

Back in 1697, William Congreve claimed that "Musick hath charms to sooth a savage Breast." Was he right? Now, more than three hundred years after his observation, we who live in a divided and hate-filled world might be well served to heed his message, fix our eyes upon the muse, and tune our ears to the music of the spheres ...

Hatred and The Muse: A Parable for Our Time

Jim Willis



I knew something was wrong at the introductory dinner, but it just didn't register with me. Or if it did, I somehow buried it in my subconscious. I guess I was too preoccupied with the thought of tomorrow's concert. It kept me from noticing details that didn't pertain to the mechanics of actually making music. The musicians I was going to be dealing with were all experienced pros. As the visiting conductor, I thought of them as my instrument. They were the orchestra. I was the maestro with the baton. It was my job to lead. They were to follow. It was that simple.

Or so I thought.

The orchestra itself was strings only, and the idea was to present music for violin, viola, cello and bass by Barber, Tchaikovsky, Copeland and Grieg. The schedule called for the traditional two-day affair of an introductory dinner on Friday evening followed by a two-hour rehearsal. On Saturday morning we would rehearse for three hours. Then, after a mid-afternoon break, we would have a one hour run-through in the concert hall itself, just to check sound levels and get used to any acoustical anomalies that might be present on the stage. We had all done it before. Different people, different places. But all the same.

The introductory dinner got us off to a rocky start, though. The restaurant where it was held didn't have a big enough room to seat everybody, so they had set us up in two adjacent rooms. There were no assigned seats, so everybody chose their own place.

That was the first warning sign. The musicians were supposed to use this time to get to know each other and me. But they naturally gravitated toward people they either already knew or somehow felt comfortable with. All the women, for instance, sat together. The younger musicians hung in one corner, the older guys in another. Violinists clumped over here, cellists over there. That kind of thing.

As the visiting conductor I tried to schmooze with everybody, but when the time came for me to sit down and eat I had to choose one room and one group. That identified me with a single clique and I didn't like it.

The problem only grew worse at the first rehearsal. Everybody had their own ideas about tempo, phrasing, and bowing, and none of them seemed to agree with mine. I was the

conductor. They were supposed to follow me. Those kind of decisions were mine to make. But it wasn't as if their jobs depended on this one weekend gig, and they felt free to argue with me about everything. I admit it. It ticked me off. Tempers began to flair so I cut the rehearsal short, hoping to get a fresh start in the morning.

Apparently I wasn't the only one to notice what was going on, though. The atmosphere on Saturday was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Some people resorted to passive aggressive tendencies. They played just a little slower than I wanted to go. Or a little faster. Entrances were ragged. Dynamics were all over the map. Accents varied according to the mood people were in. I've never felt such blatant discontent. "Hatred" was not too harsh a word. They seemed to hate each other. They didn't trust me. And, I'll admit it, I started to despise them.



Why did they need to act this way? What malevolent spirit filled that room? What had I done to deserve this? We had come together for a common purpose - to make music. And the music had become a battleground. I've never felt such consuming rage. I'd give a downbeat, half would play just a fraction too soon and the other half would come in just a fraction too late. It was like pulling taffy. All I had was a stick in my hand. I couldn't do the actual playing for them. I was as frustrated as I've ever been in my life.

After we had finished for the morning and separated to our neutral corners, there was nothing to do except fret and fume. I didn't understand them. They wouldn't even look at me.

Some of them decided to skip the final run-through. They just didn't show up. What was I going to do? Fire them? The concert was in a few hours. Who was I going to get to replace them? We couldn't cancel the performance. The tickets were already sold. It was going to be a packed house. All we could do, it seemed, was plunge ahead and get it over with. But I was scared. Really scared.

Eight o'clock finally came. The musicians had assembled and it was curtain time. They tuned their instruments and sat back in their chairs. No one took responsibility. Everyone waited to see what would happen.

To this day I don't know what made me do what I did. I swear I never planned it. I was so frustrated that I couldn't think that far ahead. Even when I adjusted my tux and tie and walked out on the stage, I hadn't planned on saying anything. I just wanted to get it over with.

But as I took my bow and mounted the podium I somehow felt I had to vent - to let the audience know what was going on - to be honest. The music deserved that much respect.

So before I gave the downbeat I turned and faced the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, as I pointed over my shoulder to the orchestra, "I hate these people."

There was an audible gasp from the crowd.

"And they hate me. What's more, they hate each other.

Don't be surprised. We're no different than you, your neighbors, and everyone else who lives, works, and votes in this country of ours. We're divided and we hate each other. We can't work together anymore. We despise our leadership, on both sides of the isle, and we're allowing our hatred to sabotage every bit of nobility that might be found in whatever makes us human. All that out there, the stuff you thought you left behind when you came in here, has come in with you. It permeates every nook and cranny of our culture, even our churches and concert halls.

We've tried, folks. Those of us up here on the stage have really tried. For two days, we've tried. And I can confidently say that we haven't made any music at all in the time we've been together. I hate it! They hate it!

Don't get me wrong. We all love music. It's what brought us here in the first place. But today, before we begin, I have to warn you that, so far as I can tell, the music has died. We've each suffered, to be true. But the music we came together to create never had a chance. I'm going to turn around now, face these people who I really resent, and do my best. The music deserves that much. But what's going to happen after we start? Well, that's up to us, isn't it?"

I turned around and looked at the orchestra. Before I raised my baton I closed my eyes and tried to eliminate every negative feeling and every dispirited emotion. I focused entirely on the music. I let it fill my mind and, more importantly, my heart. I tried to forget about every hurtful thing these musicians had done over the past two days. I reminded myself that they were, in the end, pros. It didn't really matter how we felt about each other personally. All that counted right now was our shared art and the fact that we all loved music.

For a full minute, maybe even two, I just stood there with my eyes closed and meditated on what music meant to us all. Then, ever so slowly, I raised my baton, and brought it down to begin the hauntingly beautiful Adagio for Strings, by Samuel Barber.

To this day I will never understand what happened next. For the next hour our love for music triumphed over our hatred and frustration. Each musician performed up to his or her innate standards, and contributed the specialized talent that had brought them this far in the first place. Each had undergone their own unique trials. Each had suffered through the process of



perfecting their own inadequacies. They had spent untold hours practicing - strengthening their weaknesses and molding their strengths. I could trust them. And they decided to trust me.



The Muse smiled upon us that evening, and we became one. It was the single most breathtaking concert I have ever conducted. Every nuance, every phrase, every note, even every pause - it was all there.

When the final note had faded to its inevitable conclusion, the audience rose to their feet as one. I was too spent to even move. But before I turned around to receive the adulation of those who loved music as much as I did, and who recognized the difference between mediocrity and genius, I stepped down from the podium so I was on the same level as the musicians. I took the concert master's hand and motioned to the orchestra to stand. Only then did I turn to the audience. Then, as one, we bowed together and thanked the goddess of music for blessing us this evening, and for restoring our hope.

As I walked off toward the wings I knew I still bore in my heart a real resentment toward some of these folks. I doubted if I would ever see eye to eye with them about many aspects of our art. To be honest, I didn't even want to see most of them again.

But we had proved tonight that people can differ, disagree, and, yes, even hate, yet still come together for a common goal that we all hope to achieve even though we almost always fail to fulfill it. That which is noble, that which is good, that which elevates us all and lifts us to distant realms, is always possible. All we have to do is let go of our individual, ego-driven pettiness, and seek that which beckons us from afar.

The Muse always awaits. And sometimes she allows us to create unexpected beauty.

As I continued off stage I felt my body begin to dissolve. Each pixelated particle separated and began to vanish into nothingness. I began to slowly disappear.

It was only then that I realized it had all been a dream.

