

## ***Beethoven and Bodhrans***

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I know two people, a man and a woman, who live in harmony although their musical interests lie in the extremes. He is a violin-maker. That is to say, a luthier by trade. A maker of violins, violas and 'cellos. His work is well-known in Europe - and here - and he is held in high regard by those who play such instruments.

I've watched him choosing wood - the fliche - tapping it at his ear to hear a clear and telling note. I've come to know his taste in spruce pinstripe and maple flame, top and back. I've come to appreciate some of the subtler variations in taste - their historic and current popularity.

I've tried to grasp how a Stradivari - even a not very good one - can bring two and a half million dollars at auction and the expectation of a greater, future return for the investor.

It's a rarified air, with almost as much snobbery as erudition, almost as much scandal as nobility. The stakes are high. And yet the musical life of these instruments is unquestionably noble. And full of grace: their work is to interpret and render the vision of revered composers - in tone and timbre, intended to replicate the human voice - or so it is, at least, with the violin.

Granted, violins do turn up in other genres: country, folk, and occasionally jazz. There they find the friendlier name of fiddle, bringing to mind the hoedown rather than the solemnity of the straight-backed chair. Some award-winning makers such as Guy Rabut have altered their instruments, veering away from the standard of shape and materials, even electrifying the sound.

The exploration of cubist or post-modern form is of little interest to my friend. Candied-apple Stradocaster red or a cobalt sheen do not excite him. He is assiduously attuned to the so-called masters, in design specifications, techniques, and tools. He struggles for the Stradivari shape, content with itself, appealing to some precise inner human sense of proportional harmony. He strives for a varnish like the 18<sup>th</sup> century Cremonese "alchemists" - a rich, warm, red-brown that flows over the beauty of the wood allowing it to shine through, enhanced, not obscured.

He has accomplished - or is it that he has discovered in the wood - a dark and brooding sound in his violas. He has been best known for these. His violas are played in prestigious quartets and orchestras around the world.

Although he chooses not to break new ground in overall design, his attention to detail is consummate. Within the realm of minutiae he addresses huge variation, choice and refinement: the curl of the scroll, the posture of the fingerboard, the height of the bridge, the arch of the top, the back, the roll of the edge, the elegance of the f-holes, the purfling laminate's width and depth, echoing the outlines and offering some defense against critical injury from inevitable bumps.

While a contemporary twist on design and materials does not excite him, hearing his instruments played *does*. Although he has expressed fears of a fingerboard flying off in a Carnegie Hall concert, striking him dumb with horror, there has, as yet, been no such occurrence and the likelihood is remote. This kind of concern does demonstrate, however, the intensity of his occupation, of his wizardry.

And wizard is what I call him when I visit his workshop. Although we are at opposite ends of the spectrum - audioum? - in our approaches to sound and to music, I remain awed by his work, which is his play - and which is a source of so much joy for him and for the world.

Here, now, I admit that I *am* the other half of the harmonious partnership to which I referred in the opening line of this piece. My fascination is not with music but with sound itself: for reshaping brainwaves, for shamanic practices, for community shifts toward awakening, toward peaceful coexistence. With my work it has not been simply pleasure and transcendence. It is also purposeful, alterative, therapeutic.

I use my voice, a gourd rattle, or a hoop drum for dreamtime journey work. The drum, a bodhran, predates the violin by millennia. Its multi-layered resonance shoots straight through to my soul. Although there are many who know bodhran technique and can teach it, that is not the way I choose to learn. For me it's a case of "don't confuse me with the facts." I want my drum to teach and to inform me. And it does. When I allow it. The skill for me, then, is paying attention, being present yet empty, the "hollow bone" of shamanic tradition. My course of study does include long hours of practice but without the discipline of scales or rudiments which I witness in my classically-trained acquaintances. For this reason I do not call myself a musician, although I *am* directed by my *muse*.

When drumming for myself I have to let go of what I *know*, of what I believe to be true. I enter an altered state of awareness, give over my authority, and allow the many voices of the skin and wood to lead me. When drumming so that another person may journey I must, again, give over my authority and get out of the way, but this time I must also maintain the assurance of a constant beat, something steady for the traveler to climb aboard. The sound becomes the vehicle. My constancy does not, however, preclude the eruption of unexpected vibrations from the skin, often harmonic, sometimes a drone more reminiscent of a didjeridu than a drum. And sympathetic tones often dance in the room, seeming to emanate from the walls, from "thin air," like feathery ghosts.

I imagine that classically-trained musicians would describe a similar experience about getting out of the way of the music, about evaporating in the ecstatic rendering.

I understand that Bach was a genius at improvisation, that it was common in his day, and that "The Musical Offering" resulted from a court challenge for skilled spontaneity. Mozart, too, demonstrated such ability seen most easily today in cutting-edge jazz.

If it can be said that these composers (and the musicians I know) have spent years honing their craft then, perhaps I - and others like me - have been honing the “art” of it. The art of “getting out of the way.” I depend on synchronicity, on serendipity, and on spirits to infuse me. To guide me. I am informed by the instrument itself. Or, when drumming with others, we are informed by the drums and by one another.

I find that people who “know how to drum,” who are seasoned, who are confident of their competence, sometimes listen less easily to the dynamics of a circle of drummers, many of whom may be novices.

I observe that classically-trained musicians are usually uncomfortable with improvisation unless they get inebriated enough to fall over the threshold of their vulnerability and not care. Not care if they make a “fool” of themselves.

I, on the other hand, cannot sit at the piano - for which I have been trained - and effectively read music fast enough to join in one of the impromptu salons that my violin-making friend often holds. So there are emotional places we cannot easily go together. I get antsy if I have to sit and listen. I am stirred to participate and yet my limitations - or is it the limitation of the formats - forbid participation or, at least, restrain me. It is a gap I have not yet learned to bridge. And I’ve never looked up to see a classically-trained musician throwing me a rope, either.

I sometimes read condescension among these acquaintances who have studied music so thoroughly and theoretically that they cannot abide spontaneity. Their disdain condenses in the room so that I have to rise above my own wavering confidence *and* their fear, which is what disdain is at its root. Isn’t it?

*Where*, then, do I meet such souls, emotionally and philosophically? What common stomping ground do we share? With my luthier friend, it is in Bartok, Bach, Beethoven, The Beatles (excuse the alliteration, please). In the work of these composers something is said that reaches both our kinds of listening. For me, the appeal is the element of unpredictability, surprise and delight. My friend says they offer him direct revelation of the soul.

We have sat together at the Union College Chapel for a concert of the Emerson Quartet playing from the Beethoven cycle and I’ve watched spirits emanate from the walls to meet the music rising from the strings, from the hollow bones - their instruments. I know many who would say for certain that a classical concert is a healing event for them. Basking in the beauty changes them for the better, they would say. They don’t care if it is quantifiable. They *feel* it!

And yet, if I invited them to rest on a comfortable mat and journey with the monotonous rhythm of my bodhran, with the intention of interior travel, discovery, and healing, most of them would decline.

What is the difference? Perhaps it is worth pondering. There may be some value in understanding, or if not in understanding, at least in considering the relative appeal and usefulness of these two approaches.

Is one grounded in inspiration alone while the other depends on practice and precision?

Is one purposeful in awakening intuition while the other attends to the spirit more subtly?

How is it that among such diverse and even extreme points of reference two individuals can be such good friends?

And as for you, gentle reader, what do you see of yourself in this? Do you prefer to sit as a member of an appreciative audience, bathed in sound, or would you rather be lying cozy while a friend and confidant drums you into a conscious dream and brings you home again?

*Geoffrey Ovington is the violin-maker spoken of in this article. He lives in harmony with the author.*