MUSIC POWER

by Barbara Anne Scarantino

To illustrate, Dr. Manfred Clynes asks why a single piece of music when performed by a great artist can „move and transform the state of listeners, penetrate their defenses and make them glad to be alive" - while the same piece performed by a lesser artist, does not have this power?

Clynes asserts that the answer is not to be found in the musical score, but in the performer's fee/for the composition. The greater the musician's empathy, the more clarity in his expression, and the deeper the listener's response.

Research by Clynes further suggests that "essentic forms" have innate meanings that transcend cultural learning and conditioning and therefore neurologically coded. He demonstrated this by instructing people in four different countries (the United States, Mexico, Japan, and Indonesia) to press the push-button transducer with each of seven emotions: anger, hate, greed, love, sex, joy, and reverence. The transducer then converted the form of the push - the pressure pattern of the finger on the button - to a tone or a line on the graph. The graphic representation for each emotion was approximately the same for all individuals regardless of their culture.

Clynes suggests that musical compositions embody the unique "inner pulse" of their composers, that they are a reflection of the composer's own personality. And a performer whose own inner pulse is sensitive to the composer's can communicate the same emotions to the audience and reflect the visions of joy, love, and so forth that were created perhaps hundreds of years before.

The same can be said of orchestra conductors. Some are filled with a highly transmittable life energy that motivates and inspires the musicians to peak performance and can absolutely electrify the audience. Others are merely technically proficient and make no emotional connection to the composer's work. Thus the entire performance is cold.

In the recording studio, it is the engineer who ultimately is responsible for capturing the essence and "inner pulse" of the composer, musician, conductor, and performer. If he is attuned to their inner feelings, he will enshrine the moment forever on tape. If he doesn't get the "message," the meaning will be lost, the mix will be bad, and, if it gets to the market place, the buyer of the record will be ultimately cheated.

And, in the words of the experienced musician, Keith Jarrett:

".. .Music is the sonic motion of intention. With words, sound can be divorced from meaning by taking away the physical quality of speech. But music's meaning is in its physical quality: its sound. When a musician plays something a certain way and we can't hear the intent (the reason) behind it. we are hearing wasted motion, and register it as such because we haven't been given enough clues about the intent. We can then grow to think that everything is only gesture, and miss the real thing.

The media through which we hear music (our systems, rooms, etc.) cannot be separated from our ability to experience the music. It isn't the same music on a different system because we cannot separate music's rhetoric (its words) from its physical reality (its delivery). This makes the "delivery systems" (our stereos) more important than we might think they are. Can they tell us what the musicians on the recording are telling us?

As a musician, I often - too often - had the following experience: I would play a concert, hear the tape afterward, and wonder what was missing. I would remember incredible things in the concert that just weren't on the tape. The notes were there, but notes are not music. Where was the music, the intention ?

We could think of it this way: On the tape, the rhetoric had no meaning. Had I trusted the tape and not my memory of the actual event, I would have never grown to understand that, even though the sound is on tape. it doesn't mean you've recorded music. If you've heard a certain CD on a certain system, it doesn't necessarily mean that you've heard what's on the CD. We must learn to trust the responses of our own system - our ears - to music systems. Of course, this demands that we be in touch with ourselves - not easy thing.

People to whom music is important need to get close to the intention in a recording, and there's only one way to do this in the home: learn about the world of audio equipment. Use your (and others') ears to help remove whatever hinders you from the musical experience on the recording. Of course, it's not only the reproduction side that needs care - but that's the only side the listener has control over.

For instance, it's demonstrable that by merely flipping a two-pronged AC plug on a CD player, or even a turntable, a record you thought you didn't like can become a favorite -just because the polarity was wrong. Since music cannot be divorced from its emotional content, the sound of a record can determine whether you think you like the music. And vice versa, when you can't listen to music you really think you like because of how it was recorded.

Obviously, the musical experience is a delicate, complex thing, and we humans are more sensitive than we sometimes think. But we have the option to tune our music systems to better balance the equation. We can get closer to what we want if we know what we want.

There are stereo components that approximate the musical experience at many different price levels. We all know what our financial limitations are; but, given the desire to improve our systems, we can do it.

It by no means follows that musicians have to be audiophiles. Though I've been recording since 1965, I didn't seriously think about much of this until the last decade. But audiophiles and music lovers push the envelope, and we all benefit. Also, the more serious audiophiles are determined to keep their minds and ears open, keep learning, and try to remain patient during the process. Doing this thing right can take time.

There are a lot of people out there listening to all of these components for us. I recommend using this fact, and carefully reading others' evaluations, until you can tell whether a reviewer's preferences in sound match your own priorities. You can sort of get to know these guys over a period of time.

But, of course, it's your ears that count. I think you should pay attention to their needs. After all, we're talking nutrition in an age of diet soft drinks.

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