

Reflections on a Lifetime of Music-Making

I began looking back on my 60-plus years of music study and performance, which began in 1952 when I first took piano lessons from Mrs. Meyer at age 5, and then, two years later, when I became church organist at the St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (my father, a dentist, was the choir director). Why I began this exercise on this subject, I am not sure. What, after all, did I learn over a lifetime of thinking about, studying, preparing, and performing music?

I began writing down these “essentials” of my music world which began in that Lake Michigan town and continued at the University of Wisconsin (BM and MS) and the University of Illinois (Ed. D.). Thereafter, for the next 10 years, I taught music at a piano studio and at public middle and high school, junior college, and university levels – all of which contributed to my decision in 1983 to move to NYC and create MidAmerica Productions and MidAm International; the move was prompted by my desire to find greater diversity and challenges than I had previously experienced.

Now, after 35 years in New York City and a thousand-plus concerts in NYC and world-wide as a conductor and presenter, I am writing about what I have learned as I have grown and evolved as a musician and conductor. Here are some of my thoughts...

1. **Know Thyself.**

Attributed to Socrates and inscribed on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece. Why is music important? Why is one a musician? Why did I feel this was the only road I wanted to take in my professional life?

2. **Before You Conduct, Have the Entire Score “In Your Ear.”**

Know in advance what you are expecting to hear. You cannot rehearse or perform any work unless you “own it” prior to the first gesture.

3. **Understand What Makes for a Great Work of Music.**

I learned that there are six important and critical aesthetic factors and they are: Unity, Complexity, Intensity, Proportion, Blend, and Balance (all attributed to American aesthetician Monroe Beardsley, 1915-1985). When these notions work together, there is a deep, unforgettable and satisfying feeling. A composer attempts to achieve these in a composition and a conductor attempts to bring these characteristics to light through his artists. This was the most important idea I learned while at the University of Illinois.

4. **Choose Music to Perform that is Worthy of Your Precious Time**

5. **Conduct Your Music, as Much as Possible, from Memory.**

Doing so will free up your hearing. Looking at a score while you conduct cuts down dramatically on what you are hearing. As the great conductor Herbert von Karajan said, “There is nothing to look at except your performers, so listen with your eyes.”

6. **Learn the Basics of Latin, Italian, German and French.**

The vast majority of the most important western vocal music is in these four languages.

7. **Lead Your Music Performances, but Let the Composition Dictate Your Gestures.**

8. Learn to Conduct by Watching and Listening to Other Conductors.

I recommend familiarizing yourself with the Berlin Philharmonic's digital concerts live, in archives and interviews. This became, for me, an invaluable tutoring source for all repertoire provided by the great orchestra and all their guest conductors going back to the 1930s. I highly recommend viewing, on YouTube, "The Art of Conducting: Great Conductors of the Past."

9. Don't Over-Conduct.

Let the artists sing. Let them play. Conductors make no sound, but they can make music. Make gestures when you need to guide the interpretation, create the drama, and mold the tender moments.

10. Every Time One Conducts it is an Audition.

11. Know the "Form" of the Work You are Conducting.

Form dictates everything and is dictated by the composer. The composer's intentions are central to understanding and conveying a performance.

12. There is no greater collaboration between conductor and ensemble than when the performers WANT to perform for you. When that happens, there is no limit as to what the conductor can ask of his or her performers and magic is possible.

And, finally, from Fernando Pessoa (1888 to 1935), Poet, Author, Writer, Philosopher:

"The value of life is not in the time it lasts, but in the intensity in which it is lived. Make life about unforgettable moments, unexplained events and incomparable people."

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