

To Whom Do I Sing, and Why?

Vocation as an Alternative to Self-Expression

David Fuentes

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."¹ 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."²

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 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

¹ 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. (It should be noted that Bellah was highly critical of this perspective.)

² Steve Jobs, Stanford University commencement speech, delivered June 12, 2005, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>

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.

This chapter will suggest how such a shift is possible, highlighting ways in which the language of vocation might offer alternatives to narrowly-focused accounts of self-expression. The chapter begins with a vignette that illustrates the degree to which students are already uncomfortable with the idea that self-expression provides an exhaustive account of their creative energies. A second section provides a deeper historical and cultural account of the dominance of self-expression as an artistic paradigm; this is followed by a section offering three strategies as viable alternatives. A concluding section offers another illustrative vignette, demonstrating the kind of thinking that students can do when they are released from standard cultural assumptions about self-expression.

Supply and Demand

On the first day of a gateway course for music majors and minors, I pose a question that my students rarely consider: “Why do people listen to music?” I list their responses on the whiteboard:

- because it’s fun
- to relax
- to intensify emotions
- to change emotions
- to express oneself
- to set a pace and attitude for exercise
- to feel connected with other people
- to block out bad thoughts

Now a new question: “Why do musicians make music?” I move over a few feet to start a new list:

- to make people happy
- because it feels right to do it
- to make money
- to express ourselves
- to use and develop my talent
- to connect with other musicians
- to glorify God
- to get attention

Now we’re ready for some fun: “Why don’t these two lists match?”
Silence.

I continue: “Should musicians adjust what we do based on what audiences hope for when they listen?” More silence. “Wouldn’t that put us in a better position to sell our products and services to potential customers?” At this point, a conversation breaks out. Though a few students hedge their bets by offering qualified agreement with this description, most try to build arguments that support the idea that music is about something more than emotional gratification—and that musicians are more than entertainers. Still, considering the two very different lists on the board, it’s a hard case to make. So I offer some help.

“What might we make of the fact that both lists mention self-expression? Isn’t it a bit strange for a *listener* to say that music helps her ‘express herself’? After all, she doesn’t make any sound (and may not even move her body) when she listens. How can just listening count as expression?” My students answer with no hesitation. “The music ‘says something’ that the listener can’t say on her own.”

“So music has meaning?”

“Of course.”

“Even when there are no lyrics?” A less energetic “of course. . . .”

“How about from a musician’s side of the equation? When you play or sing, are you expressing yourself, or something bigger than yourself?”

We spend some time prodding at the implications of both options. “When a singer-songwriter tells us about how he feels about a tumultuous breakup, is he expressing something bigger than himself?” “Does a musician express herself while she plays a Beethoven piano sonata? Whose emotions are conveyed: hers or Beethoven’s?” I remind the students that we’re not drawing conclusions just yet, that we’ll investigate these issues throughout the course. Still, this is something they want to talk about, especially when I ask: “Is it possible for artists to over- or under-express themselves when they perform? What might each extreme look like? And how might an audience react?” Answers are likely to include some variations on these themes:

If it’s not emotional enough, the audience will get bored.

The music needs to have that certain ‘spark.’

Your job is to knock the audience out; make them feel something.

You don’t just learn an instrument, you learn to play a crowd’s emotions.

I then ask, “How does a performer learn to create emotional intensity? By registering for ‘Knocking Out the Audience, 101?’” Polite chuckles.

One student responds, “The more control you have over your instrument, the more you can let your own emotions come through.”

So I ask, “What if they come through too strongly? Can a performer’s emotions overpower the ‘meaning’ of the music?” We have now returned to the point where the listeners are using music to help them express themselves.

Music has function; we “use” it as we drive, exercise, cook, and relax. But it also has meaning: music reveals, shapes, and affirms what people feel, experience, desire, and believe. Music not only helps us

feel; it helps us know. As Dr. Martin Luther King put it, “When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument.”³ In class, I use this quotation as a bridge to a final exercise.

“Martin Luther King was a preacher and a civil rights leader. Who else ought we to hear from in this course? What other experts might offer a unique perspective on why people listen to music?” There’s still room on the board for one more list:

filmmakers
conductors
songwriters
philosophers
kindergarten teachers
athletic trainers
psychologists

I then point out that “all the types of people you’ve just mentioned have a lot to say about what music *can* do; several will even offer ideas about what music *should* do.” And with a minute left, I wrap up. “I know this is just the first day of class, but let me tell you about your final paper. One question: What do you hope will happen when you walk on stage?”

In the several years I’ve taught this course, those final papers have never included a single mention of personal satisfaction or finding and expressing one’s own unique voice. Many students cringe at their (now former) craving for thunderous applause. Instead, they talk fervently about a newfound desire to perform in a way that helps others receive the many benefits of music they’ve discovered throughout the course.

³ Martin Luther King, “On the Importance of Jazz,” in “Opening Address” (Berlin Jazz Festival, WPFW News (Washington), 1964).

Another theme frequently pervades these final papers: students begin to think of their practice as *service*, rather than a means of self-improvement—a radical shift in a pervasive perspective.

Expression meets self-expression

For most of human cultural history, the arts have been understood to convey something immensely larger than the individual concerns of the artist who created or performed a particular work. It could stir the emotions, yes; but its greater aim was to awaken the mind and the soul to appreciate beauty, truth, and reason. Those who listened to music or viewed art only to indulge their emotions were deemed morally reckless and weak. In the case of music, its crowning glory was its ability to *tune the soul*; it captured, manifested, and instilled the selfsame order underlying the whole universe. Musicians saw themselves as humble craftsmen in service of a greater good. Broadly speaking, this way of thinking dominated music from Pythagoras through Mozart.

Since the nineteenth century, however, the dominant role of Romanticism has meant that music's ability to create intense emotional experiences has tended to overshadow its role in promoting order, beauty, and truth. Here, all fingers point at Beethoven, whose early compositions had followed in the classical practice of his immediate predecessors, Haydn and Mozart. Their music emphasized drama, frequently juxtaposing contrasting themes and moods within a single movement; this challenged listeners to follow the course of its main elements—chiefly melodic ideas, in various guises—in the same way that one might scramble to anticipate the fate of a protagonist when reading a novel. Always the innovator, Beethoven pushed every element of classicism much further, leading to an outcome that superseded what anyone might expect: more sudden emotional mood swings and more convoluted narratives.

The response of those listening to Beethoven's music frequently extended beyond mere feelings into what seem to be metaphysical experiences. While a passage by Haydn or Mozart might well capture an emotion that we recognize, Beethoven's music often seems to put us in touch with the unnamable—embodying suffering, joy, yearning, or awe, yet at the same time transcending any of these experiences. And this was no accident. Beethoven called music “the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends humanity but which humanity cannot comprehend.” As such, he believed that “music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. Music is the electrical soil in which the spirit lives, thinks and invents.”⁴

Starting with Beethoven, then, “the search for transcendence turned inward. Divinity was to be found in the spirit of man, not in a remote and theoretical cosmos. . . . This earthward shift resulted in a paradox: as the emphasis was transferred to the human scale, the human agent—the artist—came to be regarded as superhuman.”⁵ While we are unlikely to use the term “superhuman” for an artist today, we do expect one special gift: the ability to locate his or her own unique emotional or spiritual core, and to let it sing. In the same way, those who find resonance a particular artist's output often do so because it helps them find and express *their* own unique emotional or spiritual core. In this sense, a “great” artist is not necessarily a person who has

⁴ This quotation is attributed to Beethoven in, for example, Nat Shapiro, *An Encyclopedia of Quotations About Music* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 6–7. In its published form, it is actually a description of Beethoven's perspective by his friend Bettina von Armin (Brentano), in one of her letters to Goethe. See William Kinderman, *Beethoven* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 147.

⁵ Jamie James, *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe* (London, England: Abacus Books, 1993), 196.

astounding technical abilities; greatness belongs to those who can consistently create powerful emotional, transcendent experiences.

Strong emotional experiences

The issue of transcendent experiences brings us back to an earlier question: “Does music express something bigger than myself?” Here, we ought to mark a difference between “*communicating* about something bigger than myself” (addressing concerns that we all share), and “*creating* the sense that I can connect with something bigger than myself” (that is, some profoundly overwhelming “force”). This second sense of expression has been explored in a study done over several decades that records over 500 accounts of so-called “strong experiences with music” (SEMs)⁶. These are instances when listening to or making music resulted in weeping or euphoria, sensations of flying, dizziness, light, or inner warmth, physical and psychic healing, convincing experiences of leaving one’s body, and (in two participants) the feeling of being “wrung out like a dishcloth.”

I, too, have had strong experiences with music, though I must admit I don’t know how to re-create them within myself—nor teach my students how to produce them when performing. But the very terminology has implications that should concern us: many people believe that unless they have an SEM, they are not truly experiencing music in all its fullness. But if we expect every musical encounter to register a maximum reading on the emotion meter, we not only set ourselves up for frequent disappointment; we also likely reduce, rather than strengthen, our encounter with music. Too exclusive a focus on the emotions disregards the capacity of a work of art to grant comfort, inspire perseverance, affirm certain virtues, and awaken new perspectives on the human condition. Perhaps even more tragic is that this

emphasis on personal artistic experience—using art to retreat into one’s own very private world of thoughts and moods—has, for many people, practically replaced its traditional (and far richer) role of drawing us *together*.

Wowing the audience

Is it possible to locate the point where appropriate musical expression (whether by the performer or listener) transgresses into 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

⁶ Alf Gabrielsson, *Strong Experiences with Music* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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 "showbiz" 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?

Self-expression beyond the arts

The arts are not the only place where strong emotional experiences can forge a connection to "unnamable" domains. People in any field are apt to say that they find a strong sense of purpose, identity, and meaning from their work. When we look closer, though, we will often find that these results depend less on the work itself than the emotions that are associated with it. Recognizing an inherent relationship between work, personal fulfilment, and emotional rewards, we should

also recognize that the various ways we might prioritize these elements will lead to very different approaches to vocational reflection and discernment.

What if we were to think of vocation as that Christmas present wrapped in shiny paper? It might be quite appealing in present (wrapped) state, but at another level, we know that its essence lies underneath the packaging. We might ask ourselves what part of this package gets us most excited. Is it the work that I will be doing, or the personal fulfilment and emotional rewards I derive from doing it? Is it the possible benefits of my vocation for others, or is it the excitement of bringing my gifts into the public arena? These questions raise additional issues in turn. 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.

Alternatives to self-expression

Once my students become aware of the characteristics of self-expression that I have just described, they seem appalled by their own tendencies to indulge it—though to be fair, they feel trapped by a culture that touts passion and authenticity among its highest virtues. “How can I ever hope to move an audience if I don’t throw everything I have into every performance?” “Why should I become a musician if I don’t have something original to say?” In the rest of this chapter, I want to examine specific approaches to recalibrating purpose and value in ways that dependably lead to a richer and more nuanced manner of expression for both performer and audience. Though the focus is on the role of intuition and imagination in musical performance, I believe that the types of reorientation advocated here can have implications throughout the disciplines and applied fields.

Reclaiming meaning and interpretation

The most important issue in resisting self-indulgence is that we redirect our focus from the musician’s persona to the content of the music itself. By “the music itself,” I mean that musical notes “do” something; that all the various ways that they might move (or linger) have meaning and significance to us human beings—such that we somehow “get” what each musical gesture is “about.” In saying this, I recognize that this notion is not universally accepted. For example, many are persuaded by arguments that music can have no commonly-understood meaning (or even that music has nothing like meaning at all). But advertisers and filmmakers know otherwise; they can use music to con-

vey powerful impressions about identity, convictions, fears, and dreams in fractions of a second—a skill that helps them to make billions of dollars each year.

For teachers, the trick is finding ways to talk about musical meaning so that it becomes apprehensible to the performer (and for that matter, to the audience as well). The most effective approaches recognize that music is not so much a language of clear thoughts as it is one of multi-layered impressions. Of the several approaches that I use in various courses (whether for musicians or non-musicians), I have found one—“cause and effect”—that is particularly helpful; it provides specific goals, engages the imagination, and opens up clear options for interpretation. It also has the advantage of being fairly simple; it involves pointing out that music isn’t magic. Every time we notice an effect, we can also find a cause—something in the way that the melody hesitates, or the bass thumps, or the harmonies lean.

Consider a recent cause-and-effect session for “The Rain Song,” by Led Zeppelin. As usual, I began with a broad question: “What mood does the introduction set?” Not surprisingly, the first response was, “I feel raindrops.”

So I ask, “Is that because of the title, or something in the music?”

Another student offers, “The cascading opening chord, plus several that come later, seem to spill like rain.” Then I play the first bit of the song again. “Did anything seem different this time?” Another student, “I could really hear what Lisa described.” Aaron—always engaged, but having established permanent residence at the back of the room—says, “It reminds me of my first girlfriend.” (I once forbade all personal associations, but then I discovered that many of them can actually stem from elements in the music. The rule in cause and effect is that nothing is out of line, so long as the student can explain how the music creates the impression that he or she describes—and do so in a way that others can experience the connection, too.) Aaron responded, “The way the

syncopated part seems to swirl reminds me of the way my first girlfriend used to sway and spin in slow motion when she danced.”

I use Aaron’s description to point out that so many of music’s gestures not only emulate, but actually embody, physical movements (like walking, leaping, reaching) or physical sensations (like our breathing or heartbeat). So I teach the students another helpful question—“Where do you feel the music in your body?”—which not only keeps cause and effect from turning into a mere a mental exercise, but also teaches the students to listen with all of their senses.

As students continue to contribute observations, I discourage them from trying to sew the various ideas into a story; any story we invent will railroad the more intuitive course that the music is likely to take on its own. Actually, the various gestures and impressions within one piece of music tend to be assembled (by the listener) as though they were impressions in a dream; lingering with them in that way is better than trying to tie everything up into a neat package. The goal is not to figure everything out once and for all, but to discern possible meanings and implications. The impressions we collect during a cause-and-effect exercise—mental, physical, emotional—don’t uncover the literal meaning of the music, but they do allow us to get to something even more important. Music operates on (at least) two levels: it has overt meaning, conveyed by lyrics, a title, or association with images; and it also has covert meaning, conveyed through gestures, tone, and rhythm. This is what I referred to earlier when I suggested that music conveys the meaning of our words—the ways we read each other, and the basis of our responses to each other.

In courses for musicians, I ask the students how they might perform the elements of “The Rain Song” they have identified. “What might you do to make the cascading chord seem to ‘splash’ more?” “How might you shape each subsequent chord a bit differently?” “How could you use tempo to give the syncopated chords a wider spin? A

more inward-directed sense of spinning?” As the students share their ideas for all these questions, they can’t sit still. Their arms, bodies, and faces are moving—acting out the music.

Restoring context

Many reputable musicians have recognized a dangerous tendency to sequester music into various silos—academic, highbrow, artistic, niche—rather than considering its broader and more vital roles across all of human culture. We can also become so fixated on the technical aspects of the art form—the “how to” elements that are, of course, a part of every field and discipline—that we can lose track of its wider significance. A helpful guide here is the composer Elliott Carter, whose extraordinarily long career⁷ benefitted from his deep roots in other fields—mathematics, physics, philosophy, and Greek. He taught all of these subjects just before World War II, when he wrote that

*music departments are too often staffed by professionals with little capacity to see their subject in a broader light than the teaching of special technical demands ... The thoughtful student who is no virtuoso finds little to his taste in a department that teaches skill without an appeal to reason, that attempts to demonstrate many styles but fails to take up the basic question of style itself, of philosophic and historic meaning. The purely practical approach is largely responsible for the low estate to which music, as a vital part of our intellectual equipment, has fallen.*⁸

⁷ Elliott Carter continued composing until just before his death at 104. In energy alone, the oeuvre of the last decade of his life rivals that of composers in their 20s or 30s. The solo piano work “Catenaries” is a case in point. When I play it for students, they have a hard time believing that it was composed by a man in his 90s!

⁸ Elliott Carter, *Elliott Carter: Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937–1995*, ed. Jonathan W. Bernard (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1997).

Carter's objection here is in agreement with others have said when recognizing a shortcoming of professional training: "trained persons are taught how to do something; educated persons also know why they do it."⁹ This "why" element was addressed by Henry Fogel, Dean of the Chicago College of Performing Arts, when he spoke at the 2009 National Association of Schools of Music Annual Meeting:

*The tired old cliché that the music we believe in is universal, and that it has transformative powers on human beings, is a tired old cliché because it is true. But too few of the people who actually perform that music understand the cultural and social context in which they are currently functioning, and thus do not think about much beyond the art of performing the music. . . some schools of music are definitely beginning to address some of these issues. However, I think they are in the minority and those efforts are still in their relative infancy.*¹⁰

Fogel's ideas are picked up in the keynote address at the 2010 National Meeting of the College Music Society, given by board member David Myers, chair of the music department at the University of Minnesota.

I would submit that the greater cause is our shared conviction in the value that music may bring to the universal condition of being human, to being in relationship with one another in an increasingly diverse and too frequently polarized world, and for encouraging creative, intuitive and empathic understanding in a global and interdependent society. In the words of novelist and painter Henry Miller, "Art is only a means to the life more abundant. It is not in itself the life more abundant. It

*merely points the way, something which is often overlooked by the artist. . . . In becoming an end, [art] defeats itself."*¹¹

Myers, Fogel, and Carter recognize that educators can do a far better job helping students establish a foundation of understanding and depth that will inform and direct their burgeoning technical abilities. In most circumstances, this won't require changing the curriculum programs, since most disciplines and applied fields include coursework in the history and methodology of the enterprise; most students also take general education courses in other academic departments and programs. Nevertheless, achieving this goal will require more intentional effort on every instructor's part to help students see the relevance of classroom courses—not only on their field as a whole, but more importantly, on the larger human culture within which they serve. Posing an open-ended question can prompts students to make such connections themselves. For example, "How does this piece of music open you up to something bigger than the feelings you get while listening to it or playing it?" Here are avenues down which such an approach might lead.

What might a love song, a dirge, or a call to battle teach about what it means to be a fallible yet responsible member of our human society? (Songs challenge us to know about and understand not only our neighbor, but people from other times and other cultures.) What are some of the experiences, desires, and convictions present in this piece? How are they complimentary, and how do they contradict? (Learning how others have tried to make ethical, spiritual, and intellectual sense of the world challenges us to reconsider our own perspectives and assumptions.) Which convictions are embodied in this

⁹ William F. May, *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Henry Fogel, "Keynote Address to the National Association of Schools of Music, November 2009," November 2009.

¹¹ David Myers, "Music and the Public Good," *College Music Symposium*, September 24, 2010, http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com_music-and-the-public-good-can-higher-education-fulfill-the-challenges-and-opportunities-privileges-and-responsibilities-of-the-21st-century?

music? (Through demonstrating the nature and significance of reason, wisdom, courage, patience, and compassion, the humanities also foster these virtues.) How are the overt claims made through the lyrics reinforced or contradicted by the covert suggestions made through the music? (To fully understand anything requires that we weigh evidence skeptically, remembering that there is always more than one side to every issue.)

Questions like these can help students recognize the rich, significant voice that their own field of study might contribute to intellectual work across the disciplines—an aspect of vocation that is frequently undervalued or neglected entirely. Here, it is both illuminating and motivating to point out the unique role that students' creative work might play in awakening intuition, which is so essential in approaching the many important questions we face. This connection has been noted by many observers—including Albert Einstein, who commented that “If what is seen and experienced is portrayed in the language of logic, then it is science. If it is communicated through forms whose constructions are not accessible to the conscious mind but are recognized intuitively, then it is art.”¹² As one specific instance among many, Einstein once eagerly told Shinichi Suzuki, the inventor of the Suzuki method of music education, that “the theory of relativity . . . occurred to me by intuition, and music was the driving force behind that intuition. . . . My discovery was the result of musical perception.”¹³

If the arts can help people grasp constructions that are not accessible to the conscious mind, it should be clear why so many people recognize their “spiritual” dimension. This need not involve a claim

that the arts themselves exert supernatural power. For example, theologian Stephen Guthrie reminds us of the surprising role that spirituality plays in reviving the senses:

In music, painting, and the other arts, our senses are engaged and enlarged, our physical experience both refined and broadened. We attend carefully to both the world and to our own physical experience of it. We gain practice in those very capacities that together indicate life and health—sight, hearing, attention, and responsiveness to touch. We become, in a very real sense, more fully embodied, more fully incarnate. In this regard, the arts mirror the work of the Spirit. The Spirit's work is to make us responsive. Conversely, those who are spiritually dead have quite literally lost their senses. The biblical descriptions of their conditions are a litany of sensory deprivation. . . . They are blind, deaf, and mute (Isa. 43:8); eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear (Ezek. 12:2; Mark 8:18); they have become calloused (Matt. 13:15), hardened in their hearts, and have lost all sensitivity (Eph. 4:18-19).¹⁴

When artists embrace these issues, they can we ignite their audiences' imaginations in ways that help them engage more responsibly with the art that is created for them and with the issues it raises.

Evoking this level of engagement in the audience is an indispensable aspect of the artist's vocation. Focusing on excellent technique alone will never achieve this—not even when combined with excellent expressivity. Here, we might do well to question our enthusiasm for the word *excellence*—a word which appears prominently in the majority of mission statements for arts departments across the country. Excellence is a power word, granting authority to those who achieved some (arbitrarily-defined) mark of technical ability, and display those

¹² Albert Einstein, *Menschen* 4, (January 1921), letter to the editor. Cited in *The Expanded Quotable Einstein*, ed. Alice Calaprice (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 271.

¹³ Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love: A New Approach to Education*, trans. Waltrud Suzuki (New York, New York: Exposition Press, 1969), 90.

¹⁴ Stephen Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Michigan, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2011), 69–70.

abilities in emotionally impressive ways. As an alternative, why not consider a word like *faithfulness*, which is a call to service?

Responding to the material

Finally, I want to suggest that whatever we offer to others through our vocations—whether tangible or otherwise—is ultimately a very material offering. Particularly in the arts, but in other fields as well, it is very tempting to think of our offerings as mysterious, esoteric, and not really by the limits of the material world. This, too, is part of the legacy of Romanticism. As John Freeman notes,

*Romanticized ideas of the artist's otherness, of art arising out of inspirational leaps taken by the innately creative, remain common currency in our general (in)comprehension of the creative process. As well as providing a somewhat misleading idea of art making, they fuel the belief that creativity is beyond analysis; that the ways of making art are instinctive rather than reflective, and that its processes should remain shrouded in secrecy.*¹⁵

Escaping from this shroud of secrecy is difficult, but it can be done. When Chilean poet Pablo Neruda describes his art making, he likens it to the very *material* mystery of ironing laundry. His first images come out of the washing tub, “wrinkled, all in a heap.” They must be wrestled onto the ironing board, where “the hands keep moving, moving, / smoothing out the sacred surfaces.” That, he tells us, “is how things are accomplished.”¹⁶

¹⁵ John Freeman, “First Insights Fostering Creativity in University Performance,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 96.

¹⁶ Pablo Neruda, *Fully Empowered*, trans. Alastair Reid, 1st edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 37. [English translation of *Plenos Poderes*, 1962]

This is not an exercise in false humility. The ordinary, everyday elements of any artist’s work, like that of someone who washes clothes, requires extricating elements from the swirling, chaotic foam of the cosmos. These must be wrung out, stretched, ironed, and formed into something that can be deemed “good.” Perhaps the composer happens upon a bit of material that catches her fancy—a chord, a rhythm, or a snippet of melody. In the rough, the material has good potential, but it is undeveloped; it needs shaping, smoothing, stretching, trimming, and just the right placement. So the composer responds to it and forms it until it feels “exactly right.” She “knows”—*senses*—when it pops into place—when it sounds “in tune.”

When something is truly in tune, it can’t be made more in tune; any change will knock it out of tune again. Once the creator of the piece is satisfied, she passes it off to a performer—for whom, on first encounter, it may well again feel “wrinkled, all in a heap.” So the performer too must practice it, respond to it—making adjustments in this riff, in that crescendo, until the music feels “in tune” to him as well. The audience responds, resonating with the order that the performer has found in the music.

As we attend to the material and bring it in tune, we are making “faith statements”—intuitive ones—about our sense of what the world is supposed to be like. We might not recognize this every time you hear a lullaby or an advertising jingle, but it does occur; moreover, our calibration of what makes something “in tune” is shaped by a multitude of factors. Some can be identified: our own formation and training, various personal experiences, and a rich, complex stew of cultural influences. But other shaping forces are more ephemeral—including the unnamable desires, fears, convictions and delights that are more easily captured by gestures than by words. We not only strive to bring out work “in tune”; we actually groan, responding, as St. Paul suggests, in chorus with the ongoing, noisy song of creation.

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption into freedom and glory that belongs to God's children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, we who have a sense of his Spirit inside us groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as his own children, which means that our bodies will be made free. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what or how to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. [Romans 8.21-23; 26]

Musicians and other artists are often singled out for their ability to look at a broken, disheveled world, to reimagine it without wrinkles, and to craft a song or painting that makes hope and freedom tangible for the rest of us. But what Paul indicates in this passage is that this motivation is not limited to one particular field or vocation; it is just as true for the plumber and the professor as it is for the potter and the police officer. We all groan, first as we become aware of everything that needs our attention, then as we use our unique gifts, training, and intuition to unearth and bring forth that which is innate, possible, and best. This requires action on our parts, but it also requires resisting the temptation to impose our own will onto the material or situation at hand.

Our calling, then, is the discovery and articulation of order. Consider what might happen if we were to broaden the notion of responsive work beyond the scope of music into the arts more generally, and indeed to every field in which something is created or done for others: songs or sculptures, knowledge or skills, products or services. The shared space between performer and audience has parallels with other shared spaces: between worker and customer, teacher and student, researcher and research community. Starting with a deeply-instilled sense of the human value and purpose of the work we do, we use talent and training to respond meaningfully to the materials at hand—not

abstractly or in ways that serve our egos or emotional needs—but in ways that also respond to the true needs of our neighbor. This can take place through a concise mathematical equation or a foolproof recipe for peanut brittle, a multifaceted high school production of Hamlet, an elegant earthquake-resistant suspension bridge; or a peaceably-monitored protest rally.

Responsive work, then, rightly done and rightly directed, liberates both the worker and those whom the work serves. And if we began to name and explore all the ways that our work moves and awakens us and others as we offer it, I submit that this would not only inspire us to reimagine why we do whatever we do; it could radically reorient our vision of vocation.

Connecting our performances with our audiences

In a sense, we've come full circle. This essay began by describing the artist's work as an intense expression of thoughts and experiences, and it may seem that we're in a similar situation once again. But there is a clear difference, and it revolves around motivation. To the extent that making art centers on the person making it, it becomes a means of gratifying the artist's emotional or egotistic needs. In contrast, art that remains centered on the material at hand opens space for the audience to "delight in," "work out," "ponder," or "bemoan" the many experiences, desires, and convictions that we all share. We also found that self-expressive art is likely to aim for emotional intensity rather than emotional depth. Artists easily create the "wow" factor by appealing directly to the audience's emotions through exaggerated displays of passion or by using manipulative, self-adulating theatrical tricks. In contrast, the thoughts and feelings that arise from encountering the actual content of a work of art prompt insight, contemplation, empathy, resolve, and more. Here, the role of education is integral, as teachers can demonstrate methods for exploring content (as we saw

with the “cause and effect” exercise), and engender habits of reflection and engagement that connect art and music to the larger concerns they embody. And how does this embodiment occur? The ways that the artist brings the basic materials of her craft into order betray her deepest intuitions about everything that is right and wrong in our world. In this sense, the utterly material work of the artist is at the same time deeply spiritual. And the selfsame impulses for order making motivate all manner of responsive work across the trades and disciplines.

The true significance of an artist’s work, then, doesn’t originate from within the artist herself, but in that its substance draws from experiences and concerns common to us all, concerns we share. In this way, our struggle is not a struggle to express ourselves so much as it is a struggle for light. And the more faithfully we groan or exult as we sing or make art, the more readily our audiences will recognize their own voices in ours, and the freedom in our notes might liberate our neighbor, as well.

With this in mind, I’ll close with another exercise from my music course designed to get at some of these very things. I invite students to compare ten versions (“covers”) of “Over the Rainbow.” We start with Judy Garland’s original rendition from *The Wizard of Oz*. Students describe her performance as melancholy, dreamy, resigned. When I ask which musical features might produce these impressions, they point to Garland’s lazy rubato, her subdued tone, the smooth sound of the swing orchestra, and the bouncy but somewhat lazy pattern in the bass. I take notes on the board, and tell the students that they’re free to revise or add more comments after hearing other versions.

Next, a gypsy jazz rendition, much faster, with a highly-ornamented variation of the melody tune and a sunny, energetic guitar accompaniment. Here, students frequently mention an urge to dance (or at least engage in vigorous foot tapping). I follow this with a much

more drawn out version by Plácido Domingo. The introduction itself takes over a minute, and is more serene than either of the earlier versions (placid, as one punster once added). But as soon as the voice enters, we’re more amazed than moved. Such perfection! Students categorize it as “so perfect that it’s hard to believe that he’s longing for a better life.”

Then I play a version by Bob Schneider; no orchestra this time, just an acoustic guitar and a raw, gravelly baritone. His voice cracks and strains to hit notes; sustain seems out of the question. This version evinces little energy (except in brief bursts) and no reverb. Yet there’s something utterly compelling here. I’ve done this presentation now well over a dozen times, and the student’s reactions to this version always run the same way. They picture a father, broken and world-worn, singing to his child. Here, the song’s central message—dreaming for a better life—is not the personal experience of the singer, but his hope for his child. In other words, Schneider’s singing is so much more than an autonomous experience. This isn’t singing for the pure self-satisfaction of singing.

After hearing this version, I ask the students why they didn’t think of the audience in the previous versions. They have a hard time answering, but when pressed, can imagine the setting of each of the performances, though the musicians don’t seem to have the same sort of connection with their audiences. And then a few more covers. Tori Amos is next. Her voice also cracks and strains, though students don’t buy it; most say that it’s completely manufactured, an attempt to seem emotionally vulnerable. Then the jazz piano virtuoso Art Tatum. Here students are torn: while they marvel at his technique, they’re baffled (some are angry) as to why he obliterates the meaning of the song. A short discussion about “showing off” ensues: students recognize that fast fingers, perfect vocal technique, and heart-wrenching feelings can either serve the music or the performer’s ego. Sometimes the discus-

sion goes even further, with students outlining conditions where showcasing talent is most and least appropriate.

I'll admit that, the first time I gave this presentation, I was surprised that students were willing to take such strong positions on what was effective—faithful to the true meaning of the song—and what wasn't. Our culture tends to expect uncritical acceptance of others' musical tastes and practices; anything that even lightly smacks of judgment is considered a despicable vice. But given the right opportunity—in this case, side-by-side comparisons—students will enthusiastically argue that style and technique aren't subjective. They either communicate or obfuscate something essential—something we all need to hear. And it turns out that this is what they, too, want to happen when they walk on stage.