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What If I Like Your Politics but Don't Like Your Art?

By MICHAEL GORDON

Directly across the street from my studio, where for most of the day I sit writing music, there is a makeshift shrine put together by the residents on my block to commemorate Larry, the homeless man who lived there for at least the past 11 years. Since my studio is just about 150 square feet I looked out my window often to see Larry in his "living quarters," a pieced together structure of cardboard boxes and discarded blankets.

Over the years I thought a lot about going out with my tape recorder and interviewing Larry. Homelessness is a very overlooked issue here, and this man was not only homeless in America but homeless on my block. I could make a piece of music with Larry in it, and that would bring about an awareness of the problem. I struggled over this, but I never did go out and record a conversation with Larry.

One question I've asked in recent years is, If I don't like your politics can I still like your art? Or put a simpler way, would you want a fantastic painting hanging on your wall that was made by a Nazi? It may sound like a bizarre question, but anyone with Carl Orff, Richard Strauss or Herbert von Karajan CDs in their collection should give it some thought. The throngs lined up around the block to see Karajan conduct the Berlin Philharmonic, as many New Yorkers did on repeated occasions, should have asked themselves this. And if we care about this question, do we need to examine the politics of other composers, like Wagner, whose views we know, along with perhaps Beethoven and Bach, whose views we know less about?

I'm not suggesting that we do this anymore than I would suggest you search through your refrigerator and find out the politics of the farmer who grew your broccoli. However, for many people it is just too much to come to terms with the idea that their hero conductor or composer, or baseball player or movie star or scientist just may be a bum. Because they have achieved superhero status in one part of their life, we tend to cut them a lot of slack. Can someone who conducts like Karajan be a Nazi? Is it really possible? Unfortunately, in his case, the answer was yes.

For many artists, the ability and desire to infuse their work with a political message is what drives their work. They either view their work as the vehicle for their politics, or as Terry Riley has said, (I am paraphrasing here) "As long as you are on stage in front of people, use the moment to say something political." That something usually involves one of two possible tacks: the universal message (all men are brothers) or a very specific message (this war stinks).

I for one am not convinced that politics and music should mix. Politics lives in the world of tangible ideas and actions. It involves a particular type of intellectual process. Music, on the other hand, exists in a totally different realm of thought. There is no way to attach an intellectual meaning to a D-sharp.

And there is no political message to a Bach fugue. There is a well-thought-out discourse from beginning to end, and there is plenty of meaning, but the music does not dictate to the listener a specific idea or course of action. For me, it is this detachment from the literal that gives music its true spiritual power. We are, in the musical realm, allowed to converse on a totally different plane of thought, one that is metaphysical and not intellectual.

Abstract music gets its power by giving listeners the opportunity to project their own sensibility onto the metaphysical framework that the composer has built. Because we the listeners are doing the projecting, we only infuse the music we hear with the values we respect in ourselves. (Maybe that's why its so hard to think of great artists as possibly not being great people.)

By infusing a political or narrative message, like calling a piece of music "Symphony for the End of Hunger," the composer gains something and loses something. The gain is the immediate understanding and admiration of the audience, but the loss is far greater. This is why I am suspicious of music that wears its political message on its sleeve. I know in advance that the composer has chosen this idea of immediate acceptance over a more thoughtful and metaphysically deeper experience.

I myself struggled with this when I wrote my recent piece for the Kronos Quartet, "The Sad Park." That piece is a personal commemoration of September 11, 2001. I live in downtown Manhattan near Ground Zero, and I was two blocks away from the North Towers, outside of P.S. 234 with my wife and two children that morning when the first plane flew directly over our heads. It was a personal event for me, and I wanted to capture the intensity of my experience in some way; to leave it here on earth as a commemoration.

Excerpt from the last section of Michael Gordon's "The Sad Park," performed live by the Kronos Quartet. (mp3)

But the thing that was gnawing at me the entire time was this: By using this subject am I forcing the audience to be sympathetic to my work before even a note of music is played? If they know in advance what the piece is about, how could they not be?

With "The Sad Park" I tried to solve this problem (at least for myself) by using documentary material and presenting it in as unimpassioned a fashion as I could. The documentary material was a chance discovery in my son's class at University Plaza Nursery School. The teacher of the class, Loyan Beausoleil, had been taping the 4-year-olds as they spontaneously broke into chatter about what had happened. She would take the tapes home at the end of the day and transcribe them in order to keep her own record of what these traumatized children were going through.

Leo, 5, at University Plaza Nursery School in Manhattan, building the Twin Towers out of clay. (Photo: Loyan Beausoleil)

When, at the beginning of 2002, Ms. Beausoleil told me what she had been doing, I instinctively knew that this recorded material was going to be important to me. By using someone else's voice, the voice of 4-year-olds, by taking the recordings and abstracting them into music, I tried to create a sense of objectivity, a statuesque type of music. I wasn't expressing my pain, or my politics. I was just capturing something that happened. (Ms. Beausoleil's work documenting the experiences of these children is chronicled at www.youngestwitnesses.com.)

Unlike adult voices, most of which have flattened out into an almost monotone, children's speech is very melodic. They basically sing what they say. While sifting through Ms. Beausoleil's tapes, I was listening not only for content but for musicality. I worked with sound artist Luke DuBois on the post-production of the tapes, and we spent dozens of hours listening carefully. Each section of "The Sad Park" is built from one of these lines of recorded speech.

The accompanying music is deliberately restrained and unemotional. It is only at the end of the 30 minute work, when for the last 4 minutes the listener is left with only music, that the string quartet is finally allowed to comment. Then, in the only non-narrative section of the work, does the listener really find out how the composer feels and thinks.

Here is the text the I chose:

Part 1: Two evil planes broke in little pieces and fire came.
Part 2: There was a big boom and then there was teeny fiery coming out.
Part 3: I just heard that on the news that the buildings are crashing down.
Part 4: And all the persons that were in the airplane died.

Is “The Sad Park” political? I don’t really know the answer to this. I don’t think you can tell what my politics are by reading the text, and I don’t think that I am proselytizing a point of view. If you agree, then I’ve succeeded at least in this.