Notes from the Editor

Why Music Matters

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I wish to thank the Secretary-General for his kind invitation. It is humbling for any private citizen to address this organization—the United Nations. This is particularly so for an American. We as a nation are the hosts of the UN, yet we have not always been its staunchest defenders or most vigorous admirers. One of the privileges of being an American is the right to dissent, particularly in these dark times; there are many of us who would like to see the day when the promise of the UN is realized with American cooperation and enthusiasm.

Early in its history, the UN inspired composers and music. In 1949 the eminent American composer Aaron Copland wrote his *Preamble for a Solemn Occasion* for narrator and orchestra. It was performed here, with Laurence Olivier narrating and Leonard Bernstein conducting. Copland used the words of the United Nations Charter—about half of its preamble—to honor the first anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The style of the work was prophetic, rhetorical, and imposing: befitting, as some noted, the voice of an Old Testament prophet. Copland sought to use music to preach an ideal that in 1949 had become clouded by domestic American anxiety about Communism, the Cold War, and fear of an atomic bomb. The world was free of Hitler but not of Stalin, nor of the legacy of nineteenth-century colonialism. Ethnic strife in India, conflict in the Middle East, and war in Indochina were present dangers and grim realities.

I cite Copland's 1949 work because while we would like to think and believe that music matters, explaining why is not easy; for in truth, if "mattering" is measured by the extent of harmony, beauty, peace, tranquility, tolerance, and understanding it generates, music no more than language has mattered in the practical, utilitarian sense. There is no evidence that music has encouraged people to become more civil or more peaceful, or helped to make the world a safer, more livable, and more humane place. Copland's use of music with the text of the UN Charter

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had no impact. Perhaps this can be explained by saying it was a poor work. But on the same program, the most celebrated piece of Western music was performed, one that is understood as explicitly utilizing music to evoke a sense of human solidarity and harmony—the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, written in 1824. Yet it, too, has not brought us peace and harmony, despite its constant repetition. It was chosen again in 1989, with Leonard Bernstein conducting, to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. It had been used nearly a half century earlier, in 1941, to celebrate Hitler's birthday.

The conceit behind setting words to music, as in opera, musical theater, secular choral music, and certainly sacred choral music, is that music can reach where ordinary language cannot. Music, used in these settings, seeks to transcend the bounds of language and exploit its limitations. Consider, for example, the closing scene of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, where the countess's words suggest forgiveness of her husband's infidelity, but the music communicates her inner sensibility, her recognition that love is lost and that betrayal and loneliness are assured as part of her lot in life. This is done wordlessly by the transformation of musical materials set against overt linguistic claims.

Furthermore, the genuine appreciation and love for music, including some generous assumptions regarding its communicative powers, are not indications of heightened ethical sensibilities and standards. Consider, for example, the music of Mozart. Stalin loved Mozart. Did that refined taste rein in his capacity for brutality? My own grandfather recalled hiding in a closet in an overcrowded living space in the Warsaw Ghetto where, like him, others, particularly mothers with children, were desperately trying to elude capture, knowing that the result of discovery was deportation to Auschwitz. The SS officer in charge of that particular raid noticed an upright piano in the room, a rarity in the Ghetto. While people were hiding, and after having sent dozens to death, he sat down and began to play, gloriously, the music of Schumann, Chopin, and Mozart.

Elias Canetti, the Nobel Laureate author, once observed that of all the clichés we repeat, the cruelest is that language fosters communication and understanding. Next in line should be that music is universal and can generate harmony and solidarity across the divides of region, class, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Consider the case of language. We all have the capacity for language. It defines a unique aspect of our common humanity. So, too, might this be said of music, for which we all may also possess an inherent capacity. Yet though we all speak and have means for translation, neither in public nor in private does language itself—notwithstanding its universality and our capacity to identify shared elements of syntax, grammar, semantics, and rhetoric that cut across all

languages—necessarily increase the prospects of peace, prosperity, and harmony. If indeed speech is action, and if debate, dialogue, and negotiation, not violence and force, can become the central instruments of politics, then language can matter only if we can agree, in speech, on shared meanings, rules, and procedures. Take, for example, notions of the principles behind law. At stake is not language per se, but particular languages, used in particular ways, with agreed-upon correspondences between meanings and words. Generating these correspondences constitutes an elusive philosophical and political task. Reaching human agreement worldwide on such principles has not yet been possible except as mere rhetoric.

Sustaining a shared discourse in language—forget music for the time being—has become ever more difficult here in the United States, where words and notions of law, procedure, and rights have ceased to reveal basic shared principles and agreements. Ironically, at the same time we have witnessed the ever more clever distortion and manipulation of language, the crafting of euphemisms, jargon, and reductive slogans that erode the tenuous connections among language and logic, clarity, argument, and truth. The dream of our eighteenth-century founders of a rational system, in which deliberation, consent, and compromise along with toleration replace force, is in danger of breaking down, the oft-repeated universality of language notwithstanding. Perhaps language can matter if connected with thought and meaning along specific rules. Indeed we have little choice but to wish and make it so. At stake, therefore, is a special kind of language use, not language as such.

Indeed, then, music may not matter, if we speak only of music as a universal phenomenon that is found everywhere and is enjoyed by all. There are two forms of music that are today ubiquitous, or nearly so. John Blacking, the eminent social anthropologist who spent most of his career teaching at Queen's University (ironically in Belfast, a *locus classicus* of how difficult it is, despite a common language, to promote human understanding) made the argument through empirical research that music may be a universal definitional, perhaps biological characteristic of all human beings, and therefore genuinely a "form of life," as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it. Blacking did his fieldwork not in Europe, but in South Africa, among the Venda.

What Blacking defined as music was the universal creation of pitch structures, rhythmic patterns, and rules by which these can be changed, organized, and adapted into units of sound that are perceived as meaningful. In short, all humans create an artificial temporal space, an acoustic realm in which they arrange sounds with duration, thereby altering the sense of time for themselves and others, away from a standard perception of time through measurement, whether by the clock or the sun and shifts in light

and dark. The universal impulse, need, and cognitive capacity for music that Blacking found to be inherent in all humans to varying degrees can engage the participation of all in a given society. By this logic, no one is unmusical. The specific rules for generating music and for extracting or changing meaning in response to the sounds that make up the musical experience are shared by communities and evolve over time, like language. There is, however, no audible universal grammar or pitch structure, just as there is no universal language. In music, as in language, there may be shared underlying rules and structures, but no shared content or specific resolutions of the use of pitch and rhythm. And there is no objective parallelism between sound and image or sound and word signifying fixed meanings for music.

This universal phenomenon of and capacity for music are what in the nineteenth century came to be associated with so-called folk music. There is no human community without it. In the early 1900s the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók studied and documented this tradition in the premodern rural areas of modern-day Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova. Traveling later in his career, after World War I, to northern Africa, he concluded that perhaps all such folk music shared similar pitch structures and rhythmic patterns, and that much of seemingly distinct folk music was interrelated. By the mid-1930s Bartók, an avowed anti-fascist, was determined to prove fraudulent the use of folk music to justify chauvinism and invidious European national distinctions. He infuriated right-wing Hungarians, still angry at the Treaty of Trianon, by suggesting that "their" authentic folk music in logic, sound, and character was no different from and was perhaps derived from Romanian and Slovakian folk patterns: they were all migrations, as music, from north Africa.

Yet there were those, like the Czech or rather Moravian composer Leoš Jánaček, who sought a way around Bartók's argument of a shared transnational folk music. He developed a specific musical logic for his own compositions that derived from the distinctive character of the Czech language—what he called speech melodies—to help defend a unique local realization of the natural impulse for music through its dependence on the variegated character of a particular language usage. In each individual's speech and in each dialect there was a palpable music. He was not only a virulent Czech patriot, but also an enthusiast for pan-Slavism.

However constructed, this basic, so-called folk musicality has found its modern mirror image in the second aspect of music that is ubiquitous, if not universal—popular commercial music. Its origins are in towns and cities; today's popular music is largely an urban extension of rural folk music. Popular commercial music is a comparatively recent phenomenon and an early example of cultural globalization. With the introduction of a stable

and easily distributable means of reproduction of music in Europe and North America at the end of the nineteenth century—first the piano, then the radio and gramophone, and now the CD and computer—there is now a broad international style, part white American, part African American, part Latin American, African, and European. A mélange of shared elements has emerged in popular songs, dance music, Muzak in airports, and urban street music, and there is a dominant element of Americanization in this modern popular music the world over.

This has troubled many nationalists. Just as Esperanto never took hold and died a natural death only to cede to English the role of an international language, resistance to the perceived loss of authentic local culture is great, whether in France or Iran. In music the enemies of popular commercial culture see a sort of global standardization, a musical McDonalds or Coca-Cola effect, by which people with access to the communication systems of modernity acquire by imitation the formulas for musical experiences, much as they purchase ready-made food or clothing. Such standardized units of music seem to satisfy their basic need for music. Local communities do not alter and change this music decisively. It is controlled by a highly centralized, global, and international music industry located in the United States, Germany, and Japan. The industry and its artists sell millions of these units of music. Each recorded, identical, packaged piece of music has succeeded in becoming part of the fabric of emotional self-expression for millions of individuals all over the world. Although this music is more formulaic, circumscribed, and uniform than we might like to acknowledge, individuals manage to appropriate it and personalize it for themselves, much as they do other consumer products.

The question of whether music matters might be more easily answered in the affirmative if the power and universality of popular commercial music could be construed as forces for enlightenment and human progress. But they have not been. In the folk tradition, to create music by oneself was necessary and customary. In its commercialized form, music has been reduced to far more passive listening with far less active participation. This essentially twentieth-century form of universal music, despite its appropriation by individuals as an emotional vehicle, is like fast food: prepared by others, limited in scope, admirable, safe, easily forgettable and replaceable, and without much transformative power. It is structured in short forms, dependent on lyrics and therefore on language. Perhaps in premodern times music making helped define and sustain local communities, but despite the commonality and wide appropriation of commercial music, we do not have a way to use this widely shared purchase of music as a basis for a new human understanding. The spread of popular commercial music—from pop and dance tunes to varieties of rock, rap, and

hip-hop—should not be derided either. The criticism of popular commercial music as somehow inferior or morally troubling seems nonsensical. The music is of limited duration, it depends on words, and it is subject to rapid shifts in fashion. Music matters here primarily as commerce, fashion, and entertainment, no mean achievement, and requires very little active engagement beyond pushing a button on a piece of technology and perhaps karaoke and dancing. It does no great good but by the same token cannot be said to do much harm.

This is not to say that there are not great, better and lesser, and quite poor examples of popular music. The observations about commercial music are not aesthetic condemnations. It is hard to write good music in any genre; there is genius in popular commercial music, as in all fields of music. But as to the question of whether music matters in terms of ethics and politics and bettering human understanding, neither folk nor commercial music—the most widespread music—has mattered, just as little as our witnessing someone speaking a language not our own (and ironically, even our own) creates a sense of solidarity and empathy. Music, like language, seems to fail to evoke a version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pre-moral awareness of compassion based on the natural empathy that should derive from the observation of our common human capacities and vulnerabilities.

So, if these two most common and popular forms of music do not matter, is there a music that does, and, if so, why? Indeed, there may be. In each civilization—in China, in India, and in the West—just as in speech and language, humans have developed a counterintuitive dimension of music. That counterintuitive dimension goes beyond the folk, the popular, the easy, the evident, and the natural. It goes beyond short forms, beyond entertainment and commerce. Much like science and mathematics, this music extends beyond the obvious and often contradicts what we think of as straightforward, self-evident, and true. The earth is, after all, not flat, and objects of different masses fall at the same rate, as Galileo proved. Our planet revolves around the sun, not the other way around, though we might be led by common sense to think otherwise. Our DNA shows that we are more similar to one another than we are different, despite our notions of race and our obsessions with skin color and the geometry of a face. There are negative numbers but no absolute numbers in nature. The music that may matter may sound different from the folk and the commercial; its materials and rules might seem, on the surface, to contradict the commonplace.

The world of science and mathematics is often arcane and seemingly abstract. In the case of mathematics, the questions and answers frequently have no practical application. In music in all cultures, systems of making

music designed for long stretches of time, measured in minutes, hours, and in some cases days, using the human voice, instruments alone or in groups as in the gamelan or the Western orchestra, have extended the complexity of musical expectations, syntax, and semantics. In each civilization this music is expressive but artificial. It extends well beyond natural experience, beyond any obvious correspondence with external reality. These extended systems of music may use basic elements from the folk tradition, just as philosophy and literature derive from ordinary speech, and confront simple, essential issues. The elaborate systems of music exhibit debts to folk origins in terms of pitch relations, definitions of timing and tuning, and the determination of microtonalities. They are, in some cases, notated. These musics may have no clear relationship to, dependence on, or correspondence with language. They are not always easily understandable, but they are enjoyable on many levels of response. This is the same in science. So, too, in language. When one gravitates beyond everyday speech (to poetry, for instance), one becomes less reliant on common experiences of language. Yet philosophy and poetry exist for all, even though plumbing their depths becomes the province of a few. Poetry and philosophy are experienced in language that requires literacy, contemplation, a puzzle solving–like skill, and discipline to engage it fully. The music of this sort contains a capacity to sustain its allure and mystery despite close, constant analysis and regular revisits over generations.

Complex musical systems are not only intricate and sophisticated; they, more than visual art or literature, have practically no evident correspondence or parallelism with nature. These systems actually create new imaginary worlds that we could not have anticipated, a new kind of experience that is absolutely meaningless and has no practical purpose. It is a world full of mystery and entirely unpredictable. It has no fixed and locatable meaning. Artificiality in this arena of music is extreme, well beyond the province of mathematics and science. This sort of music has no truth-value. It can never be judged to do something right (e.g., expressing a concrete proposition of fact or value) or say something true. This music is utterly without meaning in the ordinary sense of the word. The ascription of meaning requires an active leap of interpretation by the individual participant and listener, even if that leap is guided by inherited and learned cultural habits.

What is important about this category of music is that its attraction is transferable beyond linguistic and religious enclaves. Composers have used this kind of music across cultural barriers. The American composer Colin McPhee appropriated Indonesian music, and today composers Bright Sheng and Tan Dun seek to integrate the traditions of the Far East with the West. But precisely because this music has no fixed meaning or

significance, it has no authenticity. In recent decades what we call Western classical music has been enjoyed, played, studied, and produced in Korea and Japan. We may consider it Western, but this is only a conceit. The music played belongs only to the makers and listeners in the time and space of realization. History does not stick to music as it does to painting and literature. By the same token, fine American gamelan ensembles are American phenomena, not Indonesian. Complex systems of music as objects of performance and listening have no stable meanings, cannot be owned, and permit of no permanent national identities.

Despite the intricate nature of these noncommercial forms of music—what some call art music—something in them frequently turns out to be connected to a folk tradition or a commercial pattern. The constituent ideas that make up the complex fabric of music often come from simple models. Johannes Brahms, the great nineteenth-century German composer living in Vienna, once observed that his protégé and friend, the Czech Antonín Dvořák, had the greatest talent for inventing melodies, and that those melodies actually sounded like folk music. The hardest thing in nineteenth-century instrumental composition was to write a great melody; in Brahms's view, composers had every reason to envy the ideas Dvořák discarded.

Furthermore, because it lacks truth-value and fixed meaning, this sort of music, divorced from language and image and of long duration (as in the symphonies of Haydn or Bruckner or the instrumental works of Chopin or Sessions), is not better or worse, right or wrong, in the ordinary senses. Aesthetic judgments can be justified within a system, but to extend the aesthetic debate to the ethical and the political, from the beautiful to the good, is wishful thinking except on the most speculative level, despite the pleadings of eighteenth-century British and German philosophers.

This form of music is, as will come as no surprise, the sort that occupies me here in the United States and in Israel, both nations mired in conflict, internal tension, and violence, and both the objects of worldwide criticism. Does this third type of music—the elaborate, extended, artificial expressions spun out of a basic human capacity to create music—matter in these troubled contexts?

Ironically, it does. Why? Because of its essentially opaque, elusive, and dense nature and its absence of meaning. Nothing else in human activity is quite like it. Unlike science, music is useless and cannot lead to any concrete end. It can compel and engage both the few and the many, whether in India, Indonesia, China, or Europe and North America. But it cannot be appropriated by power or ideology. Therefore, this music can inadvertently bring people otherwise in conflict together at the same time and place without conflict.

One of the great things about this music is that it is entirely imaginary and divorced from the quotidian. It is boundless, unpredictable, untamable. What meanings it assumes are contained in a particular moment in time. On the one hand, it is emotional and intense; on the other, it is neutral. The writing or improvising of such music reminds one of the gift of one's individuality, the importance of time defined exclusively in terms of individual life and therefore the specter of mortality. Musicians can enlarge or reduce the experience of time and intensify it. For those of us who reproduce it, we remake it, creating moments with meaning that never return but can be emulated. We retain only what we remember of the passing experience. In music there is no precise repetition, for it is the sequence of events that counts; in practice, in what sounds the same, sameness disappears as the sequence occurs. The first and the last repetitions will never be or sound the same. In notated music we use a shorthand that signifies a so-called repetition, but there is really none. In nonwritten forms, improvisation and ornamentation can never be entirely duplicated. And when it comes to the realization of notated music in performance, in Western music there is no such thing as the complete, right, or perfect interpretation of a score. The transaction is always with a specific community that plays and hears the music at a single time and place. Judgments are subjective and temporary. The residue of music sustains itself as personal memory. Indeed, music creates an arena of memory that is individual and insulated from political power and reaches beyond language and image.

This leads me finally to what matters with respect to this type of imaginary, complex, and counterintuitive music. For the listeners, the creator, and the performers, this music sustains the wonderment and sanctity of every human agency and existence. We each experience something unimaginable and inexpressible that we make our own. The more complex and refined the music seems, the more diverse the ascription of its significance. There is no right way to listen and understand. Under periods of dictatorship, art music has been one of the few provinces of freedom inherently protected from governments and the willful use of power. Under Hitler and Stalin, public gatherings to listen to music reminded audiences of that which tyranny could not steal—one's private world—that from which no torture could elicit a confession and where there were no lies or truths. In the period of Metternich's rule after the fall of Napoleon, the public performance of music was one of the few arenas of activity where the public could gather without coming under suspicion, where people could show emotion and response without betraying so-called meaning in public that was within the reach of censorship. The meaninglessness, the lack of utility, the instability, and yet the complexity and significance of the extended complex musical experience are its virtues

and powers in a period of unfreedom. Efforts to control the aesthetics of such music by appending meanings to musical practices and favoring particular compositional strategies (for example, by Hitler and Stalin, or by the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter Reformation) were undermined by the very instability of music and its nature—the absence of an objective logic of correspondence. Hence the ongoing debate regarding ambiguities in the meaning of Shostakovich's music. Music within complex systems offers a rare oasis of protected private and public experience where emotion can be expressed and nothing be betrayed. Overt meaninglessness within a fabric of structure and form engenders the opportunity for meaning for each listener that no power of violence can control or fathom.

For those of us who live in relative freedom, where freedom of assembly in public space is not impossible, we may be less conscious and jealous of the power of the world of music. We take freedom too much for granted. But here, too, in times of fear, music can remind us of how reluctant we can become to express ourselves in nonstandard ways, beyond fixed meanings and symbolisms. Music can be one last bastion of individuality, freedom, and dissent.

This august organization, the United Nations, was founded in the wake of one of the most terrifying experiences in recorded history, after people with education, cultivation, and learning engaged in the most rigorous and systematic barbarism. If we can be accused of skepticism regarding the connections of education, cultivation, and ethics, it is the experience of the Second World War that taught us that we, in fact, permitted ourselves, despite the external advance of civilization and culture, to lose the sense of the sanctity of human life. That war gave us tragic evidence that education, learning, and cultural refinement are not to be confused with moral progress. Yet they do not cause it, any more than anti-intellectual sectarian fundamentalism prevents moral decay. The perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and genocide may have been educated; they may even have been conscious of music as an art form. But they were unable to taint music with evil. Music breaks free of attempts to employ it for evil. It is ineffective as an instrument for the good, but it, in an enduring sense, resists evil.

In the sixty years since 1944–45, our fragile sense of the sacred capacity granted each human being has been further eroded. We tolerate violence to others and its imagery without shock. Horror and radical evil have become routine, a phenomenon that in the early 1960s Hannah Arendt termed the banality of evil. Cruelty and criminality have been embraced as entertainment. They become attractive as relief from a pervasive sense of insignificance, powerlessness, and boredom.

Music beyond the ordinary matters because it is unique in its capacity to work against this tide, to remind us of the irreplaceable uniqueness of each individual. This is so because music is intriguing, intricate, elaborate, but useless and without purpose, owned by no one, not for sale, ephemeral but renewable. It has no evident consequence and is inessential. It harms no one and helps none. And yet music is the most unexpected and unpredictable human activity, the most human expression by its very unreality, inessentiality, limitlessness, and impermanence.

Music, in its fully developed extended forms, is the last refuge for a hope that lies beyond the linguistically expressible that in every human being there is a boundless power of imagination that need not be envied, for it has no transferable value. Music is a speechless form of life that can renew our respect and gratitude for our own life and the lives of others. The experience of music reminds us of our own limited time of life. Whether the existential consciousness that music creates can be a basis for a politics that redeems the possibility of harmony, peace, and freedom with tolerance for the diversity not of groups but of persons throughout the world is an objective we can wish for. At best, music can reaffirm the goal. But the responsibility and the means to reach it rest exclusively with politics and ourselves as citizens.

Music beyond local folk and commercial musics, as in Copland's now obscure *Preamble* of 1949, matters because it reminds us that the struggle of politics to transcend conflicts created by claims regarding identity, culture, or religion is a proper and true enterprise because each of us, whether in the role of composer, performer, or listener, has an inexhaustible and inalienable right to make for ourselves music beyond the routine whose meaning and significance to ourselves can be extraordinary. As we revisit Copland's work, it will be the music that matters most. Its recalcitrant, unimaginable, unpredictable, and distinct nature, no matter our response to it, reminds us that each of us is uniquely our own musician whose life and liberty must not be violated.