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The Exhilarating Effect of Classical
Music upon Various People

When I started teaching "Introduction to Music" at Hopkinsville Community College among the first people to be exhilarated were the male members of the faculty. The female members may have felt it too but they were better at hiding it.

One morning, in class, the piece of music under discussion was Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet" Overture. I had said something about Tchaikovsky's life and had played the three main themes from the Overture on the piano. That was in preparation for hearing the recording. I placed the needle on the record and expected to hear the "Friar Lawrence" theme with which the music begins. Instead, there was the sound of a piano. I took the playing arm up immediately and tried again with the same results. After several more tries I realized that Tchaikovsky didn't live there anymore. Not being able to do anything about it, I dismissed the class whereupon the exhilarated male faculty members rushed in. The son of one of them (I won't say who, but I know) had spent a good deal of time wiring a recording of Mr. Knuckles O'Toole's Honky-Tonk Piano to my record player. This was done, of course, at his father's bidding the night before. After many expressions of glee on their part, the exhilarated ones were free to go about their normal duties--if they had any.

Another day the composer under discussion was J. S. Bach. The piece of music was the "Little Fugue" in G minor for organ. I went to the piano to play the principal theme--the subject as it is called. The sound of the piano was not the sound I had expected. Those active gentlemen had stuffed newspaper between the strings, and the sounding board which gave, roughly, the sound of a harpsichord. This was not inappropriate, so I went right on with the class, which spoiled the effect they had aimed for. In fact it dampened their enthusiasm to such an extent that they tried only one more time.

The third try involved a toy train. I was telling the class something or other when the door was opened just enough for the small train to come into the room. I waited until it got to the desk, and then turned it around with my foot. Indicating for the students to be quiet, I suddenly opened the door--and there they were. I told the class, "This is the full-time faculty. They have a lot of free time on their hands." The daughter of one of them in class said, "My father certainly does."

Now we come to reactions from the students. There are a number of reasons for taking "Introduction to Music", but one of the most original ones was demonstrated to me years ago. The student--a mature woman (at least in years)--obviously took the class for the exquisite pleasure of disagreeing with everything I said. All I had to do was make a remark for her to say, "I beg your pardon." One day we were talking about the instruments in the orchestra and I said there was no difference between the first and second violins as instruments. The difference lay in the parts they played. "I beg your pardon", said she. "The second violins play lower in pitch and have a deeper tone than the firsts." I said, "I believe you are thinking about the violas." "Oh", she replied. We were all pleased to note that this did not dampen her spirits. In fact, she begged my pardon so often that after class some of the others said, "Why don't you tell that woman to shut up?" I hesitate to think what would have happened if I had told that particular woman to shut up.

Over the years I have fought a losing battle over terminology--the word "song" to be exact. I have explained that a song is a piece of music that has words to it--it is meant to be sung. We do not ordinarily speak of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony Song, or Chopin's Piano Sonata Song, or even Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto Song. It would be somewhat like calling every article of clothing a hat. I might say: "My hat certainly needs polishing and the heels are run over." Or: "I saw Mrs. X today wearing a hat that came well above her knees." Or: "I must get a new pair of hats. I have a hole in the toe of one of the

ones I am wearing." If it is not a song, we simply call it a piece of music, or a composition.

In spite of all my talking about "songs", at the end of the final exam one term, a girl stopped by my desk and asked in her rather nasal voice, "Mr. Butler, why didn't any of these songs have words?" I answered, "Lynn, a song does have words. When you played in the high school band, did the band music have words to it?" "Some of it did," she said.

I would like to say that it wasn't her fault that she didn't know. When a person talks constantly it is impossible to hear what someone else is saying. It was a family trait with her. Her younger sister took the class a few years later. Same thing--non-stop talker.

At the beginning of each new class I always ask the students what name they want to be called. It is often not the same name that is on the roster. I asked one boy what I should call him and he said, "Brr." I said, "What?" and he said "Brr." I said "How do you spell it?" And he said "B-r-r." So that is what I called him.

One day we were studying "Messiah" by Handel. Brr said "What's that dude's name?" I replied, "The dude's name is Handel." I think there is something friendly and endearing about calling Handel "that dude".

There have been a number of interesting wrong titles written on test papers. Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun" was identified by one boy as "Afternoon on a Farm." He lived in the country so that seemed pretty logical. Another time a piece of piano music by Schubert was called "Bronze Lullaby" composed by some gent named Haile. But my all-time favorite merely involved misspelling. Gershwin's classic for piano and jazz band has been identified on test papers as "Razbody in Blue", "Raphisidy in Blue", and "Raspy in Blew." Ever since those classic titles for Mr. Gershwin's music were given I have told each new class that I don't care how they spell rhapsody because it gives me such genuine pleasure. Strangely enough, it has hardly ever been misspelled since.

Now we get to remarks that strike a little closer to home. The exhilaration in the following cases was instigated by my own playing.

I will go back to my student days in Hopkinsville. I was studying piano with Mrs. John Starnes and one of her neighbors asked if I would come to her house and play for her. Being duly sensible of the honor, I showed up at the appointed time. Mrs. X met me at the door and guided my faltering footsteps to the piano. After telling me to start playing, she left the room. Thinking that she would return in a few minutes, I decided to wait for her. From somewhere in the house she told me to begin. I was playing a piece of music that contained a very dramatic pause--pregnant with meaning. I had come to that pause, when, from another room, came the voice, "Lovely, dear. Play some more." Being somewhat nettled, I replied, "I haven't finished this one yet." "Well, finish it and play some more," said she. My hostess, if she could be so called, was writing letters in another room. I could not help but feel how much simpler it would have been for her to have used the radio for background music.

One summer when I was home from college my grandmother's sister and her daughter came to see us. (I must tell you at this point that my mother was a pianist and her name was Susan.) I was asked to play--and did so. After I finished, the daughter asked her mother how she liked it. "Well," was the reply, "He can't play and talk at the same time like Susan could." It is very difficult to please one's relatives.

Several years ago after I had finished playing somewhere, a young lady came up to me at the piano. She had a question. "Did you have talent, or was it all training?" I found the question unsettling--suggesting as it did the evaporation of said talent or the non-existence of it in the first place.

Two or three years ago I was asked to play a group of three pieces before a wedding. I played one each by Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin. This, of course, was prior to the Wedding March. After the ceremony was over, a lady came up to me and very kindly said, "It helped pass the time." Said to myself, "Curses!

Foiled again."

One particularly exhilarating experience occurred at a funeral home. My cousin and I were there, but we were in different rooms. A lady came up to Ed and asked if he worked there. He said he did not--that he was waiting for his cousin, Marshall Butler. The lady said, "Oh, I would like to hear him play sometime, but I can't walk to the college, and none of my friends want to go." Whereupon a woman with her said, "I wouldn't listen to him if he was in my room." As I said I was not with Ed when she said it, but if I had been, I would have liked to have replied, "Madame! The chances of my being in your room are extremely remote!" But she might not have understood the big words.

There were only three times in my life when I can remember having had the right comeback at the right time. The first was in high school. There were six of us in a car going somewhere or other. There was a very snippy young lady in the back seat who had a rather acid tongue. I had just delivered some sensational witicism when Miss Snip spoke up. In a tone of contempt she said, "Marshall, did you know that a pun is the lowest form of humor?" I said, "Yes, but I didn't expect you would."

Another time, in New York, I was practicing for a recital to be given that evening. The program was to be presented in the auditorium of the Barbizon Hotel for Women. During the afternoon a lady came into the auditorium and asked where the television was. I told her that I supposed it had been removed because I was going to play a recital there that evening. She said, "What a pity." My reply was, "I promise you I will never do it again."

But my finest hour--which lasted about one second--took place in England. We were checking out of our hotel in London to come back home. The young man at the desk said, "Give my best to Ronnie and Nancy." Not to be thought lacking in the finer feelings I replied, "Tell Phil and Liz I said hello." With a weak gasp he said, "Phil and Liz?"

Back to the Barbizon Hotel in New York. During that same afternoon

another lady came into the auditorium. She asked if I had seen a hymn book. Like most people I have, of course, seen a hymn book, but not the one she meant. Then I told her about the recital that evening and that I would be very pleased for her to attend. She said, "Oh, I am very musical--always have been." then she left the room. I began to ponder what it would be like to be "very musical." If I had gently thumped her on the side of the head, would she have emitted a great resonant tone? Like Big Ben? Or at least the local town clock? I was never to know because she had left the room and I never saw her again. Not only was she very musical, but she always had been. It was not something she had acquired late in life.

There are some people here in town who are never satisfied with the time or place of my recitals. The familiar complaint is that they don't get out at night--why don't I play in the daytime? A few years ago I played a recital at the City-County Library. It was on a beautiful sunny afternoon and there was a very gratifying turnout. But--none of the afore mentioned people were there. They had not told me that they didn't get out on beautiful sunny afternoons either. Perhaps mornings are their times.

Not long after that I was at the Convention Center one evening. One of the Community Concerts was scheduled and I was punching tickets at the door. It was about 7:45 p.m. and the sky was dark. This led me to suspect that it was night. As I was punching her ticket, one of these ladies said, "Oh, I wish you would play in the daytime. I just don't get out at night." I looked at her in amazement. I looked at the clock and I looked out at the dark sky. Looking again at her I said, "You're out now." She seemed genuinely surprised and said, "Well, by the hardest." What they mean, of course, is that they don't get out at night unless it is for something they want to hear.