



CELLO

Book Reviews and Ramblings to Peruse

by David Holmes

Book Review Number One:

I have been working my way through a couple of interesting and very different music books lately. The first book is *The Power of Music: Pioneering Discoveries in the New Science of Song*, by Elena Mannes, published by Walker and Company in 2011. Ms. Mannes is from a distinguished musical family (her grandparents founded the Mannes School of Music and a great uncle, Walter Damrosch, conducted at the Metropolitan Opera), but she has spent most of her career as a documentary film maker, for which she has won six Emmys. This, her first book, sticks very carefully to what science research has discovered on music and the brain. I am very grateful that Mannes avoids reaching exaggerated conclusions from narrowly constructed research (unlike what happened in the case of the so-called “Mozart effect,” when the results of one very limited study spawned a number of products to make our babies smarter. The results of those studies have not been replicated, by the way.)

Why are researchers studying music? The fundamental reason is to understand why music is so very integral to all human cultures and how that may have affected the evolution of the brain. Science has only been exploring the brain/music relationship for about a decade, so it’s still in its infancy. Some interesting snippets from Mannes’ book:

- A German researcher has found the core intervals common to all music in the cries of babies.
- Long-term musical therapy on people with neurological problems (from strokes, etc.) can prove very helpful in re-establishing lost abilities. Some stroke victims who cannot talk can still sing familiar songs.
- Alzheimer’s patients respond to music even after losing most other brain functions.
- Music making and perception involve more parts of the brain than just about any other activity.

- Different parts of the brain are activated depending on the type of music being listened to.

There is an interesting interview with Elena Mannes on NPR from the June 1, 2011 *Talk of the Nation* radio show as well.

Book Review Number Two:

I stumbled upon a really neat book titled *The Music Lesson: A Spiritual Search for Growth Through Music*, by Victor L. Wooten, published by Berkley Books in 2007. Wooten is a jazz bass player from Nashville who has won four Grammy awards and is the only person to be named “Bass Player of the Year” by BASS Magazine three times. This book is mesmerizing and profound: a mysterious musician (Michael) shows up and leads the speaker through various experiences that deepen his understanding of music and musical performance. The chapters in this book are laid out very neatly in “lessons” on music, in this order: Groove, Notes, Articulation/Duration, Technique, Emotion/Feel, Dynamics, Rhythm/Tempo, Tone, Phrasing, Space/Rest, and Listening. The mysterious master points out that he cannot “teach” the student anything; he can just “show” him some things. I liked this semantic change. It made me feel a bit different about being a “teacher.”

Here is an excerpt of the mysterious Michael speaking:

“Emotion is a powerful force”, Michael stated. “E, meaning ‘energy,’ and motion, meaning ‘activity.’ So, emotion can be looked at as ‘energy in motion’ or ‘active energy.’ If you play with the vowels, hidden meanings can be brought out of many words...Emotion properly directed, can cause anything to happen. A mediocre musician can win over an audience by sheer emotion alone. Remember, one of the ten elements (of music), raised to a very high level, can be used in a way that overshadows the fact that the musician is lacking in skill of the other nine.” (page 98) There are so many fascinating and deep ideas in *The Music Lesson*. It moved and inspired me.

Posture, Take Two

More on my obsession with posture: the Alexander Technique idea of leading up with the head while hanging shoulders and arms is very useful. An interesting e-book on cello playing and Alexander Technique, by Ethan Kind, is easy to google. He really emphasizes the importance of the neck being relaxed in helping the head ascend freely. Nora Ephron didn’t like her neck, but I haven’t (and I bet most cellists haven’t) spent much thought on how their necks fit into cello playing. To release tension of any sort, an active attempt to inhibit an unwanted tension is necessary at first. One can also alternately tense and relax muscles or groups of muscles to increase awareness of tension and practice learning to relaxation techniques. Speaking of unusual cello-related body parts: keep those hips, knees, and feet relaxed, y’all!!

Even More On Necks

Experimenting with the distance between one’s neck and one’s cello neck can be helpful. For taller people, more distant between the cellist and cello can improve left hand ease and enhance the sound from the bow as well.

Texting Students

My latest attempt to help some students reach their practice goals is to text them a couple of times a week with a reminder to practice. This has, in the few weeks I’ve been doing it, proved to be quite helpful, especially with teenage boys, who often seem to “forget” to practice. I’m taken aback at how quickly they usually respond to my texts.

Landfillharmonic

Most of you have probably been sent the link to the “landfillharmonic” in Paraguay, South America. There are several YouTube videos showing these amazing children and adults who have built and play violins, cellos, and wind instruments from the garbage in a land fill that they all basically live on top of. It is a very powerful testimony to

music and the human spirit and makes one feel very grateful not to live on a garbage dump.

More Minnesota Orchestra Gloom

I hate to end on a depressing note, but, as I write this in December, I can't help myself. If not having the Minnesota Orchestra playing for over a year isn't bad enough, I was a bit in the dark about a couple of aspects that make me even less favorable toward the board that unceremoniously locked out the musicians. Ray Hair, international president of the American Federation of Musicians points out in his Message, in the November International Musician Journal, that the musicians have been denied healthcare as

a result of the lockout. Hair believes the board has engaged in "economic terrorism." Michael Henson, the manager of the orchestra and often the voice of the board, is still making nearly \$400,000 a year. (Let's not forget the 60 million dollar refurbishing of a now vacated Orchestra Hall.) The rest of the board, as usual, reads like a who's who of the richest corporate executives in the state. Why do boards always *only* have this demographic of people on them? I guess I'm just too naïve to understand budgets and other corporate intricacies from the "real world." [The 15-month dispute ended in mid-January 2014. ed.]

David Holmes is currently a faculty member

at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. †