every phrase is subjected to the unwavering, relentless throb of the metronome the music remains mechanical and lifeless. What a shame. What a sin.

Now, with all that said, be assured there is a place in all of our rehearsals for objectivity and measurable outcomes. But, as in so much of life, remember, all things in moderation. On occasion let your heart and your musical soul guide your rehearsal. Take time to enjoy the art of your music as opposed to the craft of your music.

In the words of St. Francis of Assisi...

***He who works with his hands
is a laborer.
He who works with his hands and his head
is a craftsman.
He who works with his hands
and his head and his heart
is an artist.***

Which are you? Are you a laborer, a craftsman or an artist? Which do you want to be? Would you like to hear more about “our sins” and how to avoid them? Join Richard Floyd at the TBA Convention/Clnic on Friday, July 24 at 8:15 a.m. or Sunday, July 26 at 9:30 a.m. to explore the world of “sin free music making.”

Richard Floyd is in his 53rd year of active involvement as a conductor, music educator and administrator. He has enjoyed a distinguished and highly successful career at virtually every level of wind band performance from beginning band programs through high school and university wind ensembles as well as adult community bands. Floyd holds the title Texas State Director of Music Emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin. He also serves as Musical Director of the Austin Symphonic Band.

A more detailed biography of Richard Floyd can be found on the TBA website, included with the convention schedule.