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Music Fullness of the Present

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It is a somewhat unfamiliar feeling for me to be with you tonight standing up rather than sitting down. Usually I heed the advice given to the shoemaker: "Cobbler, stick to your last." But just for once I wanted to make an exception and briefly talk to you about a riddle that my work as a pianist has posed for me over the years, a riddle, a koan if you will, that life seems to have saddled me with.

And my hope is that in sharing some of this journey, it may offer, to you too, a new perspective on hearing and listening to music, in particular at tonight's recital.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber relates, in the "Chassidic Books," a question that was put to Rabbi Jizchak of Worki: "What was the sin that Adam committed, what was the original sin?" And the Rabbi answered: "The sin of Adam was that he 'became concerned with tomorrow,' that he 'took thought of tomorrow.'"

When I first read this I felt a sigh of relief. At the very least I would have thought that the first act of revolt by our ancestor had something to do with Pride, with the Serpent, or, worse yet, with some mysterious sexual secret...

Well, no, not at all: he thought of tomorrow. What is wrong with that? It sure is what most of us seem to be doing most of the time. I at least find it almost impossible to simply wait for "the morrow" with the patience counseled by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "as a tree which does not push forth its sap and which remains, in winter, full of confidence that Spring will arrive." Or, as a famous Zen saying has it: "Sitting quietly, Doing nothing, Spring comes and the grass grows by itself."

For better or for worse I have always felt much more akin to Faust, that proto-type of Western man, of whom Goethe says: "Destiny has given him a spirit, which, forever indomitable, propels him forward, a spirit whose hurriedness drags him along and causes him to jump over the joys of life."

The real problem seems to be not so much that we recognize that there is a future, a tomorrow, but rather the fact that we attach ourselves to it, that we lean up against it, with haste, with desire, with fear.

I myself have come into contact with this dilemma, not in an academic course of philosophy or theology, but in a form which was personal, existential and very painful.

The destiny, of which Goethe speaks, insinuated itself into my life particularly during my studies in Paris. That is almost 40 years ago and I have needed most of the intervening years to become conscious of it and, to a small extent, resist this siren's seductive appeal.

The guise under which that fate presented itself to me seems at first pretty innocent: I made it my goal to "conquer the piano," to become the "master" of my instrument. And what happened to me-only much later did I become aware of it-is the universal law which ordains that the more one tries to control, to master that which at first we simply "just" loved, the more the object, the goal of our actions, distances itself from the subject and so eludes us.

We all know that phenomenon in the area of love: the more we run after it, the more we try to hold, safeguard and secure it, the more we lose it.

Just possibly the Serpent has something to do with that after all; the serpent who whispers that yes, it is good to love, but that it would be even better if we could possess what we love, to become the master, the mistress of it, the Serpent knowing perfectly well that the one excludes the other, that Power and Love do not go together.

So, Adam thought of tomorrow and I, I worked like a possessed man at my instrument. What did we have in common, in what way were we similar?

Very simply in this: if one tries to achieve a goal-whatever that may be-one cannot do it without thinking of "tomorrow." And "tomorrow" can be a wonderful job or a terrifying encounter waiting for us in the future; it can be years away or as close as a thousandth of a second.

What is it that, for a pianist, constitutes tomorrow?

Let me give you an example and ask you a question much the same as I might ask a new piano student. I draw three or four notes like this: and I ask them: "Where is the first sound, and where is the second?"

At first my students look at me somewhat suspiciously-they expect some kind of trap-but when I prod them a little they answer:

"here and there"...

Then I pose the second question, "What is in between the first and the second note?" The usual response is-to my surprise always- "There is nothing in between." But then, with a little help, they see it: between the first and the second note is the first sound.

In other words, sounds have a certain length, however short that may be. They have a certain duration, even though our rhythmical notation suggests that there are only points or dots.

Our task as musicians and as listeners is: to be and to remain present to each sound as long as that sound exists in time. To put it another way, we may not lose track of the interval between any two notes or events and we must learn to listen after rather than on each sound. I might mention in parentheses that an Italian scholar has called "the unnoticed loss of the interval" the cause of the cataclysmic nature of our world today. It is at any rate certain that in order to be IN the music we must learn to be to be present in the interval between any two notes-otherwise one just goes THROUGH the music.

One of several problems that as a pianist I am faced with is this: How can I attain the future-the second sound-without leaving, be it for a split second, the first sound; or, how can I remain in the first sound, the present, which is there, and still move onto the second sound without anticipating a future which has not yet arrived. This task is not easy even when one plays slowly but the

challenge becomes greater yet when the piece is difficult, when the tempo is fast, or when the music is familiar.

Let me give an example of this last scenario: a piece that is familiar and see how difficult it is NOT to tumble into the next sound. (Beethoven: Fifth Symphony, opening bars.) You all know it. Now let me play it again, stopping in the middle of the phrase.

Where were you? Were you "just hearing" what was there, what was present, or had you already "fallen" into the future, into the next sound that was not yet "present?" And believe me, all that is even much more difficult to avoid if one is the performer, the "Do-er."

A new question arises: who could be that "I," that self which anticipates, which cannot simply wait but wants to be in control, in the driver's seat, who wants to "master his instrument" who wants to "play well?"

Without a doubt it is the "I" which considers itself the instigator of an action, the agent of what is going to happen. It is of this "I" that the Bhavagad Gita, the Sacred Book of Hindu Scriptures, speaks: "He/She who thinks: I (am) the Do-er, He/She is in error."

You've got to admit things are going from bad to worse. First in the Judeo-Christian tradition, I am considered a sinner because I think of tomorrow; and now, from the other corner of the world they are telling me that I am pretty stupid to believe that that "self" which shouldn't think of tomorrow, is capable of doing anything at all, or even exists.

If that is true, then I am afraid that pretty much all of us are mistaken most our lives in assuming that each person constitutes an individual center from which actions emanate; or, as a Herakleitos fragment puts it, "Although there is only one center, most men live in centers of their own."

If that is true then it seems to me that one might very well demand an explanation. If it isn't "I" who causes the keys of the piano to go down, if it isn't me (if I am an archer) who lets go of the arrow, how does it happen that the key goes down and that the arrow flies away? In other words: if it isn't me "doing" it, how does anything get done and what does it feel like if I don't try to control or to initiate the action? The great violinist Isaac Stern said once: "It is pretty rare, but it does happen to me sometimes that I play a concert where I have the distinct sensation, I have the certainty that it isn't me who plays, and yet, it is me entirely, at the same time."

One of the great football quarterbacks of the '70s, John Brodie, recounted, in *Psychology Today*, an identical experience of non-differentiation where the do-er and the thing being done are not separated one from the other, where player and ball and field of action have become one. What makes Brodie's account of particular interest is that he directly relates his experiences on the football field to the temporal realm, to Time.

After some preliminaries about energy streamers, the interviewer asks John Brodie: "Can you learn to develop clarity and strengthen your intentions?" Brodie: "Yes." Brodie is 6'2", 215 pounds, big shoulders, moves gracefully and-it is the interviewer talking-"as far as I know does

not know a Zen master from a rubber duck, but he is about to sound like one." Here is Brodie talking: "The player cannot be concerned with either the past or the future. At times I experience a kind of clarity that I've never seen described in any football story: sometimes this (game) seems to slow way down, as if everyone were moving in slow motion. It seems as if I have all the time in the world...the defensive line is coming at me just as fast as ever, and yet the whole thing seems like a movie or a dance in slow motion. It's beautiful."

Let me contrast these two examples with a short anecdote to see what happens if there is NOT that one-ness of player and field, of subject and object. Some time ago I had a repairman fix my garage door. We started talking and he told me that he had been a rodeo rider. And he described how your left hand is tied to a knob on the saddle while the right hand holds the lasso. He shared with me that he used to be a good rider. I asked him what happened. "Well," he said, "I got mangled up pretty badly once and now I am always looking for the hole." The hole, he explained was the spot where he could let himself fall without getting trampled on too badly. And I understood that, as in my own case, he was always just that split second ahead into the future and out of the present. His goal was to make sure there would be a soft landing, my goal to make sure-I put it somewhat simplistically-to play the right note in the right tempo at the right time.

To conclude these examples it may be relevant to quote the exhortation, a thousand times repeated, of Kenzo Awa, Zen Master of the Art of Archery: "The arrow must shoot itself. It must fall from your hand like a ripe fruit. You must hit the target inside yourself: it does not exist "out there." The hitter and the hit are not two opposing objects, but are one reality."

Good Lord in heaven, where is all of this getting us? Certainly into a different world than the one I normally inhabit, the world where it seems that, if I don't spend countless hours studying and preparing, I will fail as a teacher or get a bad review in the newspapers. This other world is more like the world of fairy tales, where we don't need to do anything, where, as the Tao Te Ching puts it, "When nothing is done, nothing is left undone."

It is the world of the lilies in the field, of the birds in the sky who don't work, don't sow and yet are clothed more wonderfully than Solomon in all his glory...It sure seems to be the easy way to paradise for lazy bums.

Oh, but wait a second: we are talking here about a very different kind of world, one where everything is topsy-turvy, upside-down, or, as I am beginning to discover: right-side up. Unfortunately the truth of the matter is that I cannot manage to enter into paradise, for the very reason that I am lazy-or, as the medieval scholastic philosophers would have said, slothful. Slothful in the sense that I am almost incapable of making that supreme effort of "doing nothing," wanting, desiring nothing; almost incapable of not giving free rein to that congenital weakness of falling, like Adam, into the future.

T.S. Eliot, in the third of his Four Quartets, says, "...to apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with Time is an occupation for the saint." Eliot is probably right in assuming that the saints are able to manage it; as for me, I must confess that most of the time I prefer to be deceived, to be "in error." I prefer to believe that everything depends on me, that I am the center from which activities emanate; I prefer to continue to think of tomorrow, rather than abandon my

faith in a law which seems universal and eternal: I am speaking of the law of casualty. It is a law which says: when I exert a force here, it causes a reaction there; or, in terms of temporality: from an action "before" there results a reaction "after."

But curiously enough: the physicists and mathematicians of the 20th century such as Einstein, Bohr and Heisenberg discover-in studying subatomic matter-that other world where phenomena appear and disappear by themselves, where we can no longer predict the future, where I can no longer separate myself from the event, where the principle of causality seems superseded by the principles of uncertainty, unpredictability and indeterminacy, a world where the Cartesian inner and outer, subject-object dichotomy is replaced by intrinsic relatedness.

Causality is intimately linked with the temporality of past and future, of time-before and time-after. One might say that causality and temporality form two sides of the same medal.

Now the Greeks knew not one but two kinds of Time. The first kind they called Chronos and we are very familiar with it because this is the Time that the West has adopted almost exclusively: a Time which-almost identical to its spatial counterpart-is infinitely divisible, successive, isolated and irreversible. The other kind of Time they called: Aioon; the English word "eon" is derived from that. The philosopher Plotinus gives an admirable definition of this other Time. He speaks of "tou aioonos he zoee," the life of Aioon, which does not consist of several (successive) time-elements, but of all Time together at once.

Another mystic, Meister Eckhart, speaking in the 14th century of Chronos-time, calls it "the only obstacle in finding God," And it is of this same Clock-Time that Carl Gustav Jung speaks in his Memoirs: "The greatest atrocity the white man has committed in Africa, is to introduce into that vast continent his-the white man's-notion of time."

Inversely, as to the second Time, Aioon, the poet Rilke began to see more and more clearly that it is the task of each one of us, and not only of the poet/artist: "diese volzählige Zeit zu leisten," to make operative, to achieve, to realize this Greater Time. It is that Complete and Whole Time which people such as Isaac Stern, John Brodie and the Master of Archery spent half of their lives getting in touch with.

What holds true for Time holds true for music; there are two kinds of music which correspond perfectly with the Time of Chronos and the Time of Aioon. The Aborigines of New Guinea know well how to distinguish them. There exists, they say, a music at which one arrives by joining sounds one to another. But there exists another music which alone is true and authentic. It is only the latter which is capable "of offering a dwelling-place to the Spirit."

Here, in simple words, we find laid bare the essential difference between Cartesian Space, whether spatial or temporal, and that other "Great Space." It is only from and in the latter that Love, Spirit and authentic Art can spring forth. Instead of ordinary Time and Space which separate, divide and isolate, this is the Space-Time of relatedness, of connectedness, of Buber's "I and Thou.

Ideally we would have at our disposal-in an altogether concrete, existential sense-the three stages of time: past, present, and future in a free, ever-changing kaleidoscopic interplay: not one encroaching on the other, nor one isolated from the other as if there were walls between them, but past, presence and future linked to one another in an interdependence which allows each to remain independent.

Perhaps all of this sounds a little complicated, so allow me two short stories.

There was in the jungles of India a man, pursued by a tiger. He ran as fast as he could but couldn't prevent the tiger from gaining on him. All of a sudden he sees a gully with, a little below the surface, a branch sticking out. He throws himself on that branch and is hanging on for dear life, when he hears a roar coming from below: another tiger who also seems not to have had dinner yet. He looks at the branch which he is holding onto and which a couple of mice have begun gnawing away at. Then he discovers right next to him a fresh strawberry. He stretches out his hand and brings it to his mouth. How delicious!

Without either ignoring the menace of the past or becoming paralyzed before the future, he finds, in the eternal moment, in the Fullness of the Present, his joy.

And here is the other. Two monks are returning to their monastery. There had been a bad storm which had left puddles of water everywhere. Before one particularly large puddle an elegantly dressed lady found it impossible to get past. One of the monks offers to help: he takes her in his arms, carries her across the water and puts her down on the other side. The two monks continue on their way, in silence, as is the habit of monks. (No, I don't think this story is about Benedictine monks!) All of a sudden, after having walked for about a mile, the second monk cries out: "You had no right to do that; we are forbidden to even look at a woman, particularly when she is beautiful, but carrying her in your arms the way you did: that is a disgrace." "Oh my friend," says the first monk, "I, I have left that woman back there; it is you who is still carrying her."

Don't we all know it? It is almost impossible NOT to carry the past into the present and into the future, the past with its conscious or unconscious wounds and traumas, its injustices, as well as with its happy memories which we would like to prolong and have last forever.

All right, you many say to me: why don't you leave the past the past, leave the future the future, and put all your efforts in preserving the present, to fully appreciate it, "carpe diem," as the Romans used to say: "pluck, grasp the day."

I believe that on this particular solution I could have written the book. Already early in my studies I had come to realize how difficult it is to make sounds stand still - they always seem to topple over one another, "fall" into the future or, as T.S. Eliot says, speaking of words: they "slip, slide, perish, Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, Will not stand still."

So in order to make them stand still I tried everything imaginable, analyzed every movement of the hand, the arm, this finger, that finger, practiced agonizingly slowly, tried to concentrate to the

utmost on each sound with the result that, in the end...it became almost impossible for me to play even one single note without struggle and pain!

It was only much later that I found Rilke's "Aufzeichnungen des Malte Brigges" my own alter ego: the unforgettable and utterly devastating portrait of a man who wanted to hold onto every fleeting moment. In order to savor each precious second of his life, Nikolaj Kusmitsch puts himself to bed and never again gets up. Truly, by trying to exclude the past and the future so as to better "stuff and cram" the present, we end up at best in a state of dispersion and distraction or - in its most extreme form - in a state of catatonic paralysis.

In order to gain the Present in its Fullness, it is absolutely necessary to, in effect, "lose" the narrow and isolated present, to surrender it, let go of it, for the same reason that the Gospel urges us to give up one's soul, to lose one's life. That reason is simply this: that the more we try to hold on, the more we try to dominate and control either the past, the present or the future the more we can be certain of losing everything.

Alas, to let go of all that is easier said than done. That is what makes this task an authentic koan in the Zen meaning of the word: a sort of riddle for which there is no technical or rational solution as, e.g., to the question: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "What was your face like before your parents were born?" Or in terms of my own koan: How can one make sounds, how can one make Time stand still and yet moving? To find the answer to those kinds of questions requires an approach that is quite different from thinking, analyzing, practicing or even meditating. Because besides our desire to be in charge, there are thoughts, expectations, the thousand and one things that all pull us out of the Fullness of the Present, that distract us. And it is really no exaggeration to say that distraction is one the fundamental pillars of our existence; a distraction which, of course, we have well learned - in long years of training - to make ourselves forget. To quote T.S. Eliot: "We are distracted from distraction by distraction."

I realized that again a few years ago, when - in between a series of concerts in Japan - I had a period of one week from which I profited by making a retreat, a sesshin, at Hosshinji, a Zen monastery in Obama. I employ the word "profited" somewhat sarcastically. The experience was, if possible, even more painful than I had thought: my legs simply aren't made for long hours and days of lotus-posture sitting and neither, I am afraid, is the rest of me.

During meditation, or more exact, za-zen, there are of course the usual flights of fancy and all kinds of thoughts both noble and base. Then there is the body (and that includes the brain), clamoring to be heard; it screams at you: scratch me, move me, do anything you want but don't just sit there doing nothing. However, there is more to the Spirit of Zen than merely quieting the mind and the body. The third day of the seven-day sesshin there was a teaching by the Master which touched me profoundly. "There are," he said, "people who have come to this retreat in order to have an authentic Zen experience. They ought not to have come here; there are monasteries all over Japan where one can have that. Here, to Hosshinji, people have been coming for hundreds of years to "Die the Great Death, the Death of self."

Now I would not have been surprised to hear those words from the Abbot of the Benedictine university where I teach - but it was a real shock - and an eye-opener as well - to hear that from

the other corner of the earth, from a totally other tradition. Still, I couldn't help feeling a little like St. Augustine: "Yes, Lord, I want to, I really want to give in, to surrender, to let go; I know that I should, but not quite yet - please, could you wait a little longer?" Such is, I discovered, the terrible paradox of my human nature that I am willing to sacrifice the joy and fullness of what I know is true reality, I will sacrifice that, rather than relinquish the semblance of being in control, in control of an illusion. Almost instinctively I seem to prefer a dark cave of my own making, and be concerned about tomorrow, rather than live in Fullness of Light and Presence.

To give up that kind of illusion, that kind of control, for sure that is what the Master meant, that is what it means to die to self. This kind of death, a death which gives life, does not come cheaply, and one would much prefer not to have to pay that price. But I am beginning to realize more and more that, consciously or unconsciously, I have been searching all along for the equilibrium, the marriage of Time before the Fall, "vertical" Time, and Time after Adam's sin, the time that is flowing, horizontal: chronological Time. The way back is blocked by the angel with the flaming sword: it is no longer possible to return to the innocence of paradise. And I am no longer a stranger to the fact that the way forward is full of T.S. Eliot's "Shrieking voices, scolding, mocking or merely chattering, the loud lament of the disconsolate chimera." I am also starting to discover that, as Eliot observed, this "condition of complete simplicity" will be "costing not less than everything." It is a little like holding on to a trapeze, high in the circus tent, and then letting go in the existential trust - in spite of one's, oh so real, existential fright - that the next trapeze will be there to latch on to at exactly the right moment in time.

What I am beginning to understand more and more clearly is that only if I am totally without expectation can the music be new; better yet, only if I manage to stop my projections into the future - and have thus gained freedom from the known - can I actually hear the music. On the rare occasions that that does happen to me, the dichotomy of performer and listener, the opposition between "doing" and "doing nothing" is transcended and I find myself spontaneously echoing John Brodie's sentiment: "It's beautiful." It is only if I can listen with that kind of "innocence" that the sounds at the keyboard truly come to life, that, in another of Eliot's memorable images: "...the roses have the look of flowers that are looked at."

I hope that tonight we can, without thought of either past or future, help each other to catch a glimpse of that Greater Time of which Rilke speaks, that "Complete Time of the whole Circumference."

It is for that reason that I have chosen as final and major work on tonight's program Beethoven's Opus 111, his last piano Sonata. In this work particularly we find the equilibrium between the three stages of Time, independent one from the other, yet intimately related.

In the first movement we find the past of this great Genius, now totally deaf. A past he no longer resists or rejects; a destiny, with all its suffering, accepted without self-pity or bitterness or even regret

The second movement - and there are only two movements - shows us where Beethoven has arrived now, at this moment in his life, and this movement also traces the future: the ninth symphony and the last quartets.

In the theme of this second movement - a theme which will be marvelously varied - little is said and very little is left unsaid. Ultimately these variations conduct us into regions which are perhaps no longer of this temporal world: the regions of silence. But I must warn you that the third variation will put you to the test in case you confound Silence with a kind of bland peacefulness and tranquility.

True, authentic music comes forth not out of the world of sounds and noises, but out of Emptiness, the Void, which the Tao Te Ching calls "the Mother of the phenomenal world"; great music is engendered by Silence and, ideally, leads us back into Silence, in order that we may tarry, be it ever so briefly, in the dwellingplace which T.S. Eliot unveils for us in the first of his Four Quartets:

"At the still point of the turning world, Neither flesh, nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point there would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time... Time past and time future allow but little consciousness. To be conscious is not to be in time,... but only through time, time is conquered."