



On Music for Life

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In the realm of science, music is a combination of sounds or vibrations of air. However, while this definition is based on empirical evidence and seems persuading enough for the average person today, it fails to embody and convey music's sheer power as a form of original art. The precise origin of music is still an unsolved mystery. Maybe, the ancestors of modern civilizations invented the earliest musical instruments by accident. Flutes dating back to the 6000s BCE were found by archaeologists at multiple sites, such as at the site of the Jiahu Culture in China. The flutes excavated at Jiahu might be born out of a pure interest of Chinese ancestors to play with the different effects of blowing and utilizing air. In any case, whatever its origin might be, music evolved into an integral element of major human cultures thanks to its ability to resonate with the various wants of human nature. As music develops, taking diverse forms of expression, it only intertwines more strongly with societies, breathing life into the culture of a nation. It would be difficult to conceive of any culture today that is alive without a component of music. To illustrate how music serves life, this essay will explain three kinds of life powered by the expressiveness, width, and depth of music.

Music first serves the emotional life, one that is not only sensitive to emotional changes within but also constantly yearns for the enrichment of emotions without. This individual perceives the world around them through the lens comprised of a multitude of feelings on the spectrum. The way this individual understands an event or another person is inherently through the establishment of emotional bonds. However, this reliance on emotions does not necessarily mean that reason is unforgotten. Reason only comes later at a point in cognition when the individual tries to interpret information in their mind fully. The primary means to probe the surrounding world is still feelings.

Music serves such an emotional individual in a most direct and powerful sense. To be music, some form of mood must be conveyed. Whether it is Western classical music, modern pop, or some indigenous music produced by local tribes, the content contains the power to unite and resonate, mainly because of the inherently complicated feelings involved. Since music undoubtedly carries bits of emotion within, it creates an almost unbreakable synergy when it reacts with the emotional individual. As an individual constantly immerses themselves in a sphere of feelings, music first provides an endless supply of combinations of sensational charges. Music ensures that these charges vitalize the individual's life. The genuinely magical element of music is its ability to satisfy any emotional want. Think of the start of any piece as a white canvas. Then, if the musician desires to express a melancholic mood, they might add dark blue to the canvas. Later, the musician sinks into a dreamy mood. The canvas allows the musician to erase the dark blue and spray some light indigo or blend the latter with the former.

The moods in music are not static or uniform. Instead, emotions become highly moldable, diverse, or even dramatic in a single piece.

To illustrate how music serves the emotional individual by synergizing and supplying an endless chain of emotions, consider Chopin and his pieces. Chopin was an individual who approached his world with a heavy touch of feelings. He approached the reality of his mother nation Poland being divided and trampled with a patriotism that cannot be extinguished; he embraced life in the Paris salons with a sense of obsession and soberness; he was fiercely passionate and sorrowful at the same time. For Chopin, the world was made up of innumerable currents of sensation. His music served his emotional life. Composing and listening to some of his quieter nocturnes must have provided him peace and slight melancholy. His ballads and polonaises, however, brought fiery charges of patriotism and passion. Music was the sole channel through which he could express and hear his emotions, indulging himself in a rich spiritual life.

On a more fundamental level, what constitutes emotions? From a scientific perspective, the answer might lie in a look into hormone statuses. From an artistic and philosophical perspective, memories play an indispensable role in forming feelings. People react more emotionally if an occurrence reminds them of a memory. Some who have experienced the deaths of family members will generally feel tremendous grief upon seeing another case of death. This grief stems from a memory of losing a dear one. Music serves the emotional life due to its inextricable connection with memories. Even before the notes play out, when one sees a title of a work, some memories might already be evoked. For example, Schumann's "Kinderszenen" or "Scenes from Childhood" is a set of pieces aiming to depict precious aspects of childhood, such as having fantastical dreams. The title "Scenes from Childhood" evokes one's own memories of childhood, especially moments that they cherish. Then, when the music plays, coupled with these cherished memories, emotions may instantly flood the listener's mind.

Music serves not just the emotional life but also the imaginative life, the second kind being considered. The imaginative life sets no boundaries, allowing the mind to wander freely, sometimes not necessarily following a strong logic. Imagination can take numerous forms and scopes, from a child imagining a wonderland to political philosophers envisioning a utopia. An imaginative life, compared to the emotional one, does not often come so naturally to every individual in a population. Conversely, the will and ability to imagine sometimes need nurturing under a generally free environment. An imaginative life cannot live prosperously if the right or ability to imagine is taken away. It constantly uses imagination to fill the gaps in its understanding of the surrounding world.

If one leads an imaginative life, music serves this life as an omnipotent container of imagination. Music is ultimately flexible and "soft," allowing one to communicate and receive messages through imagery. The freer music is, the more diverse the imageries will be within. In this regard,



music resembles poetry. In a poem, key imagery and some supporting ones are often employed consistently by the poet to shape a sense of beauty and resonate with the reader through the whetting of their imagination. By crafting a melody and pairing it with subtly designed harmonies, a creator can powerfully imbue the music with images in their mind. Debussy is an outstanding composer who demonstrated this point perfectly. A unique melody harmonization may suddenly introduce a whole set of imaginative imageries in many pieces. For music to contain and serve the composer's imagination, one does not need to write a standard melody. A few distinctive combinations of harmony, a sudden change of texture, or an unexpected alteration of tempo might conjure up a diverse group of illusory images.

Moreover, music serves the imaginative life by encouraging the creator or the listener to continue “dreaming.” When one reads a book that piques their interest, they will be more than willing to continue reading; similarly, when one listens to a piece of music that allows them to wonder, they will be strongly encouraged to continue playing the music and letting visions go wild. For example, the ancient Greeks were quite devoted, as a culture, to the creation and development of music. During the creation process, music's power pushed the Greeks to imagine in increasingly bold and unrestrained ways. They conceived of a deity of music, Apollo; they came up with the previously nonexistent idea of a music festival. The shaping of Apollo as a god of music and the organization of music festivals show that music allowed Greek culture to expand imaginatively in various aspects. Even if one progresses to the chaotic modern world, the ability of music to encourage imagination only becomes more pronounced. Aided by multiple forms of media and methods to produce music, this art form has gained greater potential to resonate with the younger generations. In 1986, the Chinese rock singer Cui Jian rose to prominence with his hit single “Nothing to My Name.” Today, people widely regard him as the cornerstone of Chinese rock music. With the rise of Cui Jian, rock music encouraged the Chinese populace to reconsider and envision how they should lead their daily lives. There was more emphasis on embracing opportunity, diversity, and freedom through the 1980s and 90s.

Finally, music serves the critical life. This life, by definition, often views the surrounding environment with a critical mindset. This category includes revolutionaries, social critics, and those who yearn to see a change in the status quo. Music, for these people, is imperative sometimes, as it is usually the platform through which they deliver their messages. Music is “transparent,” to a considerable extent, in the sense that through its components, one can see the actual thoughts and emotions of the composer and, more importantly, empathize with them.

Throughout music history, the relationship between music and the critical life has been inextricable. The classical era from the 16th century to the early 20th century is often perceived as one devoid of protest music (i.e., music that aims to protest against a regional or global issue). However, this claim is invalid if one examines this period more carefully. Around 1840, the Italian romantic composer Giuseppe Verdi wrote his classic opera “Nabucco.” This opera



tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and his exiled Hebrew slaves. In this opera, one famous piece is titled “Va, pensiero,” or “The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves.” This short piece delivers the outcry of the Hebrew slaves to restore their homeland and break their chains. It can be viewed as an example of protest music. At the time of its creation, Verdi’s home country, Italy, was oppressed by the Austrians. Thus, while the piece shows the revolt of the Hebrew slaves against their Babylonian overlords, it can also be viewed as an outcry of the Italians against their Austrian overlords. In fact, after the premiere, shouts of “Freedom for Italy” came from members of the audience, who recognized themselves in the Hebrews of the opera. In this example, Verdi, a critical figure who, urged by patriotism, called for the liberation of Italy, conveyed his feelings through music.

Music has more effectively served the critical individual, such as Verdi, as time passed. Protest music became quite significant during the 20th century. In the developed Western world, calls for freedom and peace grew louder each decade. Music was the primary platform for many demanders of these ideals, such as Michael Jackson or John Lennon, to express their critical views on social norms and political matters. Songs like “We Are the World” by Michael Jackson, “Imagine” by John Lennon, and “Let It Be” by Paul McCartney spoke potently for the minds of their creators. In the parts of the world where people just ridded themselves of the yoke of colonialism, protest music served the critical life more directly. In Jamaica, for instance, some musicians, notably Bob Marley, utilized the local reggae music to call for equality and human rights. The power of music can be unimaginably immense. With the spread of protest music across the Western hemisphere, by the late 20th century, most countries came to believe, at least officially, in the sacredness of freedom, equality, and human rights.

Music intrinsically serves three kinds of life: the emotional, the imaginative, and the critical. One of the most apparent yet revealing takeaways from the history of music is that the flexibility and possibilities of this form of art are unparalleled. From the earliest music produced by the flutes of the Jiahu Culture eight millennia ago to the bedazzling array of genres people encounter today on the internet, the journey music has undertaken is undoubtedly convoluted. From a modern standpoint, music might serve other purposes and kinds of life in the future. Music might even “leave” the realm of pure art and evolve into something purely for the practical purpose of delivering instant fun. This trend is already arguably demonstrated on short video platforms now, as some rapid, mesmerizing clips of music that complement the video content often go viral. However, whatever form music takes, it will still support the expression of emotion, the desire to freely imagine, and the will to critique perceptively. This claim shall hold as long as music exists, as the passing of history verifies it. In the forests inhabited by hunter-gatherer societies, the plains cultivated by the first agricultural towns, the castles and palaces constructed by feudal states, and the half-virtual world we reside in today, music has always been the element that crosses the boundaries of space and culture, creating a unified force within.

