

## On “Feeling” - in Music and Life

An oft heard entreaty from teachers of music to their students is the heartfelt directive to play with “feeling.” Their plea is filled with hidden meaning. It is at one level an admonishment, at another a challenge, at another a mystery.

What does it mean to play with “feeling?”

If queried a teacher will usually respond,  
“The music means something. You don’t feel it.”

Or,

“ This should be more intense.”

“This should be quieter, more serene.”

“This should have more grandeur.”

“This is a minor key, it should feel sad.”

“ This is a Major key, it is a surprise.”

Etc.

What is “feeling?”

We normally associate the word with emotion, meaning an emotional response to the action and interaction of ourselves with the “stuff” of our lives - the world “outside” us. Our internal, psychic thermometer measures and labels our “feeling” about a situation, a gauge by which we determine who we are. Is this what is meant by “feeling” in an artistic sense?

Are those “feelings” an aesthetic response to what surrounds us or a sentimental indulgence?

What is the difference? Is it an important distinction?

I believe so. Not only in living one’s life, but also in understanding what constitutes artistic expression.

We usually separate the two - by that I mean living from art. There really is no such divide, although in our society we have relegated the study of art to being an impractical waste of energy.

Art is the contemplation of beauty. To live fully one must live within its sphere. The awareness and sensitivity required to do so is not only the source of all “feeling” in art, it is also the only path to the subtlety and intimacy - the “feeling”- necessary to have real relationships with people. It is only on this level of awareness that our embeddedness with all of life is obvious, and comforting. It is only on this level that we can live with one another and our surroundings and find meaning. Meaning intrinsic to ourselves - that we are all one; meaning that makes life an entirely different experience from finding

purpose in the pursuit of the phantasm of seeking outward approval, a form of mental illness whose symptoms include voracious consuming and desperate accumulation, with the tacit hope of buying meaning, friendship, or distraction.

A mind unaware of beauty is dangerous. There is no anchor of sensitivity. Logic without “feeling” may be quite efficient, but with an effectiveness that destroys any human component. Don’t we want to be the masters of our lives? Or do we want to become reliable machine-people?

“Feeling” without rationality is apt to be just as stupid. Emotions based on our “experience” are likely to have no more truth in them than the ravings of a lunatic, a mind unhinged from any anchoring - “outside” - reality.

An aesthetic interaction with the world is the essence of all art. The creation of art is our attempt to see what “is” from a whole mind, a mind that is perceptive and responsive, open to what unfolds under its scrutiny and free to be carried where it must. There is no separation of “feeling” and reason - rationality - at this level.

By “feeling” I do not mean emotionalism. I mean emotion. Emotion - feeling - is a natural accompaniment to a mind that is clear. But to “see” in this sense one must free oneself from preconceptions.

I remember reading in Salvadore Dali’s book on painting, *The Fifty Secrets of Master Craftmanship*, that to accurately see a subject to be drawn or painted he advised students to render it through a device that he concocted which, by the manipulation of mirrors, depicted the subject upside down, thereby making the artist’s gaze free from preconception and enabling him to perceive the form without the filter of familiarity.

This is the constant danger in art and life. Can we see accurately? If not, if our “feelings” have nothing to do with reality, what do our “feelings” about anything mean?

Can we see anything for what it is in itself? If we could we might have a chance to see what our “real” feelings are.

Everyone has feelings, emotional responses. We have feelings about everything we encounter. Those feelings are usually a brew made up of the potpourri of our conditioning, the mere whiff of the outside world being the trigger that starts an avalanche of thought, a symphony of theme and variation, unfortunately always based on the same theme - our inherited identity, the frame through which we “see” the world - which blocks us from seeing or feeling anything but the reflection of ourselves.

Have you noticed the “feelings” you have about your name? Is your name you? Who gave you your name?

If someone pronounces your name incorrectly, or purposely makes fun of it, I would venture to say “feelings” would suddenly appear. How rational or real are the

preconceptions in your mind that call to action the cascading thoughts born with the maligning of “your” name? Are you seeing the situation clearly enough to have a pure perception, or “feeling” of the moment, that has nothing to do with your image of yourself?

If not, if your reaction is based on preconditioned paradigms, you inhabit the world of sentimentality.

Sentimentality is worked-up sensation through the spinning of the mind, a mental state that evokes “feelings”, but feelings which are a mirror only of our own fears and prejudices, not derived from a relationship with anything outside the echo chamber of our conditioning.

Holidays. They carry the weight of the past, the burden of tradition, the comparison of time gone by, of aspirations unborn, of advertising and merchandising, of ideals, etc.

This puts the mind in a state of excitation and confusion, a whirlpool of conflicting realities between what is, what was, and what should be, leading to a romanticized and highly emotional state of mind expressing itself in tears, numbness, or a contrived, forced elation. None of this psychic maelstrom may be cognizant to an individual, but nevertheless because of the inherent conflicts within his mind, a person may be carried by the frothing of his emotions through a plethora of states within a ten-minute span, never knowing where he will land.

This is more akin to a dream state than a true, “feeling” response. A person may genuinely have “feelings,” but these feelings may have little or nothing to do with what is happening aside from his imagination. These feelings are a reflection of the thought-engine, the “program” of his own mind. They are entirely about himself, the outside world - as much as can be noticed in this state - being the ignition to a sentimental reverie about himself.

Sentimentality is based on manipulation and the use of emotionalism for effect, usually to gain an advantage. Its outward expression is always overdone because it is habitual, ritualistic, mannered, studied, and self-centered, divorced from rationality because it is a storm created entirely from within the bubble of a conditioned mind. Only peripherally is the exterior world noted. Sentimentality is the source of all “ham-acting” - overdone expression that draws attention to the performer in opposition to the material, the play, the music - in both the theater and musical performance.

In the arena of our lives sentimentality can transform an object of “care” to a center of hatred within the same embrace. The wrong look, a *deja vu* moment of distress, can send the mind racing in other directions because there is no grounding, no real “self” that can experience life unafraid of the opinions and directives of the programmed mind. Fear of another’s opinion blocks direct perception.

And direct perception is the key to true “feeling” in art performance and life.

Our thoughts are words. Words create feelings. Words also create a false, imaginary self, an ego, that in turn creates fear of others, self-imposed limitations, and creative blocks. This “constructed” ego blocks pure perception. In any recreative, performance art, the transcribers ego must get out of the way, otherwise there can be no direct “feeling” or communion with one’s subject. How does this work in practice?

As an example, in the world of theater the words of the script are, in essence, the psychological description of the character an actor plays. The words are the products of the character’s thought process, and it is in the words that the truth of the character must be found.

Are not words our thoughts? Our thoughts, which are words, are the contents of our minds. Thoughts create actions. The actor, to be as “real” as we are or he is as “himself,” must become one with the words of the script. Those words must take over his body and mind. Interference of his own mental words - his own thoughts - tangles the psyche of the character he portrays with his own “self”, his own programmed paradigm, and creates a conflict which blocks true “feeling.”

Therefore, the actor’s task, his challenge, is to make the words his own, as if he created them. But to do that he has to be able to let the words take him over and flow so naturally from him that in answer to another character he can think of no response other than what is in the script. The “feeling” for the material is inseparable from this process. It is a by-product. How much room is there for his ego?

The actor has to train his mind and body to be a supple, subtle conduit for pure contact with the subject - the character he portrays. He must develop and train his voice to be a powerful and malleable instrument of expression, train his body to respond in concord with his needs to interact with other characters with naturalness, and be aware of his movements on stage. This all constitutes technique. To achieve contact with his subject - the part he plays - requires that there be no impediment to the actor’s expression of the “feelings” of his character. To do this requires the focus of his entire being. The actor’s “feeling” for the play and the part he portrays is inseparable from that attention. It is born from the melding of his psychic and physical forces in interaction with the whole, the material and other characters.

The same is true in music. The performer trains himself to become a perfect pipeline of inspiration coming directly from the music, and through him, to the audience. To do this requires that the artist have no physical or mental antagonism to the free flow of expression, expression which is one with the material, not added on by design. To do this requires technique. Without technique - skill that has become internalized - there can be no direct communion, hence no true feeling.

The “feeling” is the melding of the beauty of the sound, the subtlety, the nuance, the flow, the play of the rhythm, the organic understanding of the material, the physical presence and energy of the performer, the ability to create a “world” for an audience, the

passion to work to that end, the pulling together of one's entire being for the purpose at hand. This is what constitutes feeling. It is not achieved by admonishment, or via sophisms such as play with grandeur, or in a piecemeal fashion. It is a mind-set.

The artist seeks to give to others a direct line to the essence of the subject being illuminated through himself. Since we all are in relationship with one another and everything else - because the world is one indivisible system - if an artist can create an atmosphere in an audience which begets self-forgetfulness, of suspended disbelief that the situation is contrived, the artist's mind can convey a direct experience with the music normally "outside" the capability of the auditors. To accomplish this transference the artist's task is to "clean" himself psychically and physically from any impediment to expression, becoming one with the essence of what he performs. He must trust his intuition and inspiration. Two of the greatest impediments in artistic endeavor is a mind not free to run with intuition, and a public numbed to subtlety by the pursuit of distractions, the very purpose of which is to anesthetize the mind.

Art is study in the true sense of the word - looking with magnified attention at and into the subject and oneself. There is no end to discovery - as there is no center to a point - and it is this journey into the depths of the subject that is the source of true "feeling." The main element necessary in art to convey true "feeling" is the possession of enough passion to get to the truth, the essence, of the subject of study.

Sentimentality in art is a result of a superficial and lazy attempt to "sell" a subject in the hope of acquiring something from another. "Feeling" is applied, lacquered on with brushstrokes hastily believed in, desperately borrowed from a source sanctioned by public opinion. All this is done to acquire outward approval. That something may be money, applause, recognition, but it is the sentimentalist's main drive - ambition - to reap a benefit or advantage from his efforts.

The source of the sentimentalist's actions are all outside themselves. What they feel is regulated by their concocted and inherited persona, through which they measure their effectiveness, which is, essentially, how well they are getting their message across. They sell. The only "feeling" they possess is a creation of their machine-minds comparing their programming with what comes "at them" from outside. Additionally, and paradoxically they can't see what is truly outside because the filter of their minds blocks the outside world.

Since their inherited and programmed persona is a collection of paradigms meant to please and serve the societal values, power structures, and expectations in which they are embedded, their direct feelings, their intuitive process, their ability to have insight - which can only come from a break in the programming - is muffled, or deadened completely. For a person of this level of psychic development aesthetic feeling is not possible.

It is this sort of person that our society is manufacturing. And manufacturing is the correct word, because of the machine quality of both the process of indoctrination and the end-product - the machine-citizen.

The machine-citizen is the perfect guard dog and supporter of any power structure. Unable to see beyond their need to fit in and please those around them - their family, friends, authorities - they live in a hall of mirrors, their minds seeing what others see, their goals being what others want, their feelings the interaction of these elements, with nary an outside, perceptive insight having a chance of gaining entrance.

Freedom from inherited paradigms is not a loss of self. It is freedom from the limitations of one's conditioned thinking - a false ego with no real "self." When one speaks of the loss of ego as being a crucial component of art, the ego lost is the constraining, limiting factor. Loss of this ego allows one to stand against the crowd, to be unafraid of authorities and opinion, and to harness insight and perception as one's microscope peering into the complexities and subtleties of life, and to have the freedom to express "feelings"- emotion, which derives from care - in the highest sense of its meaning, a combination of reason and sensitivity, which is true intelligence.

So the dictum by teachers of art that a student play music with feeling, or act a part in a play with feeling, or paint or write with feeling, is not so easily met. If one doesn't live with genuine feeling and communion with the world, one has no chance of having anything but a sentimental, contrived, and ultimately frustrated response to that demand.