

Musical Activism

John Steinmetz

Los Angeles, California

Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls and helping us figure out the position of things inside us.

—Karl Paulnack¹

Inherent in the artistic experience is the capacity to expand our sense of the way the world is or might be.

—Eric Booth²

To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real.

—Maxine Greene³

In fact, artists have their biggest social impact when they achieve it obliquely. If true racial reconciliation is achieved in this country, it will be through the kind of deep spiritual and emotional understanding that art can foster. You change the world by changing peoples' hearts and imaginations.

—David Brooks⁴

Classical music cannot save anyone.

—Kira Thurman⁵

Working as a classical musician, I have often felt oddly distanced from the major issues of the day. While wars raged, I played chamber music. While innocents died in natural disasters or human-caused catastrophes, I played operas about tragic love. When violence and demonstrations troubled my racially and economically divided city, I performed with mostly white musicians for audiences that were mostly white and well-off. Classical music may be full of drama and emotion, but whether old or new, it usually seems separate, even insulated, from the world's current problems.

For some classical music lovers, that is as it should be: concerts provide respite from the world and its difficulties. Certainly one of music's functions is to envelop people in a sound world removed from everyday cares. I love music's ability to provide solace and refuge. And classical musicians provide more than escape: the beauty in music is a kind of answer to the violence, cruelty, and suffering in the world.

And yet . . . and yet . . . I know I'm not alone in feeling dissatisfied with classical music's detachment from the issues of our time. Can we musicians, acting as musicians, turn classical music's power toward some of the problems that beset our communities, our nation, our world?

Certainly we can, and many are doing so. I have observed and have participated in classical music projects addressing nonmusical issues, and I believe that some of those initiatives have been effective and valuable. But I have also heard people overstate music's ability to bring about change. Sometimes I cringe at the claims made for classical music, especially knowing that the field has so much work to do on its own racism, sexism, and inequality.

So I'm trying to untangle contradictory ideas about what music can and can't accomplish and how it works with real-world issues. I'm going to think aloud here, hoping to lessen my own confusion and to stimulate conversation. There are no final answers here, only some possible directions for discussion. Most of this should apply to other kinds of music, so anybody is welcome to eavesdrop.

Caveat

Before going any further I need to clear up one thing: I do not believe that classical music is inherently better than other kinds of music. Our planet overflows with wonderful traditions and styles, and Western classical music is among them. I focus on classical music here because that is where so much of my experience has been.

The Layout

Section I explores how (and whether) music can deal with anything non-musical.

Section II deals with other persistent questions: whether music can fix the world, whether it can fix people, whether it can be political, and whether it weakens when it reaches outside itself.

Section III gives a few parting thoughts.

Two Supplements offer additional information:

- Strategies for musical activists
- Examples of musical activism.

I. Music That Reaches Beyond Itself

Like any human activity, a musical event can promote whatever values are important to its people. An event can, for example, highlight a point of view, extend opportunity, increase accessibility, foster equality, or conserve natural resources.

Music has additional methods of activism particular to performing arts. A musical fundraiser can support a worthy cause. A familiar classical piece like *The Four Seasons* or the Mozart Requiem can acquire a new purpose for a notable occasion like Earth Day or September 11. A piece can ally with images, film, video, or dance to connect with current issues. Musicians can use words—titles or lyrics or explanations—to align their music with an issue.

In all these cases, music connects with an issue by using a non-musical link—like words, images, occasions, or organizational practices. With the link in place, music's ability to

foster solidarity can reassure people that they are not alone with their feelings or experiences. A link can enable music composed long ago to lend its emotional power to a current concern without having to change a note.

Music alone

As a performer and composer, I am especially interested in how music itself—without help from words, images, or occasions—might serve a non-musical cause. How does music make that kind of connection?

For me this is the toughest question about musical activism. Music is made from patterns of sound, and people may experience the same music quite differently. How can an ambiguous art form of sound patterns address any external issue? We will have to consider music's capacity to evoke multiple meanings.

Ambiguity

Music's ambiguity is part of its nature. Even when music has words, people often disagree about what it means. For example, Eduardo Galeano's book *Mirrors* describes some of the wildly contrasting meanings people have found in Beethoven's Ninth. That piece of music has served a startling array of conflicting agendas:

Bismarck proclaimed the Ninth an inspiration for the German race, Bakunin heard it as the music of anarchy, Engels declared it would become the hymn of humanity, and Lenin thought it more revolutionary than "The Internationale."

Von Karajan conducted it for the Nazis, and years later he used it to consecrate the unity of free Europe.

The Ninth accompanied Japanese kamikazes who died for their emperor, as well as the soldiers who gave their lives fighting against all empires.

It was sung by those resisting the German blitzkrieg, and hummed by Hitler himself, who in a rare attack of modesty said that Beethoven was the true führer.

Paul Robeson sang it against racism, and the racists of South Africa used it as the soundtrack for apartheid propaganda.

To the strains of the Ninth, the Berlin Wall went up in 1961.

To the strains of the Ninth, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.⁶

I happen to love music's ability to mean different things to different people. For me this is a strength and a source of fascination. But music's contradictory meanings have convinced some people that music has no inherent meaning at all, and that any meaning it appears to have is only what listeners project onto it. Music, seen this way, could never address conditions beyond itself.

Yet this view doesn't square with the importance music holds in people's lives and in their hearts. Music's meaning is so important that sometimes governments ban certain kinds of music, and sometimes musicians risk imprisonment or worse by performing.

How can music's meaning be ambiguous yet important enough to fight over? What kind of meaning is that? And how can it possibly relate to any particular cause?

Meaning

In trying to grasp how music addresses non-musical issues, it helped me to consider music's particular way of creating meaning. The most convincing explanation I have found of music's meaning comes from Christopher Small's wonderful book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*.⁷ Small writes, "Whatever meaning a musical work has lies in the relationships that are brought into existence when the piece is performed."⁸ He is talking not just about sonic relationships but all the relationships involved, including those between the people, whether performers, listeners, ticket sellers, or concert hall cleaning crews, who help the music to happen.

According to Small, musical acts "explore, affirm, and celebrate the concepts of ideal relationships of those taking part."⁹ While performing or listening, setting up chairs, or otherwise taking part in a musical event, we don't just hear *about* ideal relationships; we participate in bringing them into being.

This is why music can be ambiguous and yet matter so much. It is ambiguous because it embodies relationships and not the objects of those relations; it matters because it embodies *ideal* relationships. In performances that we like, we experience relationships that seem *just right*.

Music (not) alone

Because the meaning of a performance includes all of its relationships, not just the sonic ones, my desire to understand how *music alone* addresses outside issues is misguided. Music is never alone. Texts, images, occasions, architecture, personnel, economics, and other aspects of a performance participate, along with musical sounds, in enacting the ideal relationships that music brings into being. (Later I'll discuss the possibility that sonatas, symphonies, and other "abstract" genres may not be so abstract after all.)

Examples

The concept of "ideal relationships" may be unfamiliar, so here are some examples of music embodying ideal relationships.

Ethnomusicologist Robert Garfias once told me that in non-hierarchical societies, music tends to be non-hierarchical: if the music has multiple layers, all layers have equal importance. Meanwhile, in hierarchical societies music tends to be hierarchical. The standard repertoire of Western classical music, coming from a hierarchical culture, takes for granted that some layers are more important than others. This music contrasts melody and accompaniment, foreground and background, primary and secondary subjects—even dominants and subdominants!

Hierarchy appears all over classical music: the tonic is more important than other notes; violinists are divided into firsts and seconds; some concert hall seats are more expensive than others; conductors have more power than other performers, and certain jobs and certain workers are invisible. Many favorite classical pieces create drama by modulating to remote keys before eventually evoking satisfaction or victory by reestablishing the dominance of the home key.

Classical music grew in a society that embraced hierarchy as the best way to organize—the right way, the true order of things. In those societies, even heaven was hierarchical, with a

boss and ranked underlings—just like factories, and just like orchestras. So classical music is full of hierarchies. (Of course a Western classical concert is not only about hierarchy; it embodies other ideal relationships, too. Small’s book is rich with examples.)

After World War II, as people considered new ways to organize society, many composers considered new kinds of relationships in music. Serialists had already declared that all notes were created equal. Other composers used improvisation, chance procedures, or ambiguous notations to reduce centralized control over musical results. Another camp focused on hypnotically repeating patterns, lessening or eliminating the distinction between foreground and background.

Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964) brilliantly combines an improvisatory approach with repeating patterns to enact relationships much less hierarchical than those of the standard classical repertoire. Notated as a single page of short patterns, *In C* puts many decisions traditionally made by composers into the hands of performers, who choose instrumentation, decide the piece’s duration, and improvise dynamics and articulations. Performers also coordinate their own musical interactions; even a huge ensemble needs no conductor. The music is an evolving texture whose form and character are created largely by the performers as they perform.

Famous for ushering in the new style called minimalism, *In C* also rearranges the usual power structure of classical music, celebrating a very different set of ideal relationships. The piece must have struck a nerve, because it continues to appear in concerts more than fifty years after its premiere.

Values

Because music works with ideal relationships, we human beings use our many ways of music-making to contact and enact our deepest beliefs about the world. Christopher Small writes that when participating in any music that is meaningful for us, “We feel that this is how the world *really* is when all the dross is stripped away, and this is where we *really* belong in it. . . . we have been allowed to live for a while in the world as it ought to be, in the world of right relationships.”¹⁰

This is why people love whatever music they love. This is why any beloved music feels so alive, so true, so real. This is why music may seem spiritual, offering glimpses of the eternal. This is why the same music can feel uplifting to some people and dangerous to others. And these effects usually happen without musicians or listeners thinking explicitly about ideal relationships. People focus on their experience of the music.

By enacting ideal relationships, music embodies values. Through classical music we can experience and embrace values from times and places as different as *The Four Seasons* and *The Rite of Spring*. If the music feels alive, that is because the performance—no matter what the style and period of the music—explores, affirms, or celebrates ideal relationships that resonate now. Because ideal relationships change over time, musical styles go in and out of fashion, and the same music sounds different in different eras. When we perform Bach nowadays, we don’t reproduce Bach’s performances, or Mendelssohn’s version of Bach, or Mahler’s, or even von Karajan’s Bach interpretations from my childhood. We perform Bach according to today’s approach to his music, in a setting appropriate for today, and if today there are many ways of performing Bach, perhaps our culture’s ideal relationships are multiple or in flux.

Making change

Whenever creative musicians explore fresh ways to compose, perform, or present music, they are also working with changes to ideal relationships—whether or not their inspiration comes from outside music. If other people find those ideal relationships compelling and worth re-enacting, the new practices and pieces will persist. Some musical innovations, like Beethoven’s expressive intensity, Wagner’s harmonic suppleness, and Terry Riley’s brand of minimalism, have had far-reaching influence on the culture’s sense of what is acceptable, what is right, what is beautiful, what is true.

I believe that music’s most powerful—and most essentially musical—way to address contemporary problems is to “explore, affirm, and celebrate . . . ideal relationships.”

Talking about “ideal relationships” may sound intellectual, but music can be direct, emotional, and visceral. So when the Playing for Peace project at New Hampshire’s Apple Hill music camp brought together a Syrian pianist, an Egyptian cellist, and a violinist from the Israeli army to perform Beethoven’s “Archduke” Trio, the music’s meaning included the relationships between those players. That performance, and those relationships, brought some listeners to tears.

When the Oregon Bach Festival marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, choirs from Germany, Japan, and the US combined for a performance of Britten’s *War Requiem*. The Festival offered free tickets to war veterans, families of veterans and MIAs, and others affected by war. The music’s meaning included the relationships between all those people. There was sobbing in the free ticket section; performers cried onstage.

In other cases musical sounds themselves enact ideal relationships connected with extra-musical issues. Frederic Rzewski’s *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* expresses solidarity with oppressed people by featuring a revolutionary song in a grand romantic set of piano variations. John Luther Adams’ orchestral piece *Become Ocean* faces sea level rise with music that surges, immerses, and overwhelms.

What musical activists do

Classical music, like any music, always enacts ideal relationships, even though those relationships may differ from event to event. Many classical concerts honor an undying realm of beauty that is remote from current issues and problems. Such a concert’s aloofness from current events is part of its meaning and purpose: to affirm ideal relationships that dwell in a transcendent realm far distant from worldly concerns.

If a different kind of classical concert shrinks that distance in order to address real-world issues, it does so because it embodies a different set of values—it enacts ideal relationships that are entwined with today’s world.

Nowadays, even while many mainstream classical organizations focus on transcendence, plenty of classical events engage with current issues. (The supplement “A Few Musical Activists” gives some examples.) “Musicking is about relationships,” says Christopher Small, “not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience.”¹¹ Activist performances, whether presenting older or newer music, enact relationships that diverge from current social, political, or economic norms.

I think this is what musical activists do. Their music-making enables participants to explore possibilities, affirm values not yet realized in the wider society, or celebrate emerging ideals. While the music lasts, a suppressed truth glows, or a longed-for world seems real.

II. Music's Power, Music's Limits

Persistent questions hover around the topic of musical activism, having to do with basic assumptions about what music can and can't accomplish in the world. Here are some reflections on four of those questions. (These issues are intertwined; I separate them only to get my head around them.)

1. Can music change the world?

So far, music has not been able to end war, eliminate poverty, or restore the climate. As far as I can tell, music does not do such things. For all its power, music cannot change the world.

Nevertheless, music plays a crucial role in the process of change. Through music, people can explore possibilities, affirm values, and celebrate ideals. These are essential prerequisites for social change. But enacting ideal relationships musically is very different from implementing those ideals in the world.

As Daniel Barenboim has said, "People talk about the West-Eastern Divan [an orchestra of young Arab and Israeli musicians] and say it's an orchestra for peace. It isn't. As wonderful as it is for them to play together, it does not make peace. Peace needs something else."¹²

Implementing real-world change requires many kinds of effort, all of which are different from musical effort. Music can nourish the imagination about possibilities, and then other kinds of work are needed to make those possibilities into realities. To put ideals into action, musical activists may want to forge alliances with people and organizations working for change. Musical events could offer opportunities for musicians and listeners to follow up and participate as citizens in change-making. (See supplement "Strategies for Musical Activists.")

2. Can classical music make you a better person?

Classical music's boosters talk so much about the art form's transformative power that a web search for "classical music transformative" found nearly half a million results. Does listening to classical music really change people? Certainly music has helped some people to make positive changes in their lives, but at best the impact of music is inconsistent. Classical music enthusiasts exhibit enough bad behavior—from rudeness to genocide—to discredit the idea that listening to this music makes a person good.

But what about musical training? Does learning to *make* classical music transform people, as is so often claimed? I am sure it does sometimes, but plenty of classically trained musicians are jerks, and in some cases classical music study appears to amplify narcissism and obsessiveness. When watching classical musicians' behavior and when reading about musicians of the past, it is easy to see that musical training does not inoculate people against human failings. Fabulous musicians are not necessarily fabulous people.

Yet the idea persists that classical music improves people. Perhaps the experience of ideal relationships in classical music blurs the distinction between enacting ideals musically and incorporating them into daily life. Embodying ideal relationships in music is valuable and beautiful, but living up to those ideals is quite a different matter. It is time to give up the cherished notion that classical music is, by itself, ennobling or morally improving.¹³

In fact classical music has its own baggage to deal with. The atmosphere at some music schools and workplaces may cause musicians to absorb negative influences like egotism, competitiveness, and cruelty. The classical music field is strongly associated with white privilege, and it has sometimes colluded in subjugating and excluding nonwhites and in denigrating other cultures and other musical traditions. Because of this history, missionaries for classical music need to take special care that their advocacy not result in the “otherizing” of people or cultures.

Instead of promoting classical music as a way to improve people, some musical activists invite disenfranchised people to help improve classical music. For example, after several years of performing in Los Angeles prisons and homeless shelters, Street Symphony has begun to recruit people who have experienced homelessness to serve in artistic and governance roles in the organization.

Is there no connection at all between music study and human improvement? In my experience as a musician and as a teacher, building skills in any kind of music *potentially* confers positive effects on personality and behavior. (Building skills in other activities can have good effects, too.) Music *may* foster empathy, focus, teamwork, follow-through, patience, and other valuable traits, and it *can* nurture respect for nuance and subtlety, but nobody can guarantee these outcomes, because other factors of personality and environment also exert influence. And even when a person enjoys beneficial effects from music study, those benefits may or may not transfer to other aspects of life.

It should be possible to improve the odds that musical training will develop character and build transferable skills. Instead of leaving that kind of improvement to chance, some educators embed music training in a school culture that consistently reinforces positive values. For example, a public charter school in Los Angeles, Renaissance Arts Academy, uses performing arts training to foster community, focus, and striving. It works, but only because faculty members nurture those qualities throughout the school curriculum. They have to, because music alone is not a reliable agent of behavioral change.

3. Can music be political?

Politics is about power—about who makes decisions, what issues get attention, what assumptions dominate, and whose voices get heard. Although music by itself does not confer political power, a good tune can sear a slogan into memory, and a compelling groove can rouse a crowd or help a video go viral. However, music appears to be non-partisan; the same music can support opposing political messages. (Both Republicans and Democrats have used Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.”)

For music to attach to a cause or candidate, some adhesive is needed. Words, images, charismatic people, a compelling backstory, or a stirring occasion can glue music to a cause. When a cause gets attached, music can become *very* political.

A wonderful example is Marian Anderson's 1939 concert in Washington, D.C. Her program was apolitical, but she was an African American star performing in a segregated city, and the Daughters of the American Revolution and the D.C. Board of Education had denied Anderson access to their halls. Furious political activity produced a concert at the Lincoln Memorial with a multiracial audience of more than 75,000, along with millions listening on the radio. That classical voice recital acquired great political significance. Pictures of the event resemble the famous March on Washington of twenty-four years later.

Music's political potential also appears whenever musicians run afoul of politicians' agendas—when Nazis ban pieces by “degenerate” musicians or when Soviet bureaucrats censor composers. In the US, McCarthy-era composers found themselves on the blacklist. In 1944 Igor Stravinsky got in trouble with the police for performing his version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” with the Boston Symphony; the composer withdrew his arrangement from subsequent performances.

In all these cases, musical performances enacted ideal relationships that displeased the authorities. Whenever somebody thinks that a performance's ideal relationships confirm or contradict the political status quo, that performance becomes political.

Like Stravinsky, US classical music organizations generally steer clear of politics and controversy. John Adams and Alice Goodman's *The Death of Klinghoffer* sparked such heated debate that one of its co-commissioners, L.A. Opera, never performed it. At a different organization, a conductor friend spoke during a concert about an ongoing US invasion, and afterward he was reprimanded for violating the unwritten rule separating classical music from politics.

During my musical training, that separation prevented me from realizing how many composers wrote political music. I was surprised to learn that Luigi Nono adopted serial techniques partly for political reasons. *O King*, the second movement of Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*, pays tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. Alvin Singleton's *Jasper Drag*, a trio for clarinet, violin, and piano, commemorates a tragic hate crime in Jasper, Texas.

These works appear only rarely on mainstream classical programs, and when political works do appear, the music all too easily becomes aestheticized and any political message tends to become muted. American audiences seem to love Shostakovich's musical rebellions against the Soviet state, and opera buffs love political operas like *Don Carlo*, but these examples concern the politics of distant places and times.

In any case political works, no matter how moving, probably don't change listeners' political views.

Perhaps a more useful role for music is to encourage reflection about political realities. John Harbison says that his *Abu Ghraib* for cello and piano “is not a protest or moral lesson.” Instead, its opening music “investigates wrongness and infection.”¹⁴ This music's political purpose is not to convince, but to consider.

Some “experimental” music puts political ideas into practice by enacting power relations that are different from those of mainstream classical music. Like Terry Riley's *In C*, pieces by Pauline Oliveros, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and others give performers some compositional decision-making authority. Rather than whipping up support for a cause, this kind of music reallocates power.

In fact, *all* music puts political values into practice. Every ensemble is an idealized community with its ways of coordinating work, managing relationships, and distributing power. Every piece promotes ideals of order and organization. Even the most determinedly apolitical concert shows who has power, who makes decisions, who has the right to be heard, who has the right to hear, and what topics and messages are permitted. Insulating a concert from politics is itself a political act.

If you want your music to have a political effect, one way to start is by examining the politics embedded in your own music-making.

4. Does addressing current issues harm music's quality?

As part of his graduate work, a colleague organized a week of campus events about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, ending with a concert that included Barber's Adagio and Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. Afterward, members of his doctoral committee disapproved, expressing concern that people hearing the Barber for the first time might forever associate it with Darfur. The meaning of that piece, they maintained, should be purely aesthetic.

According to that way of thinking, classical music should be heard only for its own sake. Apparently some in our field believe that music's highest purpose is aesthetic, that the very best music is abstract—without text, program, or story, and certainly without connections to current events. Perhaps some classical music enthusiasts treasure a particular kind of purity, as if classical music is completely respectable only when free of worldly concerns. Many classical concerts do appear to be carefully engineered to separate the music from the everyday world, to allow the event to enact values that feel timeless and transcendent.

In many cases, though, that “timeless” music was composed to engage with the world, not to retreat from it. Bach aimed his church music, with its expansive emotional range, at the doubts and life challenges experienced by members of his congregation. Mozart's operas deal with abiding human issues like inequality of power, sexual misconduct, and the longing for affection. Beethoven linked his Third Symphony with then-current liberation struggles and democratic ideals. The fabulous music of such pieces is inseparable from their extra-musical purposes; removing those purposes seems to me to diminish the pieces.

Some people prefer more abstract compositions—*The Art of Fugue*, the “Jupiter” Symphony, the late quartets—and there is nothing wrong with that preference. But because the composers of these pieces used the same compositional techniques for both abstract and non-abstract works, the distinction between abstract and non-abstract seems flimsy. In wordless pieces like sonatas and symphonies, Western classical composers use musical methods that were developed for opera: techniques to illuminate personality, suggest moods and feelings, and intensify or relax emotional tension. In the classical music canon, even instrumental works without words delineate character types, inner and outer relationships, and states of feeling. Themes may be heroic, yielding, mysterious, or yearning. Struggles may occur and may lead to domination, destruction, or reconciliation.

Barber's Adagio is intelligible and moving not because of its abstractions, but because the composer so skillfully deployed compositional techniques born in opera to make the piece's expressive character and emotional journey clear, meaningful, and powerfully affecting. It is no wonder that Barber's piece contributes so successfully to narratives of loss and occasions of national mourning.

The now well-established “new” musicology has shown that *all* music, even the most abstract and supposedly pure, reflects the social and cultural currents of its time—whether flowing with those currents, resisting them, or digging new channels. Those so-called abstract pieces are ways of engaging with the world, not ways of escaping from it. This doesn’t mean that composers were necessarily thinking about contemporaneous issues, only that their music couldn’t help being affected by their times.

How do musical activists assess quality? Because activist projects have extra-musical goals, musical activists may need to evaluate aspects of their projects that conventional standards of excellence ignore. For instance, a project using music to build community might evaluate a performance first according to its impact on the neighborhood, and only secondarily according to its intonation and phrasing. There are many kinds of quality, and it is important to measure the relevant kinds.

Classical music has trouble with that principle, because talk of “artistic quality” seems to imply a single standard for classical performances. That standard is a chimera; classical music experts don’t agree about what sounds good, let alone which approaches are worthwhile. Nevertheless, it is fairly common for activist musicians to assert their lofty standards—“Our musical quality has to be the very highest.”—as though defending against doubters. Yet for activists, terrific-sounding music may not be enough. Emotional honesty may be at least as valuable as technical perfection. Because they care about their music’s impact, activists need to establish the criteria by which to judge a project’s success.

III. Parting Thoughts

The great questions and problems of our time, including social justice, economic inequality, international conflict, population dislocation, and climate change, all go to the heart of our culture’s assumptions and values. These difficult and contentious issues call on all human faculties and modes of discourse. Music, one of our most ancient and powerful arts, is crucial for addressing the issues now confronting our country and our species.

The classical music field has some deep-seated resistance to getting involved with extra-musical issues. This resistance must have many sources: yearning for transcendence, fear of offending donors, unwillingness to face painful truths, desire for reassurance and familiarity. Music critic Alex Ross has observed that some of the resistance comes from the way musicians are trained:

Perhaps the most intractable problem with contemporary music education is that so many teachers have been trained in the monastic culture of the music conservatory, where mastery of technique is the dominant topic and where discussion of music’s social or political or spiritual meaning is often discouraged.¹⁵

But even avoidance makes a statement. Like it or not, classical musicians cannot avoid responding musically to the issues and energies of today, even if their response is to disengage.

Meanwhile classical musicians and organizations are, like everybody else, subject to the disorders of the wider society. Racism and sexism afflict the field (if not from personal

attitudes, then from past biases that have been allowed to continue) along with feudal power structures in some organizations and the special attention lavished on fans already awash in privilege. If we are concerned about society's current problems, we can face those very problems not only in performances, but also in our own workplaces and organizations. (For some ways to proceed, see the supplement "Strategies for Musical Activists.")

Both social activists and musical activists know that lasting change requires more than protesting or calling out problems. Both activists and artists need guiding visions to inspire and shape their work. Music, with its ability to enact values, can be especially helpful with clarifying ideals and visions.

Activists and musicians also seem to agree on another important principle; they remind us that human beings are most effective when they operate from love.

I hope that love for music will foster honesty about what music can and can't do. Our field doesn't need to make inflated claims about transforming people or changing the world; music offers a powerful way to address issues of concern by enacting ideal relationships, by embodying values. And musical events can extend their influence into the wider world by making alliances with other kinds of activism.

Nowadays while other art forms and other kinds of music regularly confront current issues, classical music often stays on the sidelines. There is a lot to be said for the sidelines, where the atmosphere is peaceful and radiant, where the air is full of past glories—I have spent countless happy hours there, reveling in the beauty and excitement of fantastic music—yet I know that the music, with its long tradition of exploring essential issues and its tremendous expressive resources, has great potential to speak to our world's most pressing problems. Classical musicians can make a difference. For anyone who wants to, this is a great time to get off the bench and into the fray.

Acknowledgements

During the years that I have struggled with this essay, I learned a great deal from pieces and projects I heard or heard about, from people using music as a force in the world, from thinkers about music, and from comments and advice about my drafts. Many thanks to all of you, even if you didn't realize that you were helping. And special thanks to Angela Beeching for her many excellent suggestions about content, flow, and wording. The flaws here are nobody's fault but mine.



John Steinmetz, retired from freelance bassoon playing in Los Angeles, teaches bassoon and other things at UCLA. His compositions include War Scrap for piano trio and percussion; Sorrow and Celebration for reed quintet and audience; Together for orchestra and beginning string players; On My Way for string orchestra and children's choir; and The Creation of the World for bass, beach ball, war toys, and individually-wrapped cheese slices. His Laments for solo bassoon respond to the multiple griefs of 2020. For more information visit www.johnsteinmetz.org.

Supplement 1: Strategies for Musical Activists

For those of us in classical music who want to engage musically with current issues, what should we *do*? I'll take some guesses; please add your own suggestions.

Activate artistry. Work in the way artists always work. Use intuition, imagination, critical thinking, and craft. Link conscious and unconscious impulses. Keep questioning. Try to get the relationships to feel right—all the relationships, not just those between the sounds.

And I have a hunch that we need to nourish everybody's artistry now, not just artists'.

Address issues. Work musically with the issues that call to you and with forms of expression that speak to you. Inspiration may come from anybody (poets, farmers, scientists, organizers, refugees, caregivers) and from any tradition (primary cultures, ancient artifacts, religious ritual, secular traditions, pop culture, cutting-edge performance).

Address issues with any aspect of the event, not just with notes and words. Consider who should be present, and in what roles. Consider the economics. Consider trash, power usage, and transportation. Consider clothes, setting, and etiquette. Consider how people will be separated and how they will be brought together. Consider what criteria should apply.

On the other hand, don't drive yourself crazy trying to address everything at once. Focus on the aspects that resonate for you.

Examine assumptions. Activists tend to notice assumptions and shine light on them. Musical activists may work with assumptions in the wider society or in the classical music field.

During my lifetime, some hidden assumptions in our field have become more visible. For example, Western music long operated on the assumption that only white men were fit to be composers, conductors, orchestra musicians, administrators, and managers. Now at least some women and people of color fill those roles. Much remains to be done, but the old exclusions are visible now, subject to discussion and adjustment.

Certain accusations keep surfacing about classical music: that it is elitist, exclusive, stuffy, or irrelevant. Instead of protesting innocence, why not examine these impressions in order to see how our field might be feeding them? Perhaps we are inadvertently creating the wrong impression.

To examine assumptions, ask questions:

- Why are we doing this?
- Who is it for?
- Who owns
 - the project?
 - the organization?
 - the music-making?
- What are the benefits of this activity, and who receives them?
- In order to be included in this musicking, what do you have to do or be or have?
- What kinds of belonging does the activity foster, and what kinds of separation?
- What roles are available? To whom?

- Who makes decisions?
- Who is having the most fun?
- Who is excluded?
- Who declines to participate? Why?
- What do our events say about nature, about gender, about race, about power?
- What energies and attitudes does this event unleash or squelch?
- What topics are off-limits?
- What words and images do we choose, and why?

The potential rewards are great: bringing hidden assumptions into awareness can release positive energy and foster social healing.

Serve community. Instead of striving to please critics and colleagues, instead of meeting industry standards, instead of measuring against other musicians of the past or present, musical activists need to assess their impact on the community. Define community however you like: a temporary gathering, a stop on tour, an ensemble’s home turf, a particular part of town.

What does serving community have to do with the world’s big problems? Those problems manifest in particular places, so solutions must be specific to those locales. Working with issues that real people face in real communities will also reveal values and ideal relationships.

Build human relationships. Some musical activists emphasize that their work goes beyond bestowing their artistry. If musical communication is only one-way, with one group of people performing while another group listens, a project can too easily project elitism or slip into pandering.

It may be more important to listen to people than to perform for them. When appropriate, invite people meant to benefit from a musical project to participate in planning, organizing, governing, creating, and performing. The relationships that emerge can be at least as valuable as the music.

Beware of assuming that musicians will affect others without themselves being affected.

Promote diversity, inclusion, and equity. Our field needs to make a sharper distinction between discerning connoisseurship and discriminatory practices. Be inclusive in as many ways as possible. Please don’t use the word “diversity” to mean “a group of people like me, plus a few other people.” (See “Examine Assumptions” above.)

Cultivate soulfulness. Musical activism needs to come from the heart, touch the soul, and awaken the imagination. Soulfulness doesn’t necessarily mean elaborateness; sometimes it’s as simple as lighting a candle, as basic as singing together.

Instead of assuming that soulfulness and creativity reside mainly in a handful of composers, conductors, and soloists, we can nourish those qualities in everybody inside and outside our organizations, and in all aspects of working together, onstage and off—in the business side, too.

Consider formats. Some activist events are quite similar to current classical concerts, and some involve new modes of presentation. Because people differ and musicians' agendas differ, musical activism takes different forms, adopting varied formats, styles, settings, and rituals.

This does not mean we have to abandon the traditional concert format, nor do we have to rebel against it or defend it. We should try, as best we can, to align our practices with our values.

Connect with activists. If musicians want not only to enact ideals but also to work toward solutions, they need to connect with other kinds of work. Musical activists can collaborate with activists and organizations working on the same issue, in order to help audience members and musicians to take action.

For example, after an activist concert explores a topic, listeners might encounter tables and booths in the lobby where activist organizations offer ways to get involved. An ensemble can use its website, its social media, and its program book to suggest ways to take action. A post-concert event can promote participation in a community project. Musicians and staff members from an activist musical organization can volunteer together for a day's work at a nonprofit devoted to a related issue.

None of this work replaces musical work; the idea is to create alliances so that music's enactment of ideals can energize efforts to put those ideals into practice.

Supplement 2: A Few Classical Music Activists

Before classical music became obsessed with its own past, the art form frequently turned subversive or rebellious, and some of its heroes became famous for composing or performing in new ways that reflected emerging values. Even now change is afoot: the last few decades have brought new genres, new attitudes, and greater diversity. Ideal relationships are shifting. Major classical organizations are engaging with neighborhoods they used to ignore. Dance music's rhythmic vitality has enlivened early music and has brought grooves into contemporary compositions; maybe the old mind-body split is mending.

As in the past, new perspectives don't necessarily come from the centers of power. Musical activism may spring up in unlikely places, and its work is often off the radar of the music business.

Of the many approaches to musical activism, I'll mention only a few here. The goals of these projects vary. The music may be new or old. The concert format may or may not be traditional. The project may involve any aspect of music: composing, performing, teaching, or collaborating with other art forms. The people involved may or may not be trying to change something in the world beyond music. (Disclosure: I participated in some of these projects as performer, composer, teacher, or board member.)

Peacemaking

- The Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music gives Playing for Peace scholarships to musicians from opposing sides in the Middle East, Cyprus, Ireland, the Caucasus, and other regions, to come to New Hampshire and play together in chamber groups along with Americans of different skin colors and backgrounds. Apple Hill's website explains,

“Each ensemble is coached in the skills of chamber music—listening, watching, adjusting, being sensitive and flexible—the same skills needed to work and function effectively in today’s contentious world.”¹⁶ Warm friendships form between people from enemy countries, and American participants make friends with people who might otherwise be only categories in the news.

(<http://applehill.org/playing-for-peace/description-history/>)

- *Letters from Iraq*, an album by Iranian American composer Rahim AlHaj, transforms letters from Iraqis about their experiences during and after the American occupation into instrumental works for oud, string quintet, and percussion. (<https://folkways.si.edu/rahim-alhaj/letters-from-iraq/islamica-world/music/album/smithsonian>)
- Minnesota Opera commissioned *Silent Night*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning opera by composer Kevin Puts and librettist Mark Campbell about the “Christmas Truce” of World War I, when enemy soldiers came together to celebrate Christmas on the battlefield. (<http://silentnightopera.com/>)

Social Justice

- In Providence, Rhode Island, Community MusicWorks offers concerts and music training in urban neighborhoods. One result: many students in the program seem to expand their sense of their own possibilities. The organization’s fellowship program prepares musicians to develop similar projects elsewhere. (<https://communitymusicworks.org/>)
- In northeast Los Angeles, Renaissance Arts Academy, a public charter school, provides intensive training in music and dance to students accepted by lottery. The school’s accomplished performances show what randomly-chosen children can achieve when a team of artist-teachers gives them support, encouragement, and high expectations—even if students’ families lack the resources to buy lessons and instruments, even though there is no audition or other pre-screening. Although some graduates pursue degrees in dance or music, the purpose of arts training at Renaissance Arts Academy is to nourish community, foster focus, cultivate responsibility and teamwork, and inspire the students to excel in all their work. Among the results are stellar test scores and high school graduation and college acceptance rates at 100%. (<https://www.renarts.org/>)
- Joel Thompson’s *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* sets the dying words of seven Black men—Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Kenneth Chamberlain, Amadou Diallo, and John Crawford—for men’s chorus, string quintet, and piano. The Sphinx Organization commissioned a version for men’s chorus and full orchestra and premiered it to celebrate Sphinx’s twentieth year of providing opportunities and exposure for Black and Latino classical musicians. (<https://sevenlastwords.org/about/>)
- Mia Masaoka’s composition *Triangle of Resistance* reacts to the imprisonment of her mother, like 120,000 other Japanese Americans, in an American internment camp during World War II. (<https://www.innova.mu/albums/miya-masaoka/triangle-resistance>)
- The Oregon Symphony was lead commissioner for Gabriel Kahane’s oratorio about homelessness, *emergency shelter intake form*, for orchestra, solo voices, and a choir of singers from Portland’s homeless community. The libretto, based on a bureaucratic form,

questions a person seeking admission to a shelter, sometimes expanding to comment and reflect. One movement explains, with high energy and zippy wordplay, the financial skullduggery behind the sub-prime mortgage crisis in which so many lost their homes. (<http://www.orartswatch.org/emergency-shelter-intake-form-confronting-americas-empathy-deficit/>)

- Choral musicians frequently program songs from liberation movements and new compositions inspired by freedom struggles. ChoralNet, the website of the American Choral Directors Association, offers lots of information about activist choral music on many topics and from many cultural traditions. (<https://www.choralnet.org/>)
- On May 28, 2020, three days after police killed George Floyd, as Black Lives Matter demonstrations bloomed, a Black classical clarinetist posted a ninety-second video. Anthony McGill, principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, stood in a living room playing a poignant, unresolved “America the Beautiful,” and then he kneeled. He gave his video the hashtag #TakeTwoKnees; an accompanying text invited others to join. Within days dozens of #TakeTwoKnees videos appeared with musicians playing or singing and then kneeling. Some of the Black musicians attached writings about being Black in America. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM1G-Iti7Ns>)

Community

- New Hampshire’s Keene Chamber Orchestra has commissioned several community-oriented works. One narrates local stories, and others combine the orchestra with beginning string players or elementary school singers. (<http://www.kcorch.org/>)
- In Los Angeles, Lark Musical Society commissioned Ian Krouse’s *Armenian Requiem* and joined its community chorus with UCLA’s orchestra to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. (<http://www.iankrouse.com/newsite/Catalogueworks/choral.htm>)
- Brent Michael Davids incorporated a traditional Havasupai Ram Dance into his chamber piece *Guardians of the Grand Canyon* for a performance on the canyon’s rim with Havasupai dancers at the Grand Canyon Chamber Music Festival. (<http://www.brentmichaeldavids.com/Chamber%20Works/Small%20Ensembles/guardiansofthegrandcan.html>)

Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, Identity

- Joan Tower’s series of compositions *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman* exemplifies a trend toward greater inclusiveness in classical music. Nonwhite and non-male composers have started to appear on classical programs. (<https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/joan-tower-on-her-sixth-fanfare-for-the-uncommon-woman/>)
- Imani Winds, famous for bringing musical energies of the African diaspora to the wind quintet, expands the repertoire by commissioning composers of color and collaborating with master musicians from outside classical music. (<http://www.imaniwinds.com/>)
- In Memphis, PRIZM Chamber Orchestra was founded to be as diverse as the city. (<https://prizmensemble.org/programs/prizm-chamber-orchestra/>)

- For Pride Month 2015, WFMT’s website posted “15 Queer Composers You Should Know.” In 2016, “15 Classical Musicians Who Are Out and Proud.” In 2017, “7 American Operas That Put LGBTQ Issues Center Stage.”
(<https://www.wfmt.com/2015/06/25/15-queer-composers-know/>)
- Rachel Epperly’s *Girly*, for voice and girly toy instruments, enacts and satirizes kitschy taste, body issues, and values imposed on girls.
(Video at <https://www.rachelepperlymusic.com/audio-works-list>).
- Lou Harrison’s *Varied Trio* is diverse in its instrumentation and its compositional materials, combining violin and piano with percussion instruments from various traditions—vibraphone, Chinese drums, rice bowls, etc.—and mixing musical influences from “West” and “East,” such as French Baroque and Javanese gamelan styles.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPW82VtxdqM>)
- In 2017 Chamber Music America’s Board of Directors approved an unusually sweeping Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Buttressed by clear objectives and ongoing assessment, the Commitment indicates readiness for the organization to change and for additional styles of music to be included as its membership shifts:

CMA believes that there is a fundamental difference between inviting ALAANA [African/Black, Latinx, Asian/South Asian, Arab/Middle Eastern, and Native American] communities into a Western European-based structure and revising the structure itself to include ALAANA musicians, presenters, composers, and others in the field to fully benefit as active participants in the organization.

(<https://www.chamber-music.org/statement-commitment>)

Nature, Ecosystems, Climate Change

Until recently, classical music focused almost exclusively on human relationships and emotions; now some musicians are exploring other perspectives.

- John Luther Adams’ *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, an installation with electronic music, derives its sounds from real-time geophysical data gathered across Alaska—it’s a way to hear shifting biospheric conditions.
(<http://johnlutheradams.net/the-place-where-you-go-to-listen-essay/>)
- Pamela Z, collaborating with video artist Christina McPhee, composed *Carbon Song Cycle* for voice & electronics, cello, viola, bassoon, and percussion. Her website explains that the piece’s words, sounds, and images come “from scientific data concerning the carbon cycle, stories related to environmental balance and imbalance, and images abstracted from footage shot at natural and technological sites—including petroleum fields, natural gas sites, and geothermal sites around back-country California.”
(<http://www.pamelaz.com/carbonsongcycle.html>)
- Daniel Crawford’s string quartet, *Planetary Bands, Warming World*, transforms 133 years of temperature data into a piece of music, making trends audible.
(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/this-song-composed-from-133-years-climate-change-data-180956225/>)

- Meredith Monk explores human interdependence with nature in musical-theatrical works *Cellular Songs* and *On Behalf of Nature*.
(<http://www.meredithmonk.org/currentrep/Cellular%20Songs.html>)
- Laura Kaminsky's Sixth String Quartet, *Rising Tide*, part of the Fry Street Quartet's Crossroads Project, combines images, music, and science to explore "different aspects of humanity's great transition to a societal and ecological maturity."
(<http://www.thecrossroadsproject.org/>)
(<https://laurakaminsky.com/crossroads-rising-tide-audio-and-video-excerpts/>)

Endnotes

- 1 Karl Paulnack's speech to parents of incoming students of Boston Conservatory has been widely shared: <http://net-newmusic.ning.com/forum/topics/an-encouragement> and elsewhere.
- 2 Eric Booth, "Three and a Half Bestsellers": <http://ericbooth.net/three-and-a-half-bestsellers/>.
- 3 Maxine Geene, *Releasing the Imagination*, quoted in Alex Ross, *Listen to This*, 236.
- 4 David Brooks, "When Beauty Strikes," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/15/opinion/when-beauty-strikes.html>.
- 5 Kira Thurman, "Singing Against the Grain: Playing Beethoven in the #BlackLivesMatter era," *The Point*, <https://thepointmag.com/2018/examined-life/singing-against-grain-playing-beethoven-blacklivesmatter-era>.
- 6 Eduardo Galeano, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, (New York: Nation Books, 2009). 335-6.
- 7 Christopher Small, *Musicking: the Meanings of Performing and Listening*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998). For Small, music is not a thing; it is an activity: "musicking." To have meaning, music must be enacted through performance—even a performance as small as one person playing or singing for herself.
- 8 Small, *Musicking*, 138.
- 9 *Ibid*, 215.
- 10 *Ibid*, 139.
- 11 *Ibid*, 183.
- 12 Joshua Barone, "Frank Gehry and Daniel Barenboim on Their New Concert Hall in Berlin," *New York Times*, March 3, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/arts/music/frank-gehry-and-daniel-barenboim-on-their-new-concert-hall-pierre-boulez-saal-in-berlin.html?emc=eta1>
- 13 Music education advocates often cite the supposedly ennobling qualities of classical music, but I prefer other reasons to promote musical training. Here are three: (1) Human beings are by nature musical, and their innate musicality deserves nourishment. (2) Music-making is a fundamental, powerful human activity, and everybody deserves to participate. (3) There is no better way to encounter the riches of human music than through the act of making it.
- 14 Program note at <http://www.musicsales-classical.com/composer/work/627/35709>
- 15 Alex Ross, "Learning the Score: The Crisis in Music Education," in *Listen to This*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 236.
- 16 <http://applehill.org/playing-for-peace/description-history/>