

Bill Tammeus' May 18, 2009 Address

For the Celebration of the American Guild of Organists' 70th Birthday

Although I'm honored to be with you this evening and to share some thoughts with you, I want you to know that I'm one of four siblings and that you invited the wrong Tammeus kid. You should have invited my oldest sister Karin, who is a Juilliard pipe organ graduate and who still teaches and plays music in the Bay Area.

The benefit to inviting her is that if she didn't have anything interesting to say she might at least have played a little music for you. The disadvantage to inviting me is that if I turn out not to have much interesting to say, I haven't touched the oboe since high school and my other musical skills are at best negligible. Which is why my father used to brag that I was a child musical prodigy who, at the tender age of 2, already could play really well on the linoleum.

And yet it turns out that because music is what it is, one need not be able to produce it with great elegance to be able to understand its importance. Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether professional musicians — whether of the instrumental or the voice variety — sometimes talk too much to other professional musicians and, in the process, lose touch with how their music is received by people hearing it.

Sometimes you need to hear from the people in the pews.

So I'm going to make the assumption that most of the music you produce is

done in sacred settings, in churches, synagogues and the like. It turns out that I know something about sacred settings and, I think, the place music and other elements of worship play and can play.

The first thing I want to remind you of is something you surely know, which is that most of the people hearing your music are musically untrained.

People in other professions must remember similar truths. For instance, as a writer, I must remember that most people have no idea what a conditional subjunctive is and that 99.999 percent of all Americans use the word “hopefully” wrong. Don’t get me started.

And yet my task is to write in ways that are clear even to people who, to my ear, can’t use the language well.

Similarly, preachers must remember that the people in the pews are in general, theologically illiterate, just as physicians must remember that the people they treat usually have only a vague idea of how their bodies function in any technical sense.

But the ignorance of our audience does not mean we should lower our standards. It means simply that we must be aware of the way what we produce is often received.

Perhaps you remember a movie called “Shine” from a dozen or so years ago. It was about a mentally ill pianist named David Helfgott. He became an international phenomenon and seemed able to thrill audiences.

And yet professional musicians and music critics, applying the high

standards of their trade, found Helfgott's piano playing woefully lacking. To their trained ears his work was simply awful, however much they may have admired his courage to play it in public.

So what's the lesson here? The lesson is not to lower your standards so that you play like Helfgott but, rather, to try to understand why Helfgott was able to draw from his audiences an almost visceral positive response. The lesson is to remember that art is art only if it somehow speaks to the silence that lies at the epicenter of our souls, the silence that snuffs out words as inadequate intruders on truth.

I think it's worth your while to think afresh about just how music is able to touch us and change us, reveal us and shape us. Music, indeed, is one of the best arguments I know that humans are not just physical beings but also have an equally real spiritual dimension.

Music quickens our passive souls, offering testimony that we are not merely corporeal products of evolving cells. Rather, in some mysterious way, we are receivers of divine messages mediated to us through many means. None of those means is more persuasive than music, which the essayist and poet Joseph Addison, some three hundred years ago, described as "the greatest good that mortals know/ And all of heaven we have below."

As I already have indicated to you, I am not in any meaningful sense a musician. When I was younger, I sang a little and played the oboe badly. When I was a boy in India I learned how to beat rhythmically with my fingers on a set of drums called tablas. I can carry a tune and read music but the

instrument in my throat is untrained.

And yet I don't think being an amateur musician should disqualify me from thinking about the importance of music and even to speak to musicians about what music means to someone like me.

Music is both a team art and an individual art. The single notes that, together, form a chord find their parallel in the individual voices and instruments that, together, form an orchestra or a chorus. The whole, however, is greater than the sum of its parts.

If it all works right, what the audience hears is a coordinated, unified totality (even if the audience is hearing just one organ playing) in which all the singularities are subsumed by an organizing vision that sculpts the air in something like the way the composer imagined it when the work took form. And yet within that whole there is space for recognizing and even honoring the individual parts.

All of this became more clear to me a few years ago when I reluctantly agreed to a request from my church's music director that I be part of a choral group to perform, with orchestra, the Rutter requiem and a lovely work called "Te Deum" by Andrew Carter.

In our performance, there were several brief solos. In the Carter piece these almost plaintive but confessional words are offered with humility, but without accompaniment, by a soprano voice: "We believe that thou shalt come to be our Judge." And in the Rutter work a soprano solo, over the low humming of the orchestra, says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,

for they rest, for they rest, for they rest from their labors.”

With these solos there was no sense that someone had broken away from the whole of the chorus to freelance. Rather, the audience was given to understand that the soloist comes forward with the choir’s permission to speak a word on behalf of the unit. It is, I think, this feeling of integration, this fully realized fabric emerging from warp and woof that gives music some of its power.

And yet, in some ways, all art works that way. In great writing, not only is there content of thought to be grasped, but content mediated by the singularities of grammar and syntax and spelling and style and tone and on and on. And in painting we are given the entirety of a scene, but it comes through individual brush strokes and color and light and texture and fixative.

This kind of wholly consummated music finds the cycles humming deep inside our vulnerability and resonates with the essence of our beings. It can give us new spiritual eyes and let us see new possibilities or, at least, renew old, moribund possibilities.

The nineteenth-century essayist and critic Walter Pater understood the holistic nature of music when he wrote, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”

So I think what touches those of us who aren’t professional musicians but who fill the pews of faith communities is the fully woven condition that gives music the awesome ability to make our spirits both soar and weep.

I'm not suggesting that as musicians your task is to manipulate our emotions in an exploitive kind of way. Rather, I'm suggesting that you think anew about the power you're letting out of the bottle when you offer music to people in the pews.

I'm reminded of something that one of my favorite writers, Annie Dillard, once wrote when talking about God and people in church to worship God.

“On the whole,” she said in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, “I do not find Christians outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? . . . The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

I'm not suggesting that music is as powerful and awesome as God. But music does have strength, does have power, does have the ability to change our lives.

And I just want you to know tonight that people in the pews know that, expect that and look to you to help make that happen.

It's no easy responsibility and it cannot be done if you aren't listening to your audience. But it's crucial that the music you produce speak profoundly to our souls and spirits in ways that nothing else can.

I have no idea what my musician sister Karin would have told you tonight had you invited her instead of me. And I didn't ask her because, well, I was afraid she would tell me and I'd have to tear all of this up. Too late for that now. Thanks for listening.

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