

Cerebration or Celebration

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Until recently the place of performance in a liberal arts education was hardly a matter of debate where the *arts* of liberal arts were concerned. Performance in the arts has been considered distinctly second class, *infra dig*, base, common, and popular, at least from the time of the ascendancy of the German university system, that enormously influential prototype of “civilized” education all over the world. No doubt, Plato’s mistrust of the arts as unreal (“the shadow of a shadow”) but nevertheless able to disrupt rationality lies behind the purdah they have enjoyed so widely and so long.

This was not always the case. Some of our “Old Ones” in Greece and China considered performance in music, poetry, and sometimes even painting and dance to be necessary parts of a proper education. Traces of this wisdom remain with us to this day. Mao Tse-Tung and Emperor Hirohito are honored for their poetic skill, as are not a few South American generals and presidents. The North European-Platonic blight has not been quite universal in its effects, but we need to remember how low we have fallen: dance relegated to “phys. ed.,” performance confined to conservatories granting degrees in “science” rather than in “arts” and elsewhere denied academic credit.

This state of affairs is all the more strange when one reflects on the *insistence* upon performance in other areas of liberal knowledge. Proficiency in languages is measured by fluency; the physicist must show his skill in the laboratory; anthropologists and geologists, as other examples, earn their spurs in their field work.

For me the question of performance in the liberal arts was settled when I first met Mantle Hood on the occasion of the formal organization of the Society for Ethnomusicology at the Fifth International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, which took place in Philadelphia in 1956. Mantle held forth on his concept of “bi-musicality” and cited his own experience and that of his students to show that it was possible for non-Indonesians to perform gamelan music well enough to please Indonesians. (President Sukarno on a state visit to the United States was enchanted to be greeted with such a performance.) More importantly, Mantle stressed that essential dimensions of musical understanding could be acquired only through performance.

When Robert E. Brown joined the Wesleyan faculty, his dedication to non-Western performance formed a true marriage with our own well-established dedication to Western performance. Faculty and students were soon seated cross-legged on his Indian rugs, while eating curry and practicing their *sa-ri-ga-ma*. It was assumed that the aptest pupils would give public concerts in Indian costume, that Indians would be coming here, and that

we would be going to India. "Performance" meant every possible identification, experientially, with the music and the culture that produced it.

On reflection, I find that the United States is fertile soil for the doctrine of bi-musicality. Several luxuriant gardens of multi-musicality were already in full flower before the gamelan bloomed at U.C.L.A. under Mantle Hood. Jazz and blues and their subspecies were too irresistible to remain for long solely in the hands of the Blacks. Soon White imitators were outnumbering the Blacks, and in a few instances the former have been good enough to pass muster even in Black opinion. The same has happened, also without benefit of university, in urban folk singing. Not only have rural folk songs been altered to fit urban canons, but young people from the Bronx have adopted Kentucky accents, dress, and other mannerisms in a single-minded effort to conform with every nuance of what was to them a new and exciting musical tradition. A similar devotion to a new experience developed among American Indian hobbyists. I became aware of this movement in 1964 when Tony Isaacs came to Wesleyan to study American Indian music. He came from a non-Indian West Coast background, but he could sing like a Ponca or a Sioux and knew the exact shades of difference between the two styles. It was then that I learned that there were more hobbyists than there were Indians, and that some of them could sing in Plains style (one of the most difficult) well enough to be considered equals by highly regarded Indian singers. Mantle Hood's movement at the university level, then, was matched by the same devotion and practice at various popular and grass-roots levels in this country.

Another factor in the 1950's and 60's was the massive exposure of Americans to non-European cultures. Begun during World War II, it was reinforced via the Peace Corps and increased foreign travel in the decades after 1945. American cultural isolation has thus been shattered, and the effects of our exposure are reverberating through the synapses of religion and art, where cultural nerves are most exposed. There are faint twitches even in the sciences.

Culture shock at Wesleyan has been felt in the fields of literature, history, government, languages, and others, but most deeply in music. After Bob Brown's arrival, came an ever-growing number of visiting artists from India, Japan, Java, Africa, and Afro-America, as well as a steady swell of students from the armed forces, from the Peace Corps, and from Western music programs all over the country. Our music department was transformed from a well-loved service operation, providing operas, choruses, and concerts at a high level (but with very few majors) to one of the largest undergraduate and graduate programs at Wesleyan, both in research and in performance. It was the second Ph.D. program to be established at the college and is still the only one outside the natural sciences. The department has grown to thirty-one graduate students, thirty-three undergraduate majors, three ethnomusicologists among an academic staff of eleven, and twelve visiting artists in non-Western music among a performance-teaching staff of thirty-

seven. With Wesleyan's student enrollment numbering about 1500 in all, these figures represent impressive support from the college.

These figures also speak eloquently with regard to the role of performance in the Wesleyan program. Our goal is to produce exceptional scholars who will make a contribution to intercultural understanding with their knowledge of and respect for a variety of the world's cultures through the avenue of music. We hope that whatever they write will show a sensitivity to the material that can be possible only if they have actually performed the musics they are discussing. Ideally, this performance, begun at Wesleyan under teachers from the cultures involved, will continue during a field study period in that country under conditions of maximum exposure to the culture as a whole.

We are aware of the powerful pull of any music toward experience rather than discussion: celebration rather than cerebration. Plato considered it a distraction from the Good. But we have found that most students realize the rarity of musical talent sufficient to make a living by performance alone and the special difficulty of achieving this in a new cultural setting. We prefer to think of the Good as the combination, and so far we have found that even the highest levels of attainment in performance skills have not tended to supplant "scholarship" but have, instead, given it a deeper meaning. Cerebration need not be a poor second to celebration but may be infinitely enriched by it.

This is not to say that we have been immune to the tension between performance and academic study. But in the decade of our program's existence we have found that performance has been a safeguard against niggling scholarship and that scholarship has added a healthy dimension of speculation to the creative process. Historical and analytical studies, valuable as they can be, constitute only half a loaf in the world of music. In dealing with the music of another century, where fragmentary memories and notations, skeletal at best, are all the record we have, half a loaf is better than none. But in ethnomusicology most of our research is done in a living music whose best performers can communicate with us. In a situation of such splendor it would be a matter of inexcusable scholarly neglect to fail to study the material in every accessible dimension.