

What is Musicality?

By Dennis Winge

Often times with my students, I tell them to slow down a particular piece of music so they can play it smoothly, accurately, and in a relaxed manner. I encourage them to look at the piece as a piece of music rather than an exercise to be gotten through. What does it really mean to play a piece musically? Many years ago, I got a review in which the reviewer wrote something to the effect of, "the end result is always very musical." I knew this to be a compliment, but the cynical side of me couldn't help but wonder if there was an overall dislike of what he heard and he didn't know what else to say other than the fact that it was musical. But in reality, I don't think that was the case at all. I appreciated the compliment.

The following is not meant as a be all end all definition of what musicality means. It is simply a tool by which you can further reflect on your own, or discuss with another, the nature of what it means to be musical.

Emotional

The primary function of music is to communicate, so when you play pre-existing music or create your own, ask yourself what is the primary emotion that is attempting to be expressed. Recently, I asked a student who was playing the pieces I gave her as exercises and not as pieces of music to come up with an image to portray a feeling that she thought the pieces were trying to convey. I thought it was very interesting that she came up with, for the first piece, a plant growing in a garden. Because she had this image in her mind, she instinctively played with better dynamics, making some parts of the piece stronger than others. In a different piece, she saw a ballerina, and having that image in her head as she played, she was much better able to follow the rests in a piece, especially when I pointed out the ballerina might run out of breath or perhaps even break a limb if she wasn't allowed to rest in between sequences. I'm no expert in the art of dance or ballet, but I would guess that the audience would also appreciate a clear beginning middle and end to each sequence, just like phrases in music.

Relaxed

When a piece of music is played in a relaxed manner, the listener forgets about the musician and is engulfed in the music itself. This isn't suggesting that music that is more laid back than aggressive or energetic music is any better. None of this is suggesting that any one particular style of music would be more musical than another. It simply refers to the fact that the listener should be engulfed in the music, so that if the performer is for any reason either not relaxed, or trying too hard, or overly pretentious, then that can take away from the musicality.

Flowing

I use this word to suggest that the musician play in time, but not necessarily metronomically. The other day I was on hold on the telephone listening to the piano music that that company had chosen for the on-hold music. I remarked to my wife that I could tell the piece was computer generated, because the time feel was extremely strict. It simply didn't sound like a human was playing it. Modern technology even allows us to quantize music so that it takes on a degree of human interpretation, but in the end, no technology will ever replace a master musician in terms of feel. Perhaps the word feel is even more appropriate than the word flowing. And surely, rhythm is the most important element in music, even when a piece is arrhythmic or rubato, which means freely, that is still a rhythm. Most students first need to learn to play the notes in time strictly, and then, and only then, they should also try to keep the notes flowing in the rhythmic manner intended, but not at the sacrifice of conveying emotion.

Another aspect of musicality is dynamics. Contrast is everything in our world. We live in a dualistic reality such that we are bound to like and dislike certain things. Our breath rises and falls, the seasons come and go, everything is cyclical. So when a piece of music is played without any variance in how loud or soft it is, this will be considered unmusical. Thus, dynamics is a key part of musicality.

Balancing the Familiar with the New

Ideas in music are developed, whether it is the main theme of a movement in a symphony, or simply a chorus in a pop song. Once a theme has been established it is not abandoned, and yet it is not simply repeated mindlessly, either. The best pieces of music are the ones that have a sense of theme, and all other elements within that piece relate to that theme somehow. In pop music, even if a verse and a chorus are completely different musically from each other, they are somehow related and enhance the entire piece. When new sections arrive, they are usually given time to develop. As a listener we crave variety, but if its too much too soon, it will likely turn us off. So, I would venture to say that musicality is a balance between the familiar and the new.

In conclusion, all these elements; emotion, transparency, in time but not stiff, dynamics, and balancing the familiar with the new, are all somehow part of our body's DNA. These are all things that we find in nature. In nature we find repetition with variety. We find logic and predictability with organic uniqueness in perfect balance. The animals and plants are not subconscious, so we don't get the sense that anything is not relaxed. And of course, there is plenty of drama in nature, from wild storms, volcanoes, to a peaceful sun and birds. The whole range of human emotions seems to be encapsulated in nature itself, and the whole range of what makes something musical seems to harmonize with nature itself.