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Mind Tools: Applications and Solutions

A Place Where One Can Hear

Lee Humphries

I once conducted a concert in the amphitheater of St. Paul's Town Square Park—a striking indoor space, where towering green foliage shelters multi-level terraces from the nearby public commotion.

Visually, the space engages the eye, but sonically it defeats the ear. Its ambient noise and reverberation compete with the music it was designed to accommodate. Music-making needs a hospitable acoustical environment.

There is another environment that affects a performance: the psychological atmosphere in which the music is rehearsed and played. This environment is a composite of the values and attitudes we bring with us when we come together as performers, conductor, and composer. These values form our frame of reference and ultimately determine our capacity to find meaning in the music.

We know—to use an analogy—that the written symbol “O” assumes the meaning of a number or a letter according to the mental set we project onto it. But we often forget that this same phenomenon is at work generally in our lives; that the expressiveness of a composition is engendered by the individual spirit each of us projects onto it.

In cultures different from our own, a work of art is regarded as a sacred object of the community at large—flowing as it does from that great spring of imagination which can rise up in us all. Because the object represents the universal generative impulse, deep and mysterious, it is deemed worthy of respect, even if its form be faulty.

When we develop the capacity to see our own artistic endeavors in this light, we perceive something transcendent. Our music is elevated to the level of a prized object, an icon of the numinous. It becomes a thing which no one owns—not composer, not performer, not conductor—but a thing to which each of us has a unique creative relationship.

Divested of our musical ownership (and its associated ego dysfunction), we realize that no person can know everything about a work; but that each person can recognize things missed by others—things which will enhance the work's expressiveness when they are shared. In such a state of mind, we overcome the self-diminishing fear that incorporating somebody else's insight into our understanding will reduce our own status. Likewise, we rise above the toxic behavior of using our special knowledge (or lack thereof) to diminish another's efforts or to assert our own dominance within the group.

To find this attitude throughout an ensemble is, of course, exceptional. But for extraordinary things to happen, extraordinary mindsets are required.

If what we hear in the music is a reflection of our inner orientation, then let us build within ourselves a truly artistic outlook so that we can participate in a truly artistic experience. For a musical endeavor viewed as something sacramental becomes a channel for expressing that which is best in us. And a composition treated as a numinous object may actually become one.

Lee Humphries is President of **ThinkingApplied.com**, Minneapolis, MN, where he invents algorithms, analytical techniques, and problem solving strategies.