

Musical Apartheid: Time To Divest

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“To write great music, the musician must make his life a great song.” - J. S. Bach

“Make a list of the music you love, then learn it by heart.” - - Nadia Boulanger¹

As the walls crumble between East and West, black and white, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, there remains a disturbingly unhealthy “separate and unequal” mentality in the minds of many musicians. These attitudes are rampant: separate schools at colleges and conservatories for “classical” and “jazz” musicians; drinking fountains labeled “acoustic instruments only”; and, while so-called “popular” musicians sit at the back of the bus, ever-widening rifts exist between pre-WWI loyalists and post-WWII separatists; even professional musicians won’t sit at the same lunch counter with amateurs. All the while we engage in such *musical apartheid*, our society loses its collective soul.

When Bach relates life to song, he doesn’t specify whether to sing in Italian or German, secular or sacred, but that singing is the essence of life itself: to hone a personal identity, to breathe deeply, to be unafraid to reveal vulnerabilities, to share with those around you, to resonate with the universe. These days, however, with our iPods shuffling deep into our brains, we avoid our song, preferring instead to ask, “Can’t someone else do the singing for me?” According to Sidney Bechet, “That’s what’s holding back the music...It’s still worried. It’s still not sure of itself.”² Indeed, as a reflection of arbitrary boundaries, today’s music and musicians are too worried about conditional acceptance and whether the songs are “legit”, living in constant fear of *judgment*.

Boulanger³ might have added, “When making your list, include only compositions of classically trained European men prior to 1909.” But, this is ridiculous, for it is common knowledge these esteemed masters of “high art” drew frequent inspiration from *folk sources*. Antonín Dvořák’s states, “It is a sign of barrenness, indeed, when such characteristic bits of [folk] music exist and are not heeded by the learned musicians of the age.”⁴ And, of course, his revelations on the potency of Native- and African-American music generated great controversy. However, Rahsaan Roland Kirk⁵ settles the dispute in a brief exchange at the Village Vanguard:

“They say that Dvořák was a black man.

White people say he’s a white man.”

*What do you say?*⁶

“I say...I don’t give a damn!”

Kirk then performs a medley, where he first introduces the pop standard “Sentimental Journey” followed by “Going Home” (from Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*) and then plays them on two reed instruments *simultaneously*.⁷ Could there ever be a clearer message that people are people and music is music?

Judging the music a person listens to or performs is no different than judging a man by the color of his skin, or a woman by her gender. It is judging truth by the “rightness” of one’s religion, or so-called “winners” by their nationality. It is also judging “intelligence” by identifying a creature’s place on the food chain. Musicians must take the lead in fostering a humane culture of coexistence and acceptance, without judgment, so that our world can *sing together* in wonderful harmony – the walls of musical apartheid must come down!⁸

¹ Widely attributed to Bach (1685-1750) and Boulanger (1887-1979), but of unknown origin.

² Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, (New York, 1960), 205.

³ Composition teacher, whose students included Bernstein, Copland, Gershwin, Glass, Quincy Jones, Piazzolla, and hundreds more.

⁴ Antonín Dvořák with Edwin Emerson, Jr., “Music in America”, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (February 1895), 429-34.

⁵ Multi-instrumentalist philosopher.

⁶ Someone from the audience asks this question.

⁷ “Introduction to Medley”, *Rahsaan Roland Kirk - Rahsaan Rahsaan* (Atlantic SD 1575), recorded 12 May 1970.

⁸ Watch Daniel Anker’s award-winning film, *Music from the Inside Out*, to see how members of the Philadelphia Orchestra are leading the way in divestment!