Bringing Mind and Body Together in Music

Something happened to music in the 19th century. Although this “something” probably felt gradual to those experiencing it, advocating for it, or rejecting it, it is easy now to think of it as a sudden shift; a radical, fractured departure from what was to what is. This “something” was a shift in terms of how music was thought about, performed, composed, and listened to. The simplest explanation for how this shift began would be to merely point a finger at the composer Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven’s career, which spanned the latter half of the 18th and beginning half of the 19th centuries, demonstrated a new approach to writing music. Rather than being beholden to a singular, royal or aristocratic patron and working in a role not dissimilar to a court servant, Beethoven’s main income came from four aristocrats who simply gave him money to continue to compose with few strings attached. The freedom from the individual tastes of a patron allowed Beethoven to approach his music with an experimental curiosity and boundary-pushing tenacity that would change the course of musical thought.

Philosopher Lydia Goehr would point to Beethoven as a new archetype for how composers approached music, one that emphasized expressive creativity rather than simply a wage-paying activity. The creative result was an appetite for larger, abstract conceptual thinking that took instrumental music in particular from an emphasis on rigid form and harmonic expectations to exploring the narrative potential of music to express feelings and ideas. The 19th century music critic, Eduard Hanslick, only perpetuated this shift in his praises of Beethoven’s works, lending them both creative and intellectual credibility that would follow the composer long after his death. Of course, these changes are much more complicated and historically messy than could be accounted for in a singular person’s career, even one so prolific as Beethoven’s. But he did seem to instigate a profound shift in how people thought about and consumed instrumental music.

Resultantly, the shifts in musical thinking in the 19th century also greatly changed the ways in which listeners were expected to engage with classical music, and especially with instrumental music like symphonies. While orchestral concerts of the 18th century were seen as social events - in which concert-goers would arrive late, drink, talk, and even sleep throughout the performances - 19th century concerts began to shift their focus to the more serious atmosphere we are all more familiar with today. This shift is due to a number of intersecting cultural and social factors, but the end result that we are concerned with is that it made music less social and more intellectual. Music became something to study and understand, rather than simply listen to and enjoy. Audience members were now expected to listen attentively to the music in stillness and silence and, preferably, to have studied the score ahead of their listening. The composer’s use of musical complexity became valued above a performer’s virtuosity, the latter of which some argued was more akin to a parlor trick than to serious musical expression.

This shift not only made it so that music became less social, however. The new emphasis on the intellectual nature of music also meant that it became something thought of as less physical, with less tangible ways that music’s sound waves would and could interact with our listening bodies. For some, this separation not only indicated a change in classical music, it also meant a new way to categorize different kinds of music. Ethnomusicologist Simon Frith has argued that music that was perceived to emphasize the body, especially through activities like dancing, would eventually be classified as popular music whereas music that was thought to require more intellectual engagement, like a symphony, was considered to be serious music. Like the emergence of music as an intellectual activity, the separation of popular versus serious music is the product of a number of complex and intertwined social understandings of music, but the

separation of “body” and “mind” play an intriguing role. Particularly because for many, the designation of a piece as “serious” music often carried a higher social and cultural value than those deemed simply “popular.”

These changes in how people have thought about classical music also parallel the experience of many queer people “in the closet,” the proverbial space in which queer people exist when they are not “out.” For many of us, the closet was a place in which the body could be neither emphasized nor acknowledged. Instead, we tend to focus on over-rationalizing and over-thinking experiences around all kinds of social relationships that would allow us to not confront our own feelings. In other words, we try to outthink our queerness by refusing to acknowledge the signals sent to us by our own physicality. The self-inflicted erasure of our own bodies, and the subsequent turn towards an attempt at an entirely cerebral existence, mirrors itself in this understanding of musical historical lineages, which can feel both similar and familiar.

And yet, the body simply cannot be erased. The way that we feel things, and move around and to things, is as important to our understandings of both music and our own existence as thinking is. And they are both important. Musicologist Arnie Cox has taken a cognitive scientific approach to consider how we understand music. Cox posits that our openness to and understanding of music stems directly from our bodies and how we, quite literally, feel music. He suggests that our engagement with music comes from our ability to mimic it in some way through how we move our physical bodies when we listen to it. These movements can be obvious, like “air-playing” an instrument; more subtle, like head-nodding or foot-tapping to the beat; or almost imperceptible, like exhaling or contracting the abdomen in congruence with the music in some way. The more we feel inclined to move to the music and the more avenues for this kind of physical mimicry that we feel invited to take (which ranges from person to person), the more appealing we tend to find the music to which we are listening. This line of thinking takes music back into the realm of the physical in a similar way that coming out of the closet allows us to reclaim elements of embodied experience. In concerts, we might allow ourselves to subtly move, to trace the curvature of the musical phrases in the air with our hands, to breathe in time with the performers as an expression of attunement and appreciation. In our everyday lives, we might hold our partner’s hand as an expression of radical queer joy.

In today’s concert, no matter how you identify, we invite you to bring consideration back to the body as part of your listening subjectivity. When you see the strings play, you might ask yourself what Cox considers to be the primary questions of musical mimicry: *what is it like to do that* and *what is it like to be that*? What do you notice about the musicians’ hands? What do you think it would feel like to press down onto each string or key to play each tone? How would it feel to gently tremble your hand to produce a vibrato, or shaky, sound? How would it feel in your abdomen to focus enough air through an instrument to play it? Can you think of how it might feel to move the bow back and forth to create sound; or how a wind instrument might hum in your hands as it is played? Handel’s piece that will open the concert, an excerpt from his opera *Solomon*, as well as music director Steven Byess’s arrangement of Florence Price’s *Adoration* will give you ample opportunity to consider questions like these, especially in the strings.

Other pieces, you might focus on guest soloist Sara Davis Buechner’s incredible piano playing. How do her hands and fingers move across the instrument? What would it feel like to move your own body like this? How does the rest of the body facilitate this kind of movement? You might consider these kinds of questions as Sara plays through Wolfgang Mozart’s *Rondo in A Major*. The rondo form of this piece will include one section of music (the A section) that will be repeated and contrasted against different musical sections repeatedly throughout the piece

(think: ABACADA in which B, C, and D represent different contrasting sections and A represents the repeated section). Do you notice Sara's hands going back into the same place to repeat the A section? Does the familiarity of the piece's thematic repetition create any changes in physical sensation? Saint-Saëns's piece, nicknamed "Wedding Cake," is perhaps the most obviously physical piece, as a "valse" or "waltz." Saint-Saëns' own fascination with French dance forms, something he incorporated into many of his pieces, lends itself easily to thinking about the body. Although this piece was not written to actually be danced to, you can consider what dancing to this piece would be like. How fast would your feet need to move and in what pattern? Does it align with how the musicians move to play or "feel" the beat?

Other pieces will allow you to consider the contrast of different styles of playing. Gerald Finzi's *Eclogue*, a literary term for pastoral Greek poetry that was eventually applied to piano pieces in the 19th century, will demonstrate more flowing, light, and lyrical passages. Contrastingly, Turina's *Rapsodia Sinfonica* will demonstrate more staccato (i.e. separated) playing that may come across as more immediate or heavier and, at times, much quicker. How does the pianist need to move her hands to achieve these changes in tone and character? How do you think the pressure from your hands would need to change to play in these contrasting styles?

The questions posed above are only a few of the possible ways you might think about how movement (Sara's movement, the musicians' movement, your own movement) can be used to help understand and interpret the music you will hear during this concert. Because ultimately music, as well as Sara's story, has the power to move us, both literally and figuratively. And so, we ask that you be respectful of your fellow concert-goers, but we also invite you to consider in what ways your body responds to the music you will hear and how your personal experiences and feelings interact with what this looks like and means to you as an individual.

How do you feel invited to move? How do you feel invited to listen?

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