

# Six Talks on Music #1: Keynote Address

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*I gave these talks at the National Conference on Piano Pedagogy, October, 1994. Richard Chronister, the director, didn't like long speeches, so he invited me to give six short speeches scattered through the four days of the conference. Since I am not a pianist, I came prepared to talk about music, using ideas from my article *Resuscitating Art Music*.*

*The theme of the Conference was preparation, and there were six plenary teaching sessions, each with three teachers and one student observed by maybe a thousand piano teachers. Each student had videotaped practice sessions, and the teachers showed us clips to illustrate points about practice.*

*After my first talk I scrapped the rest of my prepared speeches to address issues that came up in the teaching demonstrations and in hallway conversations. This written version of the talks tries to retain their conversational tone and improvisatory character. I am indebted to the many piano teachers who helped to elicit these thoughts during the conference, and I dedicate the texts, with gratitude, to the memory of Richard Chronister. The first talk followed his generous introduction.*

Thank you. I'm afraid to follow that! I'm also nervous about competing with these guys on the big screens. [The conference stage was flanked by two huge video screens projecting giant images of the speaker.] Watch over here....oh, they're pointing to themselves, too, aren't they?

Well, I'm very excited to be here, because this is a chance for me to be in a large collection of people who are interested in the same things that I am. I'm hoping that I can learn a lot from watching the teaching demonstrations, and from the place where all the real learning goes on in a conference like this, which is in the hallways and at lunch.

Before I say anything else, I'd like to invite you, in between the many times when I will come back to haunt the conference, to catch me in the hallway with questions or comments or suggestions, because I'm very interested to find out what are the burning issues for you. I'll start by telling you about a couple of my burning issues, but I'd also like to be able to speak to the things that are of greatest concern here.

I know that many of you are involved in quite different musical traditions, and I'd just like to get a feel for who is here. How many of you are involved at all in jazz? [Some hands go up.] How many in classical music? [Almost everybody.] How many people play music from some culture other than Western culture? [Not too many.] How many play music written since 1950? [Quite a few hands go up.] Oh, that's good. How many since 1980? [About the same number.] Hey, that's great. How many are composers? [I can't remember how many.] And is there anybody else here besides me who is not a keyboard player? [A few hands go up.] Oh, thank you. I'm grateful.

Well, I think it's worthwhile to look at music from a lot of different viewpoints, and one thing that I'll be doing as I come back to give these six talks during the course of the conference, is to look at music from different vantage points. Music is such a rich field that, when you look at it in a different way, you can sometimes discover a whole new set of truths that you hadn't noticed before. Sometimes you can stumble across the answer to a problem that you were struggling with from the other side of the same question.

From these varied viewpoints, I'm going to be talking about this kind of music that Richard was referring to in his introduction: art music. Now, that is a term that has been used in a lot of bad ways, I think. It sounds kind of fancy and hoity-toity, and it's been used to exclude and put down other kinds of music. Both because of the diversity of interests here, and because I love a lot of different kinds of music, I was looking for a way to think about art music, and to define it that wouldn't be exclusive and wouldn't put down other kinds of music.

A culture needs lots of different kinds of music, art music being only one kind, so I've been thinking about how to define art music without being rude to other kinds of music.

One definition was suggested years ago, at a computer camp, by a high school kid. I wasn't looking for this definition at the time, but that high school kid said something that stuck with me, and later I started my article with his idea.

I was teaching a music class at a computer camp, and I had never had such a terrible time teaching in my entire life. I'd taught at music camps or at music schools before, places where I had a lot in common with the students: at least all of us had had to practice scales. We had struggled through some of the same things, we had some things in common.

But these were students who didn't play instruments and who didn't know very much about music. The most troubling thing to me was that they weren't very curious about things. They would say, "I hate that," and I finally realized that what this usually meant was, "That's unfamiliar to me." "That's unfamiliar" and "I hate that" meant the same thing. (Sort of like a symphony audience listening to a piece of new music!)

I was very unhappy until I finally gave up trying to teach anything and just asked them about their own musical experiences. They agreed to an experiment: I asked them to pick one piece of music that everybody loved and another piece of music that everybody hated. They had a little trouble deciding on something that everybody liked, but they finally settled on a song by the rock group Journey. (This was in 1983.)

Then they had to pick something that everybody hated. That was hard, because anything that anybody had heard of, at least one of them would like. I finally said, "Well, I have some music here. What do you think about a fourteenth-century love song?" And they said, "Oh, that'll do just fine." They were absolutely sure, without even hearing it, that they would hate a fourteenth-century love song.

So we listened to both of these pieces, and, sure enough, they loved the Journey song and they hated the fourteenth century. I asked them to talk about the feelings that they had gotten from the music. What was the experience like? Why did they like one and hate the other? The answers were fascinating.

One of them said, "I don't like that fourteenth-century music because the music isn't in English."

Another said, "I don't like that fourteenth-century music because it reminds me of the stuff my parents listen to. You know, Pavarotti and things like that."

Then there was a kid who said, “I like rock music better because even if I'm in the other room, doing something else, I can still get it. I can still feel the beat.”

And then this particular kid said the thing that really stuck with me for the next ten years—and if it sticks with me for another minute, I'll tell you about it. He said, “I like rock music because you don't have to pay attention to it.”

And I thought something like, Yow! I've been devoting my life to honing my attention to be ever more aware of subtler and subtler things, as a performer, as a listener, and as a composer—and here is this kid saying that his favorite thing is not to have to pay attention.

Well, sure enough, many people have noticed that, in America, art forms that require attention are in trouble. And it's not just art forms. If you look at what's happened to our political discourse, you can see that where once we had political speeches, we now have sound bytes. A lot of people talk about this problem. (There's an excellent book by Neil Postman, called *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, about how Americans are losing the ability to pay attention.)

And so it occurred to me that one interesting way to think about art music would be as the music that you pay attention to. I liked that a lot, because it didn't exclude any kind of music, and it didn't sound too snobby. A little bit snobby, but not too snobby. Certainly it's not a complete definition; it leaves out a lot of things. But working with that definition has turned out to provide some interesting thoughts.

I'm going to suggest this definition, not because I think it's any kind of ultimate solution, but only because I think that when you stay with that point of view for a little while, you start noticing some fresh things.

So art music is the music that invites and rewards attention, and I think we have to add that it requires a certain amount of experience, too.

You'll notice right away that many different kinds of music can fit this definition. Jazz can fit. South Indian classical music can fit. Indonesian gamelan music can fit. Japanese gagaku music can fit. In fact, if you think of a kind of music that you really like, and you're just about to get mad because you think it's being excluded, you don't have to do that. You just include it in the definition.

There has been a lot of concern from musicians about the declining audience for this or that kind of music—orchestra music, chamber music, jazz, art song, new music. If you name a kind of music, there's probably somebody worrying that the audience for that music is shrinking. Well, what do all of those endangered traditions have in common? They all require the audience's attention. They require an experienced audience.

And it seems that music that requires attention is generally in trouble in this country. I don't think I have to go over the evidence for that; we're all too chillingly familiar with the bad news.

If you define art music as paying-attention music, that suggests one way to work with the problem of the declining audience. It's a way that hasn't actually been tried very much. We've tried different kinds of marketing. We've tried different kinds of gimmicks. But we haven't really tried very much to work with the audience's attention.

What if we tried to help them learn what was worth paying attention to? Or how to direct their attention? Or what the music is actually doing when it's playing with their attention? What if we help them to get the kind of practice and experience that they seem to need?

Another intriguing aspect of this definition is that it doesn't describe the music at all. It describes the listeners. And that suggests some interesting thoughts. Art music, as I'm sure many of you have noticed, requires listeners who want to participate in the music in some way. You can't just be a consumer. You have to participate as a listener.

European art music—and I'll talk about that a fair amount, not because I think it's any better, but just because I'm most familiar with the tradition that needs bassoon players—European art music was developed for an audience that played instruments, that sang in choirs, that learned to play the piano at home, that took composition lessons. This was an audience of practitioners.

Imagine with me what it would be like to be a musician in Mozart's time, say in Vienna. Think about it: there were people in Vienna who spent their whole fortunes on musical activity. I guess music was the drug of Vienna.

One night you're playing chamber music with your friends. Another night you go to an orchestral concert, and some of the same people from your chamber music party are playing in the orchestra. The next night you go to a reading of a new composition. The composer of that composition was the concertmaster in the orchestra the night before. The next night you go to a ball; some of the musicians are the same, and the dance music was written by the same composer.

The next morning you have a choral rehearsal. You might have a composition lesson. And that night you listen to another concert.

Now imagine what it would be like to perform for that kind of audience! Those people would be curious about new developments. They would be aware of subtleties of performance and composition. They probably wouldn't be saying, "I'm not going to go to that concert. I only listen to music by dead people."

And also, the line between amateurs and professionals was much less clear in that situation. It didn't matter as much as it does now. People weren't so specialized.

I had an experience performing for an audience like that. It was at a choral convention, a gathering similar to this one. There were two thousand choral directors, the American Choral Director's Association. I was playing the Bach B-Minor Mass with musicians from the Oregon Bach Festival.

The singers in our choir were all choral directors themselves, so they had many friends among the people in the audience. Everybody in the audience was a singer or a choral conductor. Most of them had sung the B-Minor Mass. Many of them had conducted it. They had heard of the reputation of the conductor, Helmuth Rilling, and may have even had his recordings of Bach. They seemed excitedly curious about what his interpretation would be like.

The quality of attention during that performance was unlike anything I've ever experienced. There was a hushed attentiveness, and you could tell that people were really following what was going on. At the end, there was a complete silence after the last note, a silence that, as one of my friends said, seemed to deepen and deepen and then finally to explode into applause.

And when the conductor turned around to stand the choir, there was an incredible eruption of shouting and screaming and yelling. Just the sort of thing we always tell children they're not supposed to do at classical music concerts. Many of my colleagues remember that performance as one of the highlights of their musical lives.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that in order to have a good concert everybody in the audience has to be a musician. But I do think that, for the kinds of music that we're interested in, a certain percentage of the audience needs to be musicians. When that percentage drops below some currently unknown level—there's a good research project for somebody!—the level of the music-making may deteriorate.

The short way of saying this is, “To have a great concert, you need a great audience.” We've been assuming that, while we were practicing to get better as performers, or while we were training performers, somebody else was taking care of training the audience, so that when the performers went onstage, the audience would be there to meet them. I think we've all started realizing that we need to check that assumption. Probably we're going to need to do something that wasn't previously part of the music teacher's job—but it is now. It wasn't previously part of the performer's job either, but it is now. Now part of our job is to help train the audience, so that the concerts can be better. One thing I was hoping to avoid at the conference was to tell you something that you ought to do. But after all, keynote speeches are supposed to end with a ringing call for something that you're supposed to do, something that seems like such a huge burden that you're sorry you heard about it.

So let me change this a little bit, from a burden into an opportunity. I don't mean to say that we all have to go out and revitalize concert audiences. That's not everybody's path. But I do think there's an opportunity here for people who have been looking for ways to make concerts better. For those of you who have been trying to make concerts better for performers and listeners, here's an opportunity: consider helping the audience to understand what to pay attention to. If there is pleasure in this music, consider helping the audience to understand where those pleasures lie.

This help doesn't have to be complicated or sophisticated or elitist. Sometimes you can show people something in thirty seconds that will completely change the way that they hear music. (I'll be talking a little bit more about that during the conference, and especially during my workshop here.)

I'd like to leave you—temporarily—with a couple of questions. These questions are not a test. I'm giving these questions in hopes of flushing out some more answers and, maybe more importantly, in hopes of giving all of us another way to think about the music that we make.

One question is this: if this music—whatever kind of music you're currently thinking about, art music—if art music is so great, what's so great about it? That's hard to answer in words, but think about it—not now, but as you're listening to people play, as you're listening to people teach. What grabs your attention? What touches your heart? What's great about that music? Not great in some lofty, large-screen-video sort of way, but great in a way that's powerful for you, or touching for you. Great in a way that puts something into your heart.

And then, having thought about that, whatever that great thing is, how can we help people perceive it? That's our biggest problem now. We've got all this great stuff that we can do, all this wonderful music we can play. All this greatness, and people can't perceive it. They're not getting it. So how can you help, what can you do to help people perceive what's so great?

Just to clarify these questions, this is very different from “What's important to know about the music?” or “What should I put in the program notes?”

This is something different. What would really help listeners have a vivid and powerful music experience? What would help them to be affected by the music?

If art music is music that rewards your attention and requires some experience, you can monitor your own musical experiences right here. Notice where your attention goes. Notice what the rewards are. Notice what experience you bring to bear in order to have that special thing happen.

Let me know what you notice. Let's talk about it in the hallway, and I'll see you in a few hours.