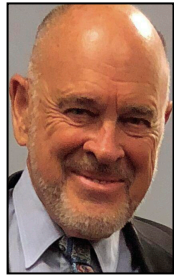


Music is essential to self-knowledge

I recently read an article on effective liberal arts education. It stressed the necessity of familiarity with the great books of literature to really know oneself.

I thought surely it cannot be only books. What about music? Isn't music more primal? I'm moved to comment, in words so inadequate for such a task, on what music



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means to me in a personal way. Who am I to add anything? On the other hand, perhaps I'm too immodest not to try.

In the season of Christmas every year, there is almost no greater exposure to stunning music.

Christmas carols are profound, melodic, awesome, plentiful — to the point that one's eyes tear up with their familiarity. That intimacy originates, I believe, from pre-memory childhood anticipation of Christmas and Santa Claus.

Rhythm and music are so ancient! They derive from the primitive roots of humankind. Is it innate? Older than that?

As a former resident of the Chesapeake Bay area, I am thoroughly familiar with the steady, pulsing rhythm of all-too-plentiful, summer, stinging jellyfish. That is how one of the earliest evolutionary embodiments

of multi-cellular life moves and feeds.

We progress to the lifetime rhythm of the heartbeat and breathing of higher animals. Even insects, which circulate air directly through their bodies rather than by a heart-pumping blood supply, must rhythmically breathe with their abdomens.

There is the slower rhythm of vegetation forced upon much of it by yearly seasonal changes.

Rhythm easily progresses to dance, singing and communing. Many participate together — not just one at a time as in reading a book, even one that's "essential" literature. Perhaps that's why music was not mentioned in the article I read — because it is inborn, unlike writing or reading.

Octaves of sound are innate because each higher octave is exactly twice the frequency of the previous one. Humans have divided octaves into steps from pentatonic (corresponding to the five black keys on a piano) to heptatonic, diatonic, chromatic; with whole steps, half steps, major and minor thrown in — pretty technical stuff! However, music does have readily understandable components of pitch, harmony, texture, tempo, sequence and volume.

Writing here as a participant in Western civilization, I'm used to strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion — all the brilliant sounds of an orchestra. Orchestral

ensembles date from the early 17th century. Who hasn't heard of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Brahms? Even the symphonic form could not contain Beethoven when he added voices and a chorus to the last movement of his ninth symphony. Camille Saint-Saëns did the same with an organ in his third symphony. Both make the heart race in windswept freedom of form into flight.

Think of the kinds of music: voice, chant, chorus, choir, solo instrument, chamber, concerto, orchestral, ballet, march, opera, operetta, musical theater, country, swing, barber shop, jazz, rock 'n roll, go-go, hip-hop. Sadly, with some modern music, I am unable to understand the words. But then, I can't understand the words to opera either! Yet I love it.

There is so much that flourishes with music. It is so constant in movies, for example, that an emphasis to action can be provided by its absence. Even silent movies were accompanied by a hired pianist in the local theater. Music is an intimate part of religious services. There are military bands and drums.

Music can be therapeutic. I have a granddaughter trained in that field. In her words, "We have utilized the power of music and combined it with modern medicine

because it is the most universal language among cultures." Music can restore a ravaged brain to near normalcy, even if only temporarily.



Percussionists (from left) Teshuan Poindexter, Stephon Bishop and Braydon Williamson rehearse with the Winston-Salem Prep middle school band as they prepare for their winter concert on Dec. 15.

It is a privilege that music is such an intimate and integral part of our lives. Composers live on in memory and performance to the point of immortality. Thanks to them for resolving what is innate within us into abiding memorability. Yes, just as familiarity with the great books of literature is essential to really know oneself, I believe musical appreciation is, also.

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