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### Music and the Human Experience

The Book of St. John in the New Testament opens with the phrase, “In the beginning was the Word”. If this is true, I imagine it must have been a sung Word. God could not have created the universe in the same manner one would order their lunch. Instead, a song of creation must have filled the vacuum from whence would come all that has ever been. Music, mixed with a little divinity, is one of the few things I think could cause light to break forth from the heavens.

Although I accept that it is beyond the realm of apparent reason for music to create Being from Nothing, it is undeniable that music possesses a unique and remarkable power. There is nothing quite like it. Music has a way of evoking feeling that can be found nowhere else. This transcendent and inexplicable communicative ability sets music apart from the rest of human experience.

Even if the origin of music is not directly from the mouth of a higher power, history shows that music has existed at least since the dawn of civilization. It is a long-lived and venerable tradition, one that is a continual

source of inspiration, comfort, and joy for people all around the world. What makes music such a constant of society? This essay will explore the ramifications of this question. More specifically, it will show how music is an essential pillar upon which rests human identity, connection, and culture. In order to do this, we will take the three aforementioned subjects and individually examine the nature of each one's relation to music. However, before doing so, it is necessary to thoroughly study the beautiful bond that exists between music and the concept of expression, in the hopes that we can more deeply understand the fundamentals of how music affects humanity.

### 1. Music and Expression

"Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent."

– Victor Hugo

It has been said that music is nothing more than a means of expression. Of course, music has been said to be many things. The definition of music has never been concretely established and is debated to this day. In spite of this ambiguity, it is clear that the vast majority of what is called music is intimately connected to the idea of expression. For example, music is frequently referred to as a "universal language" because it exists in every part of the world and can elicit strong emotional responses from all listeners, regardless of their background.

As it happens, though, music does contain many close parallels to language. This is true even when we disregard the lyrical component of music. Just as with language, musicians start with an idea or feeling in mind which they then attempt to communicate through sound. The similarities run even deeper. In a series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1973, the renowned conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein drew many comparisons between music and the field of linguistics. Specifically, he spoke of the linguistic concepts of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Phonology is the linguistic study of sounds, and appears in music as the sounds it is made up of. Syntax is the study of sentence structure, and is juxtaposed in music with how musical phrases are constructed from sound using principles of harmony. Semantics is the study of meaning in language, and is reflected in music as the listener's interpretation of what they have heard. Supplemented by a musical grammar, or an understanding of music theory, these ideas are combined to create art.

The similarity of music to language likely contributes to why it is such a unitive medium of art, and why it "speaks" to the soul, in a sense. As the German composer Joachim Burmeister once said: "[t]here is only little difference between music and the nature of oration." I've brought up the subject of music and language in an effort to show how, to a certain degree, music can be analyzed and broken down rationally. We can benefit from an objective understanding of how music works. At the end of the day, however,

music is fundamentally different from language. Music is art by its very nature, and language is not. This is the boundary where music moves beyond the realm of scientific description. As we now cross this boundary, our objective understanding must take a turn towards the subjective as we examine how music, as art, interacts with personal identity.

## 2. Music and Identity

“Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.”

– Maya Angelou

Identity is a beautifully multifaceted thing, and so is music. It naturally follows that the interplay between the two is similarly complex. A stepping stone to understanding may be the question of “why do people make music?”

Making music is a very human endeavor. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of human existence is the desire to create meaning, especially meaningful art, where there was nothing before but thought and feeling. The fulfillment of this instinct is so crucial to individual well-being that it is often integrated into our identities. Music is one potential manifestation of the desire to create. It’s also interesting to note that one does not have to write music to fulfill this desire by means of music. Simply listening to music requires the listener to create meaning out of the sounds they are hearing.

The act of creation requires us to reach inwards and draw from our own experiences. Because music forces us to connect with ourselves, listening to or writing good music cannot be done with anything but complete authenticity. It is when we are open and honest with ourselves that our perspectives are changed, and it is in this way that music can change us. It is in this way that music becomes intertwined with identity.

In my life, there have been certain pieces of music that have spoken to my soul in such a way as to change how I see the world around me. These works of art are enshrined deep within my heart. It is evident that this sentiment is growing increasingly common in today's world. Music is more widely available than ever before in history. This accessibility also invites more connection over music than has ever been seen.

### 3. Music and Connection

"Music acts like a magic key, to which the most tightly closed heart opens."

– Maria von Trapp

Let us return briefly to discussion of music as a "universal language." Music's indiscriminate power over the hearts of its listeners allows it to bring people together in a way that nothing else can. I've always been fascinated by the fact that without knowing anything about a person, I can converse with them excitedly about music we both listen to and come out having made a better connection with the person, the music, and myself than I would have if

we had merely made small talk about the weather and recent politics. This small and simple interaction can be indirectly replicated on a larger scale at concerts. There are not many things in the 21st century that can get several thousand people in one place for a singular purpose. Music, however, does exactly this, and all the time. People from all walks of life gather at concerts to do nothing more than listen to music, and in the process, experience a connection to their fellow humans that could not have been had in any other context.

Another example of music in interpersonal relationships is the phenomenon of “our” song. It is not uncommon for couples to have certain songs that they associate with their relationship. This shows that music often has a significant and emotional place in even the most intimate interpersonal relationships.

There is also one more type of musical interaction between people that is well worth highlighting. Many musicians profess that collaboratively making music, whether as part of an orchestra, garage band, or otherwise, is a deeply edifying and even spiritual experience. This experience even has the capacity to shift entire cultures, as we will now discuss.

#### 4. Music and Culture

“Music can change the world, because it can change people.”

– Bono

It is easy to take for granted the impact that music has had on civilization at large. It is true that the wars of antiquity make for fascinating topics of study, but what is, for instance, Greece, without its fine arts? How could we overlook all the great plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, and the artful choruses featured therein? Think of how closely we associate the unique and exotic sound of ancient Egyptian music with modern-day Egypt. The same could be said of the Oriental sounds of India, or China, or Japan. The case could even be made that the k-pop boom of recent years falls into that pattern of societal influence. Music actively changes how we perceive the cultures it originates from. In addition, it's often instrumental in the development of those cultures. Music has served as a way to cultivate community for as long as humans have existed.

In an intriguing reciprocal effect, the values of cultures also influence the music that comes from them. Examining music originating from two different cultures can show the differences in values between those cultures. For instance, Eastern cultures like Japan demonstrate a cultural ideal of inner peace in their zen music, while the virtuosic and uber-expressive music of the Romantic period of Western classical music shows a cultural focus on the most vivid passions of human existence.

To offer another example, in more recent years, we've seen governmental policies on war, racism, and poverty influence artists to express their dissent through music. Protest songs such as John Lennon's Imagine,

Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, and Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* can move individuals to change their perceptions of morality and race, and so influence the way voters feel about policies. This further demonstrates the reciprocal relationship shared by music and culture. Ritual and music first influence the development of culture, then culture moves music to evolve, and in turn, music influences culture to evolve, and so on.

All this talk of music's huge influence on the world around it may lead the reader to ask the question, "what would a world without music be like?" I will not pretend that a world without music would be catastrophically unlivable. However, I will adamantly contend that humanity would be without a beautiful and universal experience upon which human identity, connection, and culture has been built.

As I write the conclusion to this essay, I am listening to Artur Schnabel's recordings of Beethoven's piano sonatas - the first complete set of Beethoven's sonatas ever recorded. I can't help but ponder the centuries that have passed since Beethoven first set his music to paper and the emotional poignancy the music still holds today. As I look back at my own life, I see that the meaning I've attached to much of the music I've listened to has never left. I think back to the lullabies my mother sang to put me to sleep, and find that the melodies are engraved in my memory. I think of the campfire songs my grandpa would sing when we went camping, and hum along to them as I do. I think of the music my girlfriend and I would listen to together, as well as the

music I listened to in the wake of our breakup, and am reminded that love and heartbreak are just as deeply affecting as they have ever been.

I now challenge you, dear reader, to look back at your own life and consider the music that has followed you through the years. Listen to it again, if need be. Then go forward and experience whatever art you encounter with complete engagement. Art such as music will shape your life for the better if you let it. Life is too short for such profound beauty to be left unappreciated.

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