

Driven by Transcendence

by: Rhoda Bernard, Ed. D.

Perhaps it's the summer months that do this to me, but lately I have found myself stepping back and thinking about what drives me in my work. Why am I so passionate about music education? Why have I dedicated myself to the education and training of the next generation of music educators? What makes music and music education meaningful to me? Of course, these are questions that one considers multiple times over the course of a career. They are also questions whose answers are not fixed. They change – sometimes from day to day or from moment to moment, and certainly over longer periods of time.

Today, when I think about these questions, I think about what I have come to call the transcendent aspects of musical experiences. The online thesaurus defines transcendence as “a state of being or existence above and beyond the limits of material experience” or “the state of excelling or surpassing or going beyond usual limits” (www.thefreedictionary.com). As musicians and music educators, we all know what it feels like when musical experiences take on these qualities. Something magical happens that takes us to a completely new realm. The music takes over. We are transported to another place. Time no longer matters. We no longer matter. All that matters is the music and the particular moment of that experience.

For me, transcendent musical experiences most often occur when I am making music – specifically, when I am either singing composed music or scat-singing. Transcendent musical experiences are less common for me when I play the piano, listen to music, compose or arrange music, or conduct rehearsals or performances. The occurrence of transcendent musical experiences seems to vary quite a bit from person to person, however. In conversations with me, other

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people have related accounts of times when they were listening to music and that experience took on transcendent aspects. I have also heard from composers, arrangers, and conductors who have described the transcendent qualities of their experiences. A wide range of musical interactions and involvements can take on transcendent qualities.

Once I was able to undergo a single transcendent musical experience, I noticed that I became more sensitive to the possibilities that could be awakened in other musical experiences. This gets tricky, because these kinds of experiences cannot be forced. We cannot will the transcendent aspects of musical experiences to show up

whenever we would like, according to a pre-arranged schedule. However, through having my first – and then subsequent – transcendent experience with music, I have somehow become better at having, or maybe finding, these experiences with music.

It seems to me that transcendent experiences in music are similar in some ways to physical exercise. Once you undergo such experiences, it is as if you start working a muscle. You get better at having transcendent musical experiences. And then you start to notice that transcendent experiences are popping up in other parts of your life. After years of having and noticing the transcendent aspects of my musical experiences, I now find myself in the midst of transcendent experiences in unlikely moments.

Transcendence sneaks up on me, for example, when I'm teaching a class with my graduate students on a muggy summer morning, or when I'm flying high above Boston Harbor on my way back to Logan Airport at the end of a vacation, or when I'm in a planning meeting for a new project or program at Boston Conservatory, or when I'm reading fiction that captivates me (to name a few of many examples).

Transcendent experiences somehow beget transcendent experiences. Of course, not all of these transcendent experiences are of the same quality or magnitude. Some may be overwhelming and may last for hours, while others may be more fleeting and on a smaller scale. But, for me, all of these experiences share certain qualities: the sense of losing myself, of being transported to another time or place, of magical, out-of-the-ordinary features. To return to the online thesaurus and its definition of transcendence, all of these experiences take me beyond the limits of my material experience.

I can remember the very first time that I experienced transcendence when I was

singing. It was about fifteen years ago, and I was performing a Yiddish folk song with a pianist at a world music festival in New York. From the moment that it began, the performance took on magical qualities. My accompanist and I had a mysteriously strong connection that night. We were so deeply in sync that we could almost anticipate each other's musical thinking. We were listening so intently to each other that we began to feel the same nuances of phrasing and dynamics. Expressively, I was able to accomplish everything that I wanted to with my singing. All of the layers of emotion and meaning in the song came through in my voice. The audience was intently focused on our music, and they accompanied us as partners on our musical journey. A seasoned performer, I knew that this was a performance like no other that I had ever experienced. I also knew that I wanted to fill my life with more experiences like this.

What drives me in my work? I am driven by the opportunity to create and facilitate similar kinds of experiences for

other people, both as a musician and as a music teacher educator. I would like my audiences and students to start working their muscles by undergoing transcendent experiences in music. Why am I so passionate about music education? Because I firmly believe that music classrooms and rehearsal halls are unique places in school settings. They are places that feature and nurture the kinds of engagement, commitment, focus, and seriousness of purpose that make transcendent experiences possible. They are where the muscle of transcendent experiences can begin to be exercised. Why have I dedicated myself to the education and training of the next generation of music educators? Because I would like for as many young people as possible to have the opportunity to experience transcendence through music, in whatever way that they can. This will, hopefully, lead them to experience transcendence in other settings, as well. Outstanding music educators can make transcendent musical experiences possible. What makes music and music

education meaningful to me? The ways that musical experiences can inform and transform the other aspects of our lives.

As you read this article, your summer will have flown by and you will be at the beginning of a new academic year. I urge you to take a few minutes to reflect on what drives you in your work and what makes it meaningful to you. Staying grounded in our passion and the source of meaning in our lives can help us to gain valuable perspective on who we are, what we do, and why we do it. Thinking about and writing this article have certainly done that for me. I hope that you find a means for the kind of reflection that you need in order to gain that perspective and approach your work with new focus and commitment.

Rhoda Bernard is the Higher Education Editor of MMN.

References

"Transcendence." <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/transcendence>. Accessed July 7, 2008.



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