

Are You Really Listening?

*I hear the rhythm of life in music,
I hear the rhythm of life in song;
I know the rhythm of life is beating,
Because the rhythm of life is strong;
I feel the rhythm of life around me,
Because the rhythm is everywhere...*

Oye la musica de la vida (Hear the music of life!)

(Lyrics from choral composer Jay Althouse's song "Oye La Musica")

These are words that catch your attention and are definitely worthy of further reflection! The music of life is indeed everywhere but the question is this -- are we really truly listening? Are we truly, "savoring the music"? Are we really grateful for the gift of listening and hearing? Or do we take it for granted?

Of course listening is a skill that most of us musicians really pride ourselves on and we usually give ourselves high grades in this area. Jazz guitarist/composer Pat Metheny once shared that, "My first relationship to any kind of musical situation is as a listener." Careful, attentive listening is vital to a satisfying musical experience.

However, there are very many different things you can listen for when listening to a recording. There is the groove, the changes, the words, the arrangement, the bass, drums, piano, horns, and many other aspects as well. You can listen to learn more about your instrument, hearing other people's chops, improvising, and writing skills. And this is all well and good. But sometimes unfortunately it is easy to become stuck in a listening rut where you are only listening for certain things instead of listening to the spirit of the music and being able to respond to it. The French Composer Claude Debussy put it this way,

"There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law." And Keith Jarrett once said this, "Jazz is there and gone. It happens. You have to be present for it. That simple." Wow! You have to be present for it. I would go even further and say that you have to be listening in the present moment, listening with an open heart and not with just your head!

I am reminded of the story of the Rabbi who had a member in his synagogue who always seemed to be in a hurry, his motor (so to speak) always running at full throttle. The Rabbi asked him, "Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. Tell me, where are you running to all the time? The man answered," I'm running after success, I'm running after fulfillment, I'm running after the reward for all my hard work." The Rabbi responded, " That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are ahead of you, trying to elude you and if you run fast enough, you may catch up with them. But isn't it possible that those blessings are behind you, that they are looking for you, and the more you run, the harder you make it for them to find you?"

I have a saying I use quite a bit that fits very well at this juncture--- "celebrate today and savor the music!" Take time to really listen to music. Slow down, turn off the TV and try to avoid any distractions. Sit down, relax, and savor the music. Close your eyes and allow yourself to respond emotionally as well as intellectually to the music.

But I would go further and ask are you hearing the music of life? Are you listening not just to recorded music but also to the "music of life"? Author and Pastor Frederick Beuchner has written some really profound words concerning this.

"Listen to your life... I have discovered that if you keep your eye peeled and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it then it will open up to extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your spouse goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present in it, always hiddenly, always leaving you to recognize Him or not recognize Him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly...If I were called upon to state in a

few words the essence of everything I was trying to say as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

What a breathtaking statement! If we will take time to wake up and smell the flowers, (and the coffee!) and start listening we will be able to hear the beautiful ‘music of life’ itself! Since God created life it is holy and to be treasured moment by moment.

German saxophonist and composer Uwe Steinmetz reflects on his reasoning for becoming a musician: "As I thought more about my motivation for becoming a musician, I discovered that I had two 'unbalanced' sides to myself. 'One side was the contemplative one, that simply liked to listen to music, read poetry and observe nature and the visual arts. In this way I discovered something like "God"--a manifestation of the eternal beauty and truth behind reality.' But I also recognized egocentric feelings 'that poisoned the message of my music and influenced the way I interacted with others. My music had become just a form of self-expression. When I grasped the difference between what was really meaningful to me and the music that I was doing, I saw that I was heading for a dead-end street--both for my music and in my life.'

It is easy to get trapped in this dilemma if we fail to listen and recognize the gracious Spirit and giver of all that is good. Rev. Joel Miller exclaims, "We must take time to listen to the Spirit! In my experience, if we are really listening to the holy, the Spirit of Life is calling out to us: “Improvise! Be Cool! The beat is life, love is the key, and you’re all players, so listen and be funky.” To be able to respond and improvise you must be listening!

Uwe Steinmetz went on to find a much deeper spiritual experience by listening and paying attention to other peoples needs, and by responding to the voice of the Spirit. As a result his music and writing took on a much deeper and more satisfying nature. Our preoccupation with producing mass quantities of music can lead us to

a place where we are left with nothing more but a unhealthy narcissist focus upon ourselves and our own music.

As a matter of fact when we truly are listening to the Spirit the music flows! To be in communion with that which is holy is the source for an infinite variety of musical expression! If we center ourselves only on the finite things we are missing out on an incredible amount of great music!! Many times we as artists become too concerned whether others are listening to our music instead of us really listening to the music of others, the music of life, and the voice of the Spirit.

Recently I read about this great interview on CNN with Tom Arnold, the comedian. He had just wrote a book and the interviewer asked him, "Why did you write this book?" Arnold said, "The reason I wrote this book is because I am a broken person, and I do things to get people to love me."!!!!

And most of us musicians are in the exact same boat as Arnold! We are broken people, checking our CD sales and other stats to see if we really are people of significance. Asking the questions, does my music and my life really matter? But the answer to this isn't really found in the amount of our CD sales, fame, or financial success from our music. On the contrary, our deep need for significance is answered by truly listening and savoring the gift of life, music, and God! Are you really listening?

Written by David Arivett © 2004 Songs Of David