

The Meaning in the Air

As my fingers dance up and down the keys, each press light yet powerful, each note simple yet meaningful, my mind flows in tandem with the river of sound swelling around me. A graceful flicker of notes high up cascades down the scale in magnificent fashion, gradually reaching the depths of the piano and coming to rest peacefully, gently. The final chord resonates with more than just a simple sound.

This seemingly arbitrary collection of ivory keys on an old wooden box does something mysterious and magical. It carries meaning. Somewhere inside me is a fibre of being vibrating with the same inspiring frequencies and wondrous power of the music that has transcended beyond the black blotches on the page in front of me. The composer's encoded message, deeply embedded in the glorious mess of melodies and harmonies, has found its home in my mind. The sheet music I followed does not do this message justice, nor could any combination of sesquipedalian words no matter how beautiful or elegant. No - music is its own language. That, I am certain of, when my fingertips glide seamlessly from one end of the instrument to the other, and my whole body pours from one chord to the next, as if the music itself is guiding me on a journey, and I am simply along for the ride.

I have played music since I was very young, receiving a ukulele for my 5th Christmas and progressing into lessons for guitar and violin in primary school. In the last couple of years I have taught myself the piano, enjoying every minute of learning. Not only has this been an incredibly rewarding experience in and of itself, but has also opened me up to the joy of self-expression. However I am feeling in a moment can be transmitted from my mind, along my arms, to my fingers, through my fingertips, to the instrument. I believe that this can be heard by anybody who happens to be listening - including myself. The way I play echoes who I am, and how I feel. It is my way of putting myself on display, but also a very private, therapeutic experience through which I can open up.

Many people have an escape. For some it is dance, for others reading. For me, it is music. Daniel Levitin, a distinguished psychologist, stated that *'Understanding why we like music and what draws us to it is ... a window on the essence of human nature'*. Certainly, music is a window into the expression of my human essence. Naturally, I love listening to almost all genres of music, but this pales in comparison to the marvellous voyage I feel when playing. I am taken away from the moment to a place beyond time or place or thought or reason. There is only me and the music preying on my willing soul. I am helplessly consumed by it, in a joyous and emotive clash of sound and sentiment.

The meaning that music carries is objectively valuable. Over the centuries, music has embodied the issues faced by society. Classical music is evocative of the clear separation of class during the 18th century; wartime songs bring to mind the terrible fates of those marching off to the frontlines; modern rap and pop tracks often bring to light ideas surrounding race and inequality. Moreover, individuals can express their attitudes and emotions through music - whether that be hardcore heavy metal, or relaxing low-fi hip-hop. The vessel of music can carry any meaning. Giving this meaning is a precise process - forged by the composer, welded by the musician and polished by the listener. We all have a role in assigning our own value and message to the songs we listen to. Melody allows us to connect to different times and places through a language like no other. Songs transcend barriers of age, race and class. Music is so powerful in uniting us because of the very simple fact that we are all human. Music is an innate human experience.

Despite my love for music, I generally consider myself a rational, scientifically-oriented person. I value logic and reason over instinct and intuition; mind and thought over heart and soul; science over the arts; judgment over feeling. But playing music is the exception. Music, for me, represents a welcome change from an often structured and repetitive life. Not to say that my life would otherwise be mundane, only that music provides an opportunity for a unique contrast from the rest of my life. That contrast is now a valuable part of my daily routine and one I hope I will cherish for the remainder of my life.

Music is a passionate art. It is inherently expressive to play an instrument, which is why it is such a precious part of my life. Even if you were to memorise all the physical traits every note in a piece of music - the pitches, the rhythms, the dynamics, every single detail imaginable - you would still be unable to play musically. With a little practice, you could play it perfectly from a technical perspective, but you would not be able to play with purpose and, crucially, with meaning. Your fingers may move at the right time, but they would hit the keys like a machine with an unfeeling soul. To me, a piece of music is more than a bundle of notes. It is a complex and inexplicable vehicle of self-expression, messages and meaning; one that is intrinsic to my humanity.

Expression should be experienced by all humans. Whatever form that may take, a person should be able to siphon out their inner triumphs and tragedies onto a canvas of emotion and meaning. Writing, painting, dancing, meditating, exercising - we all have the need to take time to reflect on our lives by removing ourselves from them, at least temporarily. This much I have learned by playing my instruments regularly and

perfecting complex, emotional pieces. It is a valuable lesson to keep in mind, and one that I shall remember if I ever feel I lead a monotonous and unfulfilling life.

My source of enjoyment comes from both my technical progression and that soaring feeling of flowing alongside the music in a torrent of effortless purity and clarity. After hours of practice, I reap the rewards through the new-found ability to carefully mould a piece of music however I wish, or however I feel, until a sculpture of sound has been produced from the clay of my being. I am in awe of myself and what I have created. Since learning the piano, I have become addicted to this feeling - the high that music gives me is irreplaceable. Luckily this drug is a healthy obsession, as with any expressive art - and a thoroughly enjoyable one at that.

Learning the piano has changed my outlook on life. Not only do I spend many hours slaving away at the keys until my family yell at me to 'Shut up!', but I also perceive myself and humanity differently. We are not cold nor predictable nor formulaic. We require warmth and spontaneity and diversity. This can be achieved by expressing yourself through whatever means you find most natural. It is vital to a healthy life - and for me I have found it through music.

Every time I sit down at the piano and begin to play, I am reminded of why I love music so much. I am comforted by the opportunity before me to explore the very nature of what it is to be alive and human. Lost in a playground of swinging sounds and sliding scales, I surrender myself to the music. I think of the role of music in our culture, how its feel changes with the times, and the way music brings us together. I ponder the way sounds have been a part of humanity for as long as we have had society. By playing, I connect to an integral part of human nature - and it is vitalising.