

MUSIC: DISCOVERING MEANING, AWAKENING EMOTION

by Martin Kutnowski, PhD

Teaching music to our students on any given day, what is our goal as teachers? To help them master a technical difficulty? To help them learn a new piece from scratch? To help them polish matters of style before an exam or performance? I'll argue that these pedagogic goals, while all valid, necessary, and logical, should be subordinated to a much more fundamental learning goal, one to be enacted in every lesson: to establish a meaningful link between the piece and the learner's life experience, awakening emotion, and nurturing his or her lifetime connection with music.

Meaning is the vehicle that anchors new knowledge in the soul and mind of the learner. *Meaning* is etymologically related to *mind*, from the Old English *gemynd*: "memory, remembrance, state of being remembered; thought, purpose; conscious mind, intellect, intention."ⁱ Meaning is active interpretation, a search perhaps for the connection between what we experience at a given moment (let's say, a new piece of music) and the relationship between this event and our entire lives. Meaning may emerge, startle us at any moment. Suppose someone is travelling alone by train or bus, with nothing to do but look out the window. The images that flash by—a tree, a store, a person crossing the street—act as subtle triggers, helping the traveller to freely associate thoughts. She may see a bakery she has seen before, or read a marquee that elicits some special memory. Without realizing it at first, she may remember the person that she met at that corner, be moved by the things she felt that day, regret what

she meant to say but didn't. And then, whether she wants it or not, she will be actively re-telling that story to herself.

The role of the music teacher is essential because, as a nonverbal language, music often must be unpacked in order to reach the student. I remember listening to Mozart's *Turkish March* from Sonata in A Major K. 331 when I was little (perhaps four years old) on a recording by Arthur Rubinstein. Part of my interest originated because my mother told me that it was "toy music." Even though her characterization was, scholarly speaking, false, it did the trick: Then and there, I associated the sensory pleasure I was experiencing with a meaning I could understand, because it made perfect sense in the world I knew as a four-year-old. Even more important, it provided me with a reason to listen again and again to the piece to "understand" it better, engaging me with Mozart (and music in general) in the process.

Teaching older students, the meaning assigned to a piece of music can move rather quickly beyond the evocation of toys. In "Classical Music with Shining Eyes," an exceptional TED lecture given in 2008, conductor Benjamin Zander shows not only that the formal design of Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 4 in E minor conveys meaning, but that this interpretation can be accessible to audiences with no technical training whatsoever. In other words, the "proper" meaning—that is, meaning derived from stylistic analysis—can be taught and learned.ⁱⁱ

Meanings in music are there to be found, among other reasons, because art music is a mirror of life and society. Furthermore, music scores are texts that engage in dialogue with one another. This happens also in popular music whenever a particular rhythm alludes to one from another song, a melody is quoted directly, or an actual audio channel is recycled. A nice example is “Hung Up,” the lead track in Madonna’s tenth album, *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, released in 2007.ⁱⁱⁱ This song uses a sample—the distinctive keyboard vamp of ABBA’s *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!*—and this element acts as a metaphorical reference to the disco music of the 1970s.^{iv} The video of “Hung Up” reinforces the fusion of musical eras. It features a stunning fifty-year-old Madonna together with teenagers and young adults. Besides the keyboard vamp, there are many other symbols that bridge the thirty-year span: the 80s-style boom box; some of the specific choreographic steps that made John Travolta famous in *Saturday Night Fever*; not to mention the very title of the song, conveying the idea that the main character is “hung up” on the past. All these are deliberate tokens that suggest the fusion of generations. The shared attraction of young and old to music, dance, and vital energy is expressed in the dance scenes together.

Composers have always been able to harness hidden associations such as these, explicitly or implicitly embedding their scores with comments on other music. Just as many people who were teenagers in the 1970s would recognize Madonna’s keyboard vamp as disco music, European audiences

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were very much aware of the intertextual connections among compositions. They were aware too of the references to life and social occasions to be found in the music. People understood that a piece such as Bach’s *Minuet in G* (from Anna Magdalena’s *Notebook*) was a didactic rendition of one of the well-known aristocratic dances of the time. Contemporary composers also exploit this connection; when I wrote *Puppet Tango* and included it in a collection of piano pieces for children, I was confident that even teenagers would get the connection between the social occasion and its abstracted music representation.^v Why? Because nowadays the tango is a world-wide phenomenon, and because we’ve seen countless movies featuring tango moments (*Scent of a Woman*, with “blind” Al Pacino and, more recently, *Moulin Rouge*, among many others).

So when we hear a piano student playing a tango in a recital, we realize it’s the idea of tango that is being recalled. Without Al Pacino in sight, we listeners instantly recognize that this rendition of tango includes no actual dancers, nor is it placed in its original social context. The piece becomes a symbolic representation, a token of the original contextual and stylistic substance. Musicologists have termed this metaphor “topic style” or sometimes just “topic.” As performers and music teachers, we are familiar with many of these topics even if we have never seen them all lined up on a shelf—that’s how we recognize a serenade, a march, a French overture.

In symphonic music, tokens can be as simple as a drum roll to create suspense or a cymbal crash to paint the idea of a clown tripping. In a Chopin nocturne the melody in the right hand may contain gestures that recall *bel canto* arias. Piano chorales by Beethoven or Schumann would obviously allude to pieces sung by a church choir. These are all musical metaphors, mannerisms, or tropes that can be recycled, brought to life at will by the composer, in order to create a particular association in the listener.

The problem is that more than two hundred years have elapsed since Bach and Mozart were around. The natural changes in culture have gradually eroded the wealth of associative hyperlinks present in each of the works by the old masters and their contemporaries. This is why, when we hear Bach’s *Minuet in G*, the association may be lost on us: Many members of a modern audience may not realize that the minuet was originally a dance tied to a specific social class and occasion. They would just think, “Oh, it’s a nice easy piece for piano with a catchy melody,” and miss the rich reference to an earlier time in music history. In turn they miss out on the chance to experience more emotion: How much more exciting would it be to listen to—or perform—the *Minuet in G* by imagining a young duchess and her suitor, both impeccably dressed, butterflies in their stomachs as they look into each other’s eyes, gently pacing eight-measure steps in the palace gardens?



(Kellom Thomlinson, Art of Dancing, London, 1735.)

As a teacher of music, I find it essential to get my students to think about the purpose of each new piece they face: What does it want to say to the listener, to us? What emotion does it want to elicit? What story does it want to tell? Music, like literature, is an explicit act of communication, a reaching out to others. Gentle guidance from the music teacher can connect the sensory pleasure of pure listening with metaphorical meanings along the way. Each of these meanings can be potential anchors, invitations for the listener-performer to relate to the implicit story. In my experience, among the most basic characteristics of music that anybody can learn in a few minutes, are those that prompt our primal instincts, such as the

motorlike rhythm of heavy metal, which practically forces us to stomp our feet in quadruple metre; the shrill sound of loud dissonance, which elicits disorientation and fear; or the plaintive melodic semitone, almost universally perceived as a lament.

Music has been around since the beginning of time, and those intuitive associations, at first closely tied up with the sounds of prehistoric life (sudden high-pitch sounds to convey imminent physical danger, low-pitch sounds to convey foreboding, melodious birdsongs to signify the renaissance of spring) have been tirelessly shaped by human culture, and are now expressed in an infinite number of ways. Each culture has found a way to speak through

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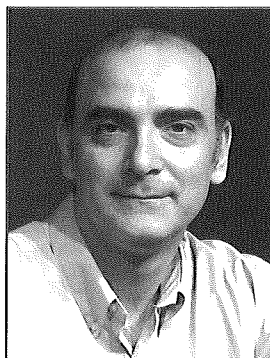
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its music, and each piece of music tells a story. That is why teaching a piece—not unlike performing it before an audience—is like the shared reading of a text, a reading that illuminates its implicit metaphor and interprets its multiple meanings. The rewards are many, for the best music addresses universal issues that we all relate to. Like the magical unveiling of a secret, the kind of teaching I am referring to is about finding the links that will make music directly relevant to our students, pulling them into the drama, inviting them to own the emotional world of the piece and, in turn, empowering them to render it in the first person.

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Martin Kutnowski's is a composer, writer, and teacher. His music, fusing folk, world, and classical sources, has been performed in four continents, including venues such as Carnegie Hall in New York, Wigmore Hall in London, Izumi Hall in Osaka, and Colon Theater in Buenos Aires.

He received numerous awards and commissions, from the Canada Council for the Arts, Arts New Brunswick, Fulbright, and ASCAP, among others. His music is published by Billaudot (France) and FJH (USA). Kutnowski teaches at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, where he currently serves as Dean of Faculty; he also taught at City University of New York and the Aspen Music Festival, and maintains a busy international schedule as lecturer and clinician. He is an Associate Composer of the Canadian Music Centre and a member of the Executive Council of the Canadian League of Composers. More information can be obtained in www.contrapunctus.com.



ⁱ Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed from: <http://www.etymonline.com> on April 5, 2013.

ⁱⁱ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9LCwI5iErE>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Confessions on a Dance Floor, LP disc (Warner Bros., 2005)

^{iv} "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man after Midnight)," in *"The King Has Lost His Crown"*, LP disc (Polar Music, 1979).

^v *Watercolors for Ten Fingers*, by Martin Kutnowski. Edited by Helen Marlais. The FJH Contemporary Keyboard Editions - Contemporary, Intermediate through Early Advanced. (J1021), 2007.

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