

## MUSIC: A PORTAL TO SPIRITUAL TRUTH

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*Editor's note: Steve spoke with Scott Samuelson on 7 July 2008.*

Scott: What is the relationship between beauty and truth in your performance of piano pieces? It's relatively easy for me to see how music is committed to beauty. I'm not quite as clear on how music attempts to get at truth—unless it's emotional truth.

Steve: I know as musicians that we are always looking for the truth of the text. We're looking for what the composer writes in the music—how he conveys his intentions. I think mostly we see those musical devices as emotional conveyance. In that sense we're looking for the truth of the composer's emotions, but I think on a higher plane all good music has spiritual beauty and spiritual truth. And if a piece of music is beautiful and rendered beautifully, it possesses a spiritual quality. I teach piano students that playing a piece of music is not just teaching musical technique; it's teaching the realities and verities that lie within the students themselves that are expressed musically. How they play is about who they are spiritually. Thus, music is really a portal to our spirituality.

Scott: How does your learning and performing new pieces expand you spiritually? Do you think music has enlarged your soul?

Steve: For example, I recently learned and performed Kernis's "Air for Violin and Piano" with Ted Ashton. I don't particularly enjoy playing this piece because I prefer hearing it with the orchestra. I don't enjoy the limitations the piano puts on me in that instance. So, I can't say playing it brought me closer to some reality or truth. But I think the process of looking closely at a new piece of music has spiritual repercussions; it's not so much the product of performance as it is the process of learning. What I gain spiritually from a piano piece lies in looking for the truth in it. For me, music is as close as you can get to spiritual matter because music to me is spirit with clothes on it. Playing the notes is like throwing out a net to put clothing on something invisible, so you can see the shape of it. What I enjoy is participating in a process that helps me perceive those things that we can't see with the eyes or the

other physical senses. To me spirituality is being able to see with the heart.

Scott: Can you say a little more about how your learning and performing the Kernis piece taught you about music as a process of spiritual embodiment.

Steve: The essence of it is to me the quality of this longing, this yearning for something that is beyond this world. I think that's what good music does. It can take an emotion, it can take us away from where we are, it can take us to a place we've never been. Some pieces take you to a place of richness and density, or of passion and intensity.

Scott: Are those spiritual ideals?

Steve: It's not that I take an ideal and find it or try to embody it in a musical piece. I keep coming back to this idea that the spirituality lies in the process more than the product. As a musician and as a teacher of music, I look for the how and the why, not so much for the what. I try to elicit that idea from the student, how does this or that musical aspect—in her or even in my own playing—how does it work? What do I feel when I play that interval, for example. I'm not sure that I try to turn it into a specific emotion; perhaps it's just something I feel. It's almost like the more you try to calculate the effect the less effective you are.

Scott: So, talk about interpretation. A musical text sits in front of you, but it's impossible to render that text colorlessly. However you play it, even if you programmed a computer to play it that would be an interpretation. So what is the relationship between being true to a text and rendering it in your own individual way?

Steve: It really has to do with you finding the truth of a text within yourself. Again, for me it has nothing to do with the piece. It has to do with the truth the musical text speaks to me. My answer to that question is, then, my interpretation. The music is the portal that opens up to an emotion, and then I just tap into that feeling and try to express and be true to it. I don't try to send it. I allow it to tap into me; what it speaks to me—I just reflect.

Scott: So there's another text within you. What I hear you saying is that the feeling within you, the truth within you is a text, and your job as a musician is to find a connection between

the musical text and this feeling within you, a responding text, if you will.

Steve: Yes. Think of a parallel with scripture reading. You can read the same scripture and have a different impression given to you with each reading. It's not so much about the scripture—it's about the process of revelation. When I feel truth, when I feel the spirit of revelation—that's the higher principle that I look for. Hopefully, it's the same revelation or same truth that the composer had. It doesn't necessarily have to be, but the process was the same. A composer receives a musical revelation and writes a text. I look to a musical text to have my revelation of truth.

Scott: You aren't trying to exactly replicate the composer's creative process....

Steve: There's no way of doing that. Nor would I be interested in it.

Scott: Is Brahms a spiritual composer to you?

Steve: I think very much so. But for me his music also possesses an intellectual quality. I think it takes a little longer to absorb. In this sense you could compare Brahms to Isaiah. Some scriptures speak a little easier or quicker than others. Scriptural truth comes from one source, but it filters down through different personalities, different temperaments, and different modal preferences. It's like truth with different flavors or various colors.

Scott: For you Brahms has a flavor of intellect; you sense a rich mind as well as a sensitive spirit?

Steve: In Brahms I sense a struggle between the intellect and the emotion. First, Brahms wants his music to be intellectually accurate. He does all kinds of patterns, musical patterns that can be reversed, or there are many kinds of musical puzzles built into his music. They are so sophisticated that they are not readily discernable, but he has such a sense of musical integrity that his pieces possess wholeness. To Brahms a composition has to be perfect, but then it has to also be expressive. He struggles to reconcile those two parts, but he leans towards the intellectual. I think what I enjoy about Brahms is how he finds passion in intellect.

Scott: What about J. S. Bach?

- Steve: They are very similar. Brahms idolized Bach and studied his music a great deal. Both composers set the ideal of perfection or becoming whole and complete in the music. They work really hard to achieve a unity between the emotional and intellectual.
- Scott: And how does Beethoven fit into this pattern?
- Steve: They all start with Bach. From him they learn their trade. Then I think as each develops, each decides how much of the emotional and how much of the intellectual is needed to achieve his ideal balance. Beethoven goes at first more the direction of passion. And then later he tends to go back more towards the intellectual. I think he tries to counter-balance the emotional with some kind of spiritual and intellectual. He is apparently looking for the spiritual, striving for a hybrid: spiritual-intellectual or spiritual-emotional.
- Scott: In visual art we say there's no art without craft. We've been talking about the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and passionate in music—in a musical text and in the musician's self. But before you can achieve any of that, your fingers, for example, have to be practiced, don't they? Somehow musicians have to reach a certain degree of facility in order to make music.
- Steve: It's the quest for balance. For example, I have students who have very fine technique, who have fine dexterous facility but still don't understand how to make music. So it's really about the spiritual. How does spiritual truth flow through you in whatever medium? It's all about understanding the invisible.
- Scott: What about the opposite? Do you have students who understand spiritual truth but don't have the facility or the technique to translate that effectively into music?
- Steve: I think many of the finest members of our audiences are that way. They probably know more spiritually than the people who can play the instruments. They know the spiritual truth in the music, and so they appreciate it.
- Scott: When you perform, do you feel the power of the audience? Does the audience contribute to the effectiveness of a musical performance? Is that an important part of this for you?

Steve: I think it's the reason we do what we do. We study to give. Like other spiritual gifts, we can't have it until we give it away. A wave comes to mind, a spiritual wave. There are times when the wave is very strong, and other times it's not. You don't always feel a great passion. In other words, when I perform I don't feel an outpouring that lasts for one hour. Rather, I have the ebb and flow of spiritual musical waves.

Scott: It's something that can't be done alone?

Steve: We talk about preparation as part of the Learning Model. We have felt that when students or audience members or members of a congregation come prepared—that preparation can influence the spirit of a discussion or meeting. And the same thing happens in performing. It's somehow something they can solicit from you if they want.

Scott: How does this idea apply to teaching students?

Steve: Students tend not to fully understand that the art is in them. I think musically that's what it's all about—it's us. We are the art. We are the music.

Scott: The kingdom of God within—a state of being rather than doing?

Steve: That's what I look for—the state of being one with the music. And yet, ultimately, I see myself less as a musician and more of a teacher. The Savior presents the idea when he says, "I and my Father are one." I look at the process of learning, teaching, and performing music as the quest to be spiritually whole. I am not jealous or possessive of music itself. I just see music as a tool to help me achieve spiritual wholeness. ∞