



PERSONAL VIEW

Music and life

Barry Smith

During more than 40 years as a professional musician, largely involved in performing and teaching, a number of things about the art of making music have constantly fascinated and intrigued me. I would like to share some aspects of my art that I feel have a distinct resonance in many aspects of daily life.

The first idea I want to put before you is the one of music as the ultimate 'throw-away' art. One of the most frustrating things about being a performing musician is the fact that as an art, music exists in time. You can look at a piece of music on paper but what, in fact, is it? Merely a collection of symbols, dots on lines and in spaces. Hours and hours of sheer slog and hard work go into the mastering of a musical instrument. Hours of preparation, often on the part of many people, go into the making of one performance, and then in one go it is all over, gone, disappeared into the air, finished. The only way it can be recaptured is by starting at the very beginning and doing it all over again. This is the thing that a musician has to learn to live with, and I would like to suggest that we should see every task we do, however ordinary, in this same light. We get only one chance for each thing we do and that we have to do to the very best of our ability – very often we do not get another chance. In a musical performance there is no possibility of going back to correct things, one has to do it perfectly the first time, like a surgeon performing a delicate life-saving operation or a pilot bringing in a crowded 747 to land on a dark, foggy night.

Once begun, the performance of a piece of music must go on, it is constantly moving forward to an unyielding pulse. One cannot stop and correct mistakes already made, one can only try not to make them again. We must learn to improve all the time, to do better as a result of our mistakes and situations mishandled. It is no use worrying about what we have done wrong – we can't change it, however much we turn it over in our minds. We must also not worry too much about the future.

Born in Port Elizabeth, Barry Smith was educated in South Africa and England. For over forty years he has been organist of St George's Cathedral in Cape Town. Honoured with fellowships of both the Royal School of Church Music and the Guild of Church Musicians, he was made a member of the Order of Simon of Cyrene, the highest honour the Anglican Church in South Africa can bestow, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1989. He has given recitals, conducted and judged competitions in Britain, America, Austria, Australia, Israel and Hong Kong. He is also the author and editor of a number of books on the English composer, Peter Warlock.

Of course, we must be aware of what is coming, but it mustn't be first and foremost in our minds. Remember, often that which we worry about never actually happens – what we must do in life, as in the musical performance, is to live in the 'here and now', to concentrate on what we are doing at this very moment in time (as the saying goes) and then do it to the very best of our gifts and ability.

One piece of advice I was once given when I was going through a rough patch was: 'When you look in the mirror, you must be able to say: "I'm glad I'm me"'. Not wishing to be better-looking, taller, shorter, younger, older, more intelligent, wealthier, whatever – we must learn to accept what we are – that is the starting point to improve one's self. That, of course, is what performing is all about. You take a piece of music – the notes are all set out for you – you may not change them – the marks of expression (which tell you how to play the piece) are all there – the 'louds', the 'softs' – the composer has marked them all clearly in the score for you. All you can do is be absolutely faithful to what you have been given, to convey to the listeners an honest account of what you have set out to perform, to use that as a point of reference and then to go on to create something beautiful, something memorable.

Harmony in music

The second idea I want to talk about is that of harmony. This is one of the most vital elements of music. A melody has only half a life until it harmonises perfectly with another or several other melodies. So in our life we need to form harmonious relationships with others, we need to discover how the lonely (often sad) melody that is our self can best interact with others to be heard to its greatest advantage. Sure, there will at times be discord, in life just as in music. But every great composer learns how to resolve this discord so that the music becomes the greater for the resolving.

It is the same with rhythm in music. It must fit perfectly in its place and context, both on its own and against other melodies and other rhythms. When this does not happen we often talk of being 'out of rhythm', 'out of sync'. As with harmony, so with rhythm – we have to fit in with our fellow beings to ensure the smooth and rhythmic running of this group thing in which we shall be participating for the rest of our lives.

But you know, the thing that has always fascinated me most about music is its distinct relationship to science. Music is, in



fact, the most scientific of the arts, yet at the same time it is the most unscientific. Just look at the following facts for a moment. First of all, we have an extremely precise system of putting dots on lines or in spaces which tells us the exact pitches of notes – which can be scientifically stated as, for example, A = 440 vibrations per second. Then, secondly, we can indicate the exact duration of a note in time by the way we write one of these dots on a line or in a space. Tempo can be indicated by an exact metronome mark at the beginning of the piece or at any point where the composer wants to speed up or slow down the music. We can assign these pitches and these rhythms to a multitude of independent melodies and to a variety of different instruments or human voices, and yet no two performances of the same work will ever sound exactly the same even if immediately repeated by the same performers. It is the all-important human element that turns vibrations and number of beats per second into something more than just another science and which, in the process, becomes an art capturing the passion of human emotions. It is the living soul that the performer adds to the science of sound and rhythm. Surely this is a vital element that we should bring into all our dealings in our lives, with all our fellow human beings.

Music in time

The other thing that particularly fascinates me is the fact that music as an art exists in time – it is contained in the fourth dimension, the one dimension which all the other art forms lack. A piece of music lasts for a fixed period of time, be it 2 minutes or 2 hours. We actually grow older during the piece we perform – you are not the same person who began the performance, you are that much older (and hopefully wiser) at the end of it all. As T S Eliot so eloquently expresses it in his *Four Quartets*:

Fare forward travelers! . . .
 You are not the same people who left that station
 Or who will arrive at any terminus . . .
 Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging
 You are not those who saw the harbour
 Receding, or those who will disembark . . .
 Fare forward, O voyagers, O seamen.
 . . . Not farewell,
 but fare forward, voyagers.

Just as in the journey of life one has learnt from one's mistakes, things not well done, and also, hopefully, things well done. T S Eliot again:

. . . the rending pain of re-enactment
 Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
 Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
 Of things ill done and done to other's harm
 Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

A musical performance is a kind of mini-version of life itself, full of anxieties, sometimes anguish, excitement, exhilaration, a

constant need for concentration and 'togetherness', for being in control, on top of the work one is performing and, finally, the satisfaction of feeling something done to the best of one's ability.

You know, there is something else I love and that awes me about music especially – the fact that you actually own it while you are performing it. You can look at the great works of art, Leonardo's legendary painting of the 'Mona Lisa', Michelangelo's magnificent statue of David, the great temples of Egypt and Greece or the Gothic cathedrals of Europe – but they are never yours, even for one millisecond. But when you perform a piece of music, it is yours for that performance, for the precious moments that you are privileged to perform it. As Eliot succinctly says: 'You are the music while the music lasts.' Isn't that a wonderful thought that should humble us all, especially those who are musicians?

In the end, however, all that is left to hope for is that one's performance may have touched a listener in such a way that his or her life is a little better for that touching. It is as simple, it is as much of a gamble, as that. Maybe in a way that is what life itself is all about. Maybe, too, in the performing one can come out of it all a better person oneself. That is the gamble, that is the ultimate reward of the performing musician. You see there is absolutely no room for dishonesty in music making. It strips you down to your bedrock personality. All you can do is to be entirely faithful to the notes that the composer has left on the page in front of you as you perform – a re-creation, in fact, for all the composer has left us are the mere symbols – a number of black dots on lines or in spaces.

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In a performance of, say, Handel's *Messiah*, the great 'Hallelujah' chorus, you may have close to two or three hundred performers all concentrating on something inestimably great and good – no other thoughts are in their minds at that time but that of doing their best and giving of their very utmost to create something perfect for themselves and for those listening. All the many hours of study and preparation are crystallised into the burning moment of creation, of performance. What a power for good, what a wonderful place this world could be if that intensity of goodness could flow from the concert halls of the world and engulf all the crime and violence and all the horrors of man's inhumanity to man. Not for nothing did the great 16th century composer William Byrd say, 'Since singing is so good a thing, I wish all men would learn to sing', although I am sure if he were alive today he would have made the necessary adjustment for the sake of political correctness! Or as Oscar Wilde wrote of artists, although tinged with his particular brand of cynicism: 'We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.'

Not all are destined to be artists, not professionally at any rate, but we can all listen to great music, read great books or poetry, and look at wonderful paintings, statues, and buildings. But if there is one thought I can leave with you, it is the lesson that music has for all of us – it is a very mysterious, powerful medium – there is nothing as overwhelming as torrents of music flooding across an audience – in its way it is one of the things that gives us a glimpse of something greater than ourselves, the vision of a better life – for some it is the voice of God – at least, something to point us in the right direction – even if we don't really know or understand where we are going. It is a vision greater than the composer, greater than the performer and greater than the listener – a microcosm of this mysterious universe where we all hope our private hopes and dream our private dreams.