

The Emperor's New Clothes



by Niall O'Riordan

Have you ever left a concert, often given by a 'big name', feeling underwhelmed, only to find out the other audience members found it 'amazing'? Have you ever played a flute that has a £10,000 price tag, and secretly felt the £2000 one sounded better? Have you ever left a performance feeling totally inspired and uplifted, only to meet somebody who didn't share your experience? Do you share what you really think... or do you edit yourself?

Many of us simply don't trust ourselves. We don't trust what we hear and we don't trust what we see. For fear of looking stupid we remain silent or, worse still, we go along with the crowd. The fear of embarrassment and rejection (along with death and falling) are innate human fears which should not be underestimated. So it is not at all surprising that we employ strategies to avoid these fears. These strategies very often include presenting a highly edited version of ourselves and our opinions in order to fit in with the crowd. Unfortunately, depending on how unconscious our fears of embarrassment and rejection are, we can then be left vulnerable and easy to manipulate, and our response to people in authority (which might include artists) can be influenced by these fears. I touched on these issues in my article 'Artist as Hero' published in *FLUTE* in March 2011 where I discussed the dangers of putting people on pedestals – in effect, handing power away.

Filters

Most of the time we listen to people through a filter governed by their status and not by what we are actually hearing. I became aware of this phenomenon many years ago, but I doubted myself; the reason seemed too simple, and today I'm finding it very empowering to acknowledge this. Many of us think 'if they are good enough to be in that position or win that competition, it is probably my hearing that is off, not them.' For example, if the artist is a principal of a major orchestra we hear them through this filter; we secretly may not like their playing but because we fear looking stupid we keep

it to ourselves. Of course, I'm not suggesting we should be insensitive or impolite. What I am saying is: don't deny your own experience, you are entitled to express your own opinion with safety and respect, especially among your friends. The danger is if you don't acknowledge your own judgments, it can be actively disempowering. In fact, you may not want to verbalise your opinion at all, but what is important is that you acknowledge it to yourself. Of course, personal taste does come into it, but I suspect not as much as we think. It can become fashionable to like a certain person, or worse still, be fashionable not to like somebody and, just like sheep, many of us go along with the crowd, abandoning what we really think. If, in a concert we respond to an artist through a pre-constructed filter, we've actually made our mind up about an experience before it has even happened!

This position is rampant in the art world. How often are dubious pieces of 'art' (using the term very loosely) sold for huge sums of money because of the status of the artist? Have you ever looked at a piece of contemporary art or heard contemporary composition and thought 'what a load of rubbish'? It is interesting to examine how we acknowledge these reactions. In the past, I have denied them, blaming myself for inadequacy of understanding. Similarly, I have been at concerts where the performer was extremely flat throughout, only to find everybody ecstatic afterwards; I have wondered to myself if I was really at the same concert. I have also been at concerts where I desperately wanted to give a

standing ovation and feared I would be the only one standing, and sometimes I was! It seems to me people hand their power away and stop listening.

Self-doubt and lack of inner trust, because of a fear of embarrassment, can also come to the fore when choosing a musical instrument. At the beginning of this article I asked whether you have ever played a flute that has a £10,000 price tag, but which you secretly thought was less good than the £2,000 instrument. Many years ago I was chatting with William Bennett about flutes and told him I preferred the sound of nickel to silver. His reply to me was “that’s because you listen with your ears”. I looked at him in a very confused way before he continued, “most people listen with their wallet”. There is a lot of truth in this. Just because an instrument is more expensive does not mean it is better.

The courage to stand alone

What comes to mind here is the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* and the lessons to be learned from it. For those of you who are not familiar with it, it is a short tale by Hans Christian Andersen about a vain Emperor who hires two swindlers who guarantee him the finest suit of clothes from a fabric invisible to anyone who is unfit for his position. The Emperor cannot see the clothing himself, but pretends that he can for fear of appearing unfit for his position; his ministers do the same. When the suit is finished the Emperor marches in procession before his subjects, who play along with the pretence, until a child in the crowd, too young to understand the desirability of keeping up the pretence, exclaims that the Emperor is wearing nothing at all and the cry is taken up by others. The Emperor cringes, suspecting the assertion is true, but continues the procession. There are a lot of valuable lessons to be learnt in this amusing story. All the subjects see that the Emperor is not wearing anything, but everybody is afraid to speak the truth; all except the young child follow the crowd. This dynamic happens frequently in the music business and the chances are that what you are hearing is what other people are hearing as well – but no one dare speak. I have also seen this frequently in masterclasses, when the teacher is so adamant in his or her ‘own way’ of doing things (or in other words is enslaved to their own ego) that they impose solutions which make a student sound worse – and nobody in the class is willing to give honest feedback.

So we come to the Emperor himself, a person in power and yet who is secretly insecure, doubting his own abilities. He is vain and his ego is so large that even when he is exposed he continues the procession in order to save face. Those who have the tenacity to get out there and do it regardless of their self-doubts, rather than those with talent alone, can be the ones who succeed. They are aware of their shortcomings and, therefore, they will do anything to preserve their position of power; and because nobody speaks up they are given this

power while those who truly have a gift can go unnoticed. Like the weavers in the tale, the music industry and record labels are content to mislead us with substandard classical music which is heavily marketed, often in a sexualised manner. They play to the ego of the vulnerable and make a lot of money at the same time. The public don’t speak up, and so it continues.



Becoming the child

Lastly in this story, though, we have the child who speaks the truth. Children have not yet been programmed by their environment and, therefore, they do not have the same fears and concerns as adults. Children are refreshing because they do not edit what they think but speak as they find. This is the spirit of the pioneering artist.

What is important about becoming more like the child in this story? By being more honest about what you think you help empower those who really deserve success rather than those with the tenacity to take it. By speaking up you might also become a voice that empowers others to do the same. You will help ‘vain emperors’ learn a tough but valuable lesson, too. Perhaps through your honest words some of them will work harder, develop their skills, and move beyond their ego into a loving place where they just want to inspire, rather than chasing and maintaining power at all costs.

My hope is that we can all begin to trust ourselves that little bit more, learning to meet performers in the moment, from a neutral position that is not influenced by their status, and championing players who inspire us even if they are unknown. When we all start doing this we are helping the truly talented share their voice and we take an active part in letting beautiful music flower in the world. Remember the words of Leonardo da Vinci: ‘Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence’ I encourage you to become an independent thinker, just like the child.

