

## The Judith Clark Memorial Address

### What's so special about music?

Emeritus Professor John Drummond

In about an hour's time something very special is going to happen in this room. Two men, one called Sydney and the other called Donald, are going to make music together. Between them, they've been preparing for this event for more than a hundred years! And we, we lucky people, are going to sit patiently attentive to every note they play. Aren't we? Of course we are. But why? What's so special about music?

After all, we could have invited Sydney and Donald to play a table-tennis match. Or they could throw custard pies at each other. They could recite monologues from Shakespeare, either alternately or both at the same time. We could watch them build an aircraft-carrier out of Lego. The possibilities of what we could invite them to do are limited only by our imaginations and their talents.

All of those possibilities would be entertaining, even amusing, possibly spectacular, especially the custard pies. But we haven't asked them to do any of those other things; *we want them to make music, live, in our presence.*

*Why? What's so special about music?*

*... we are going to sit patiently attentive to every note they play. We want them to make music, live, in our presence. Why? What's so special about music?*

There are three or four characteristics that, for me at least, make music special. You can probably think of other ways in which music is special to you. And it may not be a bad idea to do so. After all, music is something we can easily take for granted. In the contemporary world, because of technology, it is all around us. We hear it without asking for it, in shopping malls and aeroplanes, in cars passing in the street, at cricket matches, on television. And we can hear it voluntarily at any time, 24/7, by pressing switches in our own homes or on our mobile phones. *The fact that it is available everywhere instantly tells us something about it: people like music, people want music, people need music.*

And by people I mean people everywhere. In the present age of technology, music is a global industry. The recorded music that you and I listen to is also being listened to by people in Tokyo and Capetown, Reykjavik and Rio and Rangoon, Oslo and Omsk and Ontario. *But more important than that, people everywhere on Planet Earth are not just listening to music, they are making it. We have yet to find any community or culture, in history or the present, which doesn't have music.* Of course there are a few exceptions, where a particular religious belief determines every aspect of life including the presence of absence of music, but, left to their own devices, human beings will inevitably make music and listen to it.

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It used to be said – and sometimes it still is said – that because it is universal, music is a universal language. I don't think that's right. I don't understand the musical language of the horse-head fiddlers of the Manchurian border, or the Ca Tru music of north Vietnam, and the practitioners of those musical genres probably don't understand a

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solo violin partita by Bach. Why should they? In my view, music is not a single language that everyone understands. Rather, like language itself, music is universal. It is a universal experience and a universal activity.

*That is, for me, the first thing that makes music special: ironically, it isn't special at all, but seems to be part of being human, it's a characteristic of the human species.*

Human beings everywhere, no matter what may be their culture or background, find it quite natural to have music as an important part of their lives. In *The World in Six Songs*, Daniel Levitin suggests that language and music are both natural functions of the way our brains have evolved over the millennia: they probably developed at the same time during the emergence of homo sapiens and they are both functions that make us unique. As George Martin puts it on the cover of Levitin's book, 'Without music we would be little more than animals.' As a species, we are wired for music.

*As a species, we are wired for music.*

What **is** music? It is merely a form of organized sound – that is, it is energy transmitted by longitudinal pressure waves in the material medium of air. Of itself, that energy in the form of sound vibrations has no meaning at all. Only when it strikes a human ear, and is processed by a human brain, does its organization become apparent; only then does it gain meaning.

*In other words, music is the term we use to describe the meaning we give to certain sounds. As performers, we imagine a musical meaning in our heads, we turn that image into real sounds on our instruments or with*

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our voices, and we broadcast that energy, in the hope that someone will hear it, and will be able to find in it the musical meaning we’ve tried to transmit. Music doesn’t exist at all ‘out there’ – it only exists in the heads of those who make it and those who hear it. You can’t use a musical butterfly net and scoop it out of the air and say ‘here is music’.

Music is the meaning we find in the sound vibrations that impinge upon our ears.

*Where does that meaning come from? How do we know how to interpret the sounds and discover the meaning that the performers have sought to transmit to us?*

Well, let’s go back to my saying that music is not a language, but it’s like a language. You can understand the language I’m using now because you and I have learnt the same particular language - English. Wenn ich auf Deutsch spreche so ist es schwierig für viele Leute hier mich zu verstehen. If I speak in German it is difficult for

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many people here to understand me. I can pick up the meaning in the music I hear only if it has been made by people using a musical language I understand. If I don’t know that particular language then either I will find it is nonsense, or I may pick up bits of it and misinterpret them in my own language. In this respect, our ability to decode musical sounds is like our ability to decode language sounds: it depends on our knowing the particular language being used. And we will only know the language if we have learnt it, either through

immersion or through a formal and perhaps painstaking learning process. Ask your music pupils how much pain is involved.

In October 2007 I was lucky enough to be able to attend a meeting of the World Music Council in Beijing, a prestigious international body. One evening they did something special. We were invited to a huge courtyard outside the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music. It was about half the size of a football field. All round the edges of the courtyard they had stationed small groups of musicians, each one from a different part of China, each one playing the traditional music from its homeland. There were over 30 of them. There were people from the north playing horse-head fiddles; there was opera from Sichuan; there was traditional rap music from Shandong province; a Uighur ensemble from Xinjiang performing sophisticated chamber music. There was dongjing from Yunnan, drumming from the north-east – a plethora of different sounds, all of them played by people completely dedicated to their own music. All of them had dressed up in their local costume; all their instruments were beautifully clean and polished; they were all full of enthusiasm for their specific musical cultures.

Could I understand the meaning in all of these musics? No, of course not. What I came away with, from that memorable experience, was an understanding of the importance of music to a community. Indeed, the community was as much defined by its music as by anything else.

*And that is the second characteristic that for me makes music special: it is part of communal identity. Because musical meanings are local, and are learnt, like language, through total immersion, music is a group thing.*

We all know that music can define a group – and the obvious example is the National Anthem. National Anthems are of particular importance in national confrontations: in wartime music becomes a means to solidify group identity against the enemy, who, of course, has his own national anthem. At the start of World War 1 everyone in England was singing God Save the King. You know the tune. In Germany they had their own anthem, and it went like this – to the same tune as God Save the King:

Heil, dir im Siegerkranz,  
Herrscher des Vaterlands,  
Heil, Kaiser, dir.  
Fühl in des Thrones Glanz  
Die hohe Wonne ganz  
Liebling des Volks zu sein,  
Heil Kaiser dir.

Yes, well, it seems the national anthems of Britain and Germany weren't all that different. If you're looking for evidence that World War 1 was a European Civil War, look no further. It wasn't until 1922 that Germany officially adopted Haydn's tune for the Austrian national anthem to the words "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles."

The troops, of course, also recognized that music is international. By the Second World War German troops had learned the songs of British troops in the First World War, and were singing this song – to the tune of Pack Up Your Troubles:

Weit ist der Weg zurück ins  
Heimatland,  
So weit, so weit.  
Dort wo die Sternen stehen ins Waldesrand  
Lacht die alte Zeit.  
Jeder brave Musketier  
Sehnt heimlich sich nach dir,  
Ja, weit ist der Weg zurück ins Heimatland  
Ja weit, so weit.

*Never mind the words – the music brings everyone together and everyone's brain finds the shared meaning, one of nostalgia, sentiment, warmth, and community. It is singing together as much as anything which creates that communal feel.*

In the troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s between Protestant and Catholic factions, music was a vitally important part of group identity. You learnt only the songs that belonged to your faction, and woe betide if you sang one belonging to the other. I once met an enterprising young Irish woman who was working to try and get the two communities to enjoy each other's music, but it was an uphill battle.

But the idea of music as group identity is by no means all negative. At the Proms in London every year the whole audience joins in singing *Land of Hope and Glory* – even though the text describes a Britain that is long gone (despite the dreams of the Brexiteers). Never mind the words – the music brings everyone together and everyone's brain finds the shared meaning, one of nostalgia, sentiment, warmth, and community. It is singing together as much as anything which creates that communal feel. Atheists happily sing Handel's *Messiah*.

Through music we are one, engaged in a common enterprise. In these days when so much culture is about "I" and "me", that is something special.

Indeed, music seems to have a natural tendency to be collaborative. Yes, we have music competitions, but they aren't confrontational – everyone takes his or her turn. You don't try and sing the same aria at the same time and the loudest wins. No, music is an ensemble act, whether it be the horse head fiddlers of the Manchurian border, or the Allegri String Quartet, or the Dunedin City Choir, or a pipe band or the latest rock group.

Making music together is a deeply rewarding human experience; it is probably the safest communal activity we can take part in. Although there was the famous concert by the London Symphony Orchestra many years ago when the timpani player, seated high up behind the orchestra, accidentally nudged one of his timpani. On its way down through the orchestra it demolished two trombonists, cut a swathe through the oboes and bassoons, and came to rest by the front desk of the cellos. They were the only ones still playing.

Some of you may know William Benzon's book *Beethoven's Anvil*. He argues that our brains become imprinted with the particular meanings that music has in our particular culture, and that therefore other people in the same musical culture have similar neurological structures

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and pathways. This explains, of course, what we call the rapport that chamber musicians have when they perform. But Benzon extends this to suggest that people who share the same musical culture have what he calls "a community of sympathy." The common imprinting in relation to music is an imprinting which extends beyond music.

*My second special characteristic of music, then, is that music is communal. It makes communities and reflects them.*

If music is, like language, a universal, then, also like language, it takes many forms: we have a world of languages and a world of musics. For many years I've been involved in an international network with the acronym CDIME – Cultural Diversity in Music Education. We take the view that musical meanings are learned, so that they become signifiers of identity; it is therefore easy to think of 'our music' as the only valid one. Our group feels that it is important for people to recognize that there are many musics, and to respect them. Music education systems across the world offer one way to encourage this. If we come to know a little about other people's music, and respect it, then we may begin to respect the people whose music it is.

*So, I'm suggesting to you that music is universal, and that it is communal.  
But it is also deeply personal.*

We all have our own music. As we've learned how to interpret those longitudinal vibrations of sound, and built up libraries of meaning in our heads, so each person's experience has been unique. My brain is heavily imprinted with music I came to know as a child, as a growing adult, and as a mature person. My music is part of my identity. It is unique to me. Your music is part of your identity and is unique to you. Some of it results from purely musical experiences, some of it comes from other experiences that happened to have music attached. We use these familiar pieces to control our moods and emotions, to pick ourselves up after a stressful time or to wallow in nostalgia. Ah yes, I remember when I first heard that. . .

*Music is also deeply personal;  
we all have our own music.*

I don't think I should need to spend much time talking to a group like this about the idea that music is a fundamental aspect of our personal lives. If we didn't know that, and relish it, we probably wouldn't be in the game of teaching music. But it is good to remember that we are not the only people who feel that way.

As I am suggesting to you, music is about personal identity, and social and community identity, as well as human identity.

*But there is a fourth characteristic it has, one that I think might be based on the other three.  
That is that music is powerful. It can change people's lives.*

We know from research that music-making by young growing children has a physiological effect on them, increasing the size and activity of the corpus callosum which connects together the left and right cerebral cortex lobes. This facilitates communication and interaction between those lobes, which we know benefits creative thinking. At the other end of the age spectrum we also know from research that singing in a choir increases the physical, social and psychological well-being of elderly people. You may know the movie *Song for Marion*. Music therapy has proven techniques for all ages that assist in health recovery, in addressing social dysfunction, and in helping the education and socialization of people who are intellectually or physically disabled.

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According to University research in the UK and in the USA learning to make music helps develop creativity, teamwork, communication and critical thinking. On a more mundane level, we know that music can make us cry, laugh, feel warm, get angry, and manipulate us in many different ways. And it isn't just my music doing that to me, and your music doing that to you. Music's power is a communal power in every culture, and therefore it is a universal power capable of affecting every human being. Victoria Williams in her book *You are the Music* wisely points out that we don't know exactly how music does what it does to us so powerfully. But she does recognize that having it beside us on life's journey is a power for good.

***Which brings me to ask the question: so what?***

If you've followed me so far, and you're happy to consider music as having the special characteristics of being universal, communal and personal, all at the same time and, as a result, being a power for good, what does it all mean for what we do as musicians in our professional lives as teachers? Allow me to make a few suggestions.

***I've suggested that music is part of the human condition.***

It is normal and natural to be musical, either as a listener or as a music-maker. This is true across all communities and cultures. Babies are born that way in Shanghai, Harare, Santiago and Stockholm. Even in Dunedin. We shouldn't let anyone say he or she is not musical, nor allow anyone to characterize someone else as unmusical.

*Every human being has a natural potential to be musical. As teachers, our task is to nurture that, and enable everyone to find and enjoy their music.*

What every human being has is a natural potential to be musical. As teachers, our task is to nurture that, and enable everyone to find and enjoy their music.

***I've suggested that music is part of community identity.***

Every community has its music, and for many communities music is an essential part of its self-awareness. We live in a world of many musics. I know that some people dislike the term 'musics', but it's just like using the word languages. We recognize that we all have language, but we also have different languages. *Similarly, we all have music, but we have different musics.*

*And this diversity deserves respect. We should not attack someone else's music simply because it is not ours. Most of us are engaged in seeking to introduce others to Western*



Classical Music; but if we want respect for that we should offer respect to the music of others. We don't have to like hip hop or any other of the world's musics we may encounter, and we don't have to join any other musical community besides the one we are already a part of, but if we want our own to be acknowledged, we should acknowledge the music that other people consider to be theirs, including the music our pupils see as part of their identity.

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This is complicated by the fact that we live in changing times. When I went to University in the 1960s Music 101 was Western Classical Music. Now Music 101 is a programme about popular music on Radio New Zealand National on Saturday afternoons. My wife Louise and I went to a Quiz Night a few weeks ago. If you've been to one of these, you'll know that you can select one topic area to gain double points. Naturally, we chose Music. In fact, we couldn't answer a single question: they were all about popular music songs of the past fifteen years.

*We should also be wary of making comparisons between musics, especially between one we like and one we don't. A music reflects its culture, and the reasons for musical differences may be found in deeper cultural differences about which we know nothing.*

If Indonesian gamelan music sounds boring, we might remember that it is trying to recreate in sound the perfect multi-level stability of the universe. And why not? Bach was trying to do the same thing with different musical tools. If African kora music sounds out of tune that is because it may be using a natural perfect-tone system, besides which our European compromised mean-tone system is actually hideously out of tune. It's just that we're used to that one.

***I've suggested that music is itself a communal activity.***

Many of us are teaching one-to-one, and it's easy to forget how important is ensemble – not just for music, but because it creates what Benzon calls a *community of sympathy*. We may bewail the fact that many of our young pupils give up piano at the age of 12 or 13 and join a rock band. Is it possible that they find in the band that community of sympathy we've denied them by only providing one-to-one teaching?

***I've suggested that music is a deeply personal thing.***

That surely means that we must respect the individuals we teach.

Not every pupil learns the same way or relates to the same music in the same way. Not every pianist has to like Chopin, or even Bach (mysterious though that may be). Of course we have a responsibility as teachers to open ears and minds, to encourage our students to explore the unknown (and that is vitally important in the very young) and to make their own discoveries. But we must accept it if they don't gasp with eager excitement at all our favourite pieces.

*...we have a responsibility as teachers to open ears and minds, to encourage our students to explore the unknown ... and to make their own discoveries. But we must accept it if they don't gasp with eager excitement at all our favourite pieces.*

***I've suggested that music has the power to change lives.***

Given its personal and communal characteristics, it clearly has the power to influence individual and social well-being. The musical activity we engage in while teaching our pupils is not like giving them a maths tutorial: it will affect the whole person. It is capable of giving them self-awareness and self-confidence, and so help them avoid some of the worst pitfalls of growing up.

***The power of music that we wield gives us an awesome responsibility.***

At Otago we offer a course to music students on how to be a studio music teacher. When I was involved in teaching it we always began the course by asking the students to tell us what they are teaching: *are you teaching music, or are you teaching an instrument, or are you teaching a person?* The course was about encouraging them to put the third option first: teaching a person. That is not a gimmick: it follows from an understanding of the nature of music. There used to be an advert which claimed that Heineken beer reaches the parts other beer cannot reach. Music is rather like that.

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***Given its universal aspects, perhaps music has an even wider power.***

I once attended a World Music Festival in Oslo, at which performers were present from Europe, Africa and Asia. One of the most exciting events occurred when a Norwegian Brass Group starting jamming with a group of traditional musicians from South Africa. They came

from completely different musical cultures, but soon started imitating each other, borrowing from each other, sharing ideas, making space for each other to contribute to the ongoing musical fabric. A few bottles of beer fueled the experience – removing musical inhibitions and encouraging experiment – but the results were fascinating. The two groups found a wider ‘community of sympathy’ than they could ever find just in their own cultures.

Often our prejudices about other musics arise because we haven’t had the opportunity to meet practitioners of those musics, discover what fantastic musicians many of them are, and how the universality of music to the human condition means that mutuality isn’t hard to find.

*Music, I believe, is capable of creating the widest possible community of sympathy in the world, not one of uniformity, not even one in which we all sing the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but one which recognizes the rich diversity of the planet's musical cultures, a diversity which mirrors its biodiversity. Music is human and collaborative, and maybe that is its greatest power and most important characteristic, one needed more than ever in the world of today.*

So maybe we’ll ask Sydney and Donald not to play table tennis after all, and to forego making that aircraft carrier out of Lego, though I wouldn’t mind watching the custard pie fight. Instead, let’s ask them to make music for themselves, for each other, and for us. Let’s ask them to create for us that community of sympathy, that shared feeling, the common ground, the mutuality, that music has the power to create. I’m sure we’ll find it constantly during the next few days here at St Margaret’s College.

May the conference be for each of you a rewarding and special musical experience; may it be for us all a rewarding and special communal musical experience; and may the special and mysterious universality of music warm our humanity and make us better people.

John Drummond

Monday 21 January 2019