

INTRODUCTION TO “GOING BEHIND THE NOTES” LECTURE CONCERT SERIES

They closed the schools in Vienna on the day of Beethoven’s funeral. Twenty thousand people, 10% of Vienna’s population, filed past his coffin. Classical music was an integral part of society in those times. Unlike today, rulers and leaders in society themselves played music, and those who had affluence contributed massive financial resources to enable music to be composed and performed.

When many of us were young, Leonard Bernstein was on network television mentoring a nation. Radio stations nationwide were broadcasting Karl Haas’s syndicated series, “Adventures in Good Music.” Concert halls were still dignified temples for spiritual uplift, frequently presenting the highest forms of classical music, and they were filled to capacity. Today, children are only rarely taken to concerts, and audiences are almost entirely comprised of people whose hair is the color of mine. It is now a secular, materialistic world, and I feel sadness that there are many people who are not, at least at times, surrounded by something greater than themselves.

Today concert halls and presenters frequently advertise and emphasize that they are presenting “entertainment.” Classical music was not about entertainment to Robert Schumann, to Beethoven, to Bach or to Handel. When Handel was told after a performance of “Messiah,” that he had “mightily entertained” his audience, he replied: “My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them: I wish to make them better!!”

Classical music is not about entertainment to me. That is why I have created my series of eight lecture concerts subtitled, “Going Behind the Notes.” The composer Robert Schumann built his life on his belief that “it is the artist’s lofty mission to shed light into the very depths of the human heart.” That philosophy is why I entered the music profession. I believe it is the obligation of classical musicians to do all we can to save live classical music, which in the United States is in danger of becoming an endangered species.

I believe what classical music needs is not a “dumbing down,” which it often now receives, but rather a re-emphasis on how it can lift people up. Emphasizing what at its core it is about includes calling attention to the potential spiritual messages behind the notes. It includes exploring the lives and personalities of the composers to probe why they composed as they did, and what in their times influenced each one’s philosophical outlook. It includes sharing how composers structured their pieces, and how interpreters evolve an interpretation.

Each composer we will explore in this series is unique, and therefore each presentation has drawn out of me a different tone and mood. When I present Haydn, we will have fun with his sense of humor. The texts of the Beethoven and Schumann presentations are the most philosophical, and, along with the Liszt, are the most inspirational and uplifting. By the way, I believe the Liszt presentation to be the most significant of the eight, because it corrects the false and misleading impression most people have of Liszt, and it emphasizes his view of the spiritual purpose of music.

Each presentation will have considerably different percentages of performing and talking. My choices have been influenced by the fact that I view this as a one-time opportunity to be “going behind the

notes” together. For the rest of your lives, you can be listening to the music of these composers as much as you wish.

I realize that these presentations are not short. However, I have aimed to make them very comprehensive, and wish to save you from doing extensive amounts of research. When Mozart was told by Emperor Joseph I that his compositions contained too many notes, his response was, “only as many as are necessary.” I have aimed to include only what I believe to be necessary in order to understand each composer’s life and music.

Mozart consciously intended his compositions to be for “amateurs and connoisseurs.” My goal is similar—to help those of you who are less experienced with classical music to be better able to understand, love and appreciate what you hear, and to also provide stimulus to those of you who are experienced listeners.

George Fee
www.dersnah-fee.com
Midland MI
2020