

**To Whom Do I Sing, and Why?**  
*Vocation as an Alternative to Self-Expression*

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In the creative arts, many assume that the motivation to sing or to dance, to paint a canvas or write a novel, is a highly personal one: that the artist creates entirely for herself, finding and following her own unique inner voice. According to this view, artists operate with the conviction that their talents set them apart; they work to integrate art-making with their personal stories and seek to make art in their own individual ways. This account echoes Oscar Wilde's claim that "art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known." Being an artist is thought to require developing one's own rules for life—as though ordinary civic and interpersonal responsibilities would impinge too excessively on one's ability to speak in the free and intensely emotional ways that only true visionaries can.

This conception of the artist may be something of a caricature; certainly, many truly successful artists take a far more down-to-earth approach to their work. Nevertheless, the Romantic ideal of self-expression has an intense pull on our imaginations; it permeates not only the public sphere, but also our schools of art and music. These views also reflect the broader individualistic tendencies that are woven throughout our culture. As such, they raise significant questions—not only about the vocations of artists and musicians, but about those other fields as well. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah coined the term *expressive individualism* to describe the notion that "each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized."<sup>1</sup> This pervasive cultural mindset was nicely encapsulated by Steve Jobs, who gave the following advice at Stanford University's 2005 commencement: "Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become."<sup>2</sup>

This raises some interesting questions for vocation. Can one be "called" by one's own voice? And what sort of call would this be? A call merely to express oneself, or perhaps to *transcend* oneself? Should we attend to our own inner voices to the exclusion of all

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<sup>1</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, with a new Preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 334.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Jobs, Stanford University commencement speech, 2005 <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/-june15/jobs-061505.html>

others, or might we be called to contribute our voices to a larger conversation? Unless we more carefully examine our assumptions about this “inner voice” and its drive for self-expression, the language of *vocation* can easily become little more than a way to justify one’s own desires—even if these are described less egoistically, as ways of developing and using one’s talents and gifts. For students in the arts, the problem is even more acute; our culture’s assumptions about creativity and self-expression can undermine the establishment of habits and attitudes that lead to a lasting and meaningful vocation.

Fortunately, educators and students can challenge such assumptions and re-align our thinking about the relationship between self-expression and vocation. When students understand that their primary motivation to study a particular field is to become part of the larger human project, they are more likely to aim for a vocation centered in enriching their fellow human beings. They learn to embrace their particular discipline, not because it produces ecstatic experiences or draws attention to themselves, but because it is one of the most human things they can do.

[and a bit from the body of the essay]

Is it possible to locate the point where appropriate musical expression (whether by the performer or listener) transgresses into self-indulgent self-expression? Performing “with expression” (for which we often use the word *musically*) involves adding inflection to certain notes in the same way that speakers use pitch, volume, and timing to clarify the intent of their words. It is hardly coincidental that a speaker’s pitch, volume, and timing are all musical elements; without them, human beings couldn’t communicate fully. We use music to shape the meaning and gravity of our words—which helps to explain why e-mail correspondence is so frequently misunderstood.

However, playing *emotionally* is considerably easier than playing *musically*. An emotional musician uses passionate feelings to create excitement; a musically expressive musician uses nuance and inflection to convey conviction. Emotions can be conjured, faked, overinflated; musicality, however, requires insight. The emotions are still in play, but emotions that arise organically from a response to the content of the musical gestures are far richer and have more lasting impact than those manufactured to impress an audience.

Audiences do not only love intense emotion; they typically expect it, even demand it. And this is not only true for the arts. Who would dare think of bringing an idea or product into any arena without strategically considering the audience’s emotional response? “What

mode of presentation will pack the biggest punch?” “Which single element should I emphasize to give me an edge over my competition?” “Once I have people’s attention, how will I keep it?” Such concerns are so ubiquitous that even people with exceptional musical insight can fall into playing the game. Consider Michael Tilson Thomas’s reflections on fellow conductor Leonard Bernstein:

*He felt that we wasn’t really doing his best unless he was swaying on the precipice of his endurance. Whether he was conducting Mahler or playing a Haydn trio it was the same; oceans of sweat, fluttering eyes, hyperactive athleticism. He’d get a bemused far-away look that seemed to gaze off beyond the horizon into the spirit of the music itself. ... Whatever he had to do to achieve it, maintain it, he did. The public loved it, understanding it was all part of the supreme sacrifice of himself he was making for them.*

How much of this is necessary? Can a musician execute an effective crescendo without oceans of sweat or hyperactive athleticism? Can someone shape a sweetly tender phrase without fluttering eyelids, or convey longing without a bemused far-away look? Although this description was meant as praise, it also implies that Bernstein’s stature was not a product of his extraordinary musical gifts alone; he freely employed a number of “show-biz” elements as well. By placing undo focus on whatever performers might do to elicit an emotional response from their audiences, might we be setting others up devalue the actual merit of the work? Have we created a culture of 2-year-olds opening presents at Christmas—more interested in the shiny wrapping paper than the contents of the box?

Is my work meaningful because I find it emotionally rewarding, or do I reap emotional rewards from committing to work that I already recognize as meaningful? Is my work meaningful because it lets me fulfil my ambitions, showcase my gifts, and indulge personal preferences? Or do I find personal fulfilment from committing to work that others will recognize as meaningful?

There is nothing inherently selfish about hoping for work that is emotionally rewarding and personally fulfilling, just as there is nothing necessarily inherently selfish with hoping for strong emotional experiences through music and the other arts. Much depends on how desperate we are to fulfil these desires, and what our craving might drive us to sacrifice or overlook. In this respect, people in any field are just as likely as a musician or other artist to lapse into self-indulgence and self-importance.

As an example, let me point to a personal temptation I face when I teach. If someone asks, “How did class go today?” I too easily base my response on how it felt to deliver the lecture or lead the discussion: how effortlessly and powerfully my words flowed,

whether I thought my own on-the-spot analogies were clever, whether the students appeared engaged and impressed. Experience has proven, however, that none of these emotional rewards indicate whether much actual learning occurred. When I focus too narrowly on these matters, I fail to focus on my vocation as a teacher—which includes the question of what my own audience is experiencing, and in particular, what they are learning. I, too, need to think about those to whom I sing—and why.