

THE CREATIVE CIRCLE

Art, Literature, and Music in Bahá'í Perspective

Edited by Michael Fitzgerald



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“Painting is a way of being.”

—Jackson Pollock

“It is as difficult to write simply as it is to be good.”

—W. Somerset Maugham

“I will hear in Heaven.”

—Beethoven’s last words

Preface

“The artist creates the uncreated conscience of the race.”

—James Joyce

“What bestowal could be greater than this, that one’s art should be as the act of worshiping the Lord?”

—‘Abdul-Bahá

ART IS THE LAST vestige of the mysterious in an age that rejects religion. The twentieth century is widely known for its themes of alienation and a profound despair over the state of human affairs. Religion has abused its office. Responding, existentialists put forward a serious, but incomplete, philosophy which sought to address the situation of modern man, impotent in the face of titanic destruction. Humanists by and large have reserved themselves to intellectual labor, disdaining the world’s spiritual traditions. There is thus a gaping void in human values.

The Bahá’í Faith has emerged as an artist’s impetus and as an instrument for the renewal of society. Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), its Founder, anticipated the need for the inclusion of religion in a thinking person’s modern repertoire of ideas. His expansive teachings on the oneness of mankind and the oneness of religions lead to a Whitmanesque embrace of diverse and conflicting cultures. Thus, the artist informed

by a Bahá'í sensibility will be able to build on a wide variety of cultural raw materials that another artist might not accept. Pericles said that "where there is no vision the people perish." The planetary vision of a Bahá'í artist will lead him or her to relish the gifts that an exploding world culture offers. Without the need to be restricted by a parochial view, the artist with access to the Bahá'í Writings can glean a rich pool of ethical and aesthetic inspiration.

Poetry is often termed a "contact" with the natural world, as by Whitman; or "contact" with the locality, as by William Carlos Williams. When the "locality" is the whole planet, the frontiers of the imagination are expanded beyond provincialisms of every sort. Thus, prejudice can be overcome and the threat of war due to misunderstanding will be forestalled.

Still, artistic integrity for the Bahá'í must be foremost. Without preaching, without didacticism, the Bahá'í artist can form the themes of his faith into an individual vision that is authentic. In seeing art as both a service and as a means of healing, the development of young and mature talent must become a major priority in an evolving world culture. If James Joyce is right, and "the artist creates the uncreated conscience of the race," then here is a major responsibility.

The Bahá'í will be eager to practice art in a web of merging world visions, be determined to maintain the highest ethical standards, be assured that the effort to be consistent in public and private life will provide new sources. The prospects of authentic visionary work for a Bahá'í, in contrast to the documentation of an age at odds with itself, stirs the real longings of artists for honest, serious work. In harmony with the best that the contemporary world offers, expressing the unique value of diverse cultures, and committed to the highest standards of artistic and personal integrity, the Bahá'í artist can create a new world.

Michael Fitzgerald
Winchester, Virginia



CHARLES WOLCOTT

musician and member of the Universal House of Justice,
c. 1982.

Foreword

IT CAME IN A CLUTTER of mail one morning—an invitation to contribute an essay on music for inclusion in a book on the arts. The opening sentence was intriguing: “As a piano player and a Bahá’í, you must certainly, or one would think, have experienced the dynamics of artistic endeavor in the context of the pull toward community.” My instincts cautioned me to forget it, but as in a movie flashback, my thoughts went scurrying pell-mell through time and space to what can best be described as another life, a professional life spanning some forty years—encompassing, yes, being a “piano player” early on, but widening in scope to include being a leader of dance bands, a music arranger, a composer, a conductor of studio orchestras, and eventually the General Music Director of not one but two major motion picture studios. (Not at the same time of course!)

Though my professional piano playing days are long gone, and little time is available for composing, opportunities to listen to music are abundant. From that viewpoint, acceptance of the invitation became a definite possibility. So I did just that. And you, dear reader, must judge whether the exercise was worth the doing.

What is music? According to that time-honored tome, the Oxford English Dictionary, music is defined as:

That one of the fine arts which is concerned with the combination of sounds, with a view to beauty of form and the expression of thought or feeling.

Listening to some of the noise that pours out incessantly from television screens or radio makes me wonder whether the creators of such incoherent mish-mash were ever conscious of the dictionary's precise definition.

Where did music get its name? In Greece there is an ancient mount, Parnassus, and legend has it that the mount was (and maybe still is!) the home of the nine sister goddesses, daughters of Zeus, who collectively bore the name of the Muses. Individually, each related to an expression of artistic endeavor. For example, Terpsichore was the goddess associated with dance. But since music is inexorably intertwined with all art forms, it seems logical to accept it as the offspring of the collective name of the "Muses."

Before concentrating on music as an art form, we may benefit from a few thoughts expressed by some serious thinkers about art as a whole. Albert Schweitzer, in addition to his medical skills, possessed a truly professional facility for playing the pipe organ. That immortal contrapuntist, Johann Sebastian Bach, observed that art can be categorized according to the material the artists use to express the world around them: The artist "is not only a painter, or only a poet, or only a musician, but all in one. . . . The distinction consists only in that one idea is dominant and artists choose the language that suits them best."¹ It is said that Goethe fancied himself a painter and Schiller reckoned himself a musician, though both are known as poets.

Then there is the remarkable comment purportedly made by an eminent though highly controversial nineteenth-century French poet: "A toy is a child's first introduction to art." While accepting the possibility that a child's interest in some form of art might, or even should, be stimulated in this way,

it seems to me that the little one who becomes a great artist has been blessed by the Almighty with a special gift. And so, this brings us to a thought-provoking question: How is music related to religion? Given that records pertaining to the origins of the handful of ancient, divinely revealed religions with adherents in today's world go back less than a few thousand years, we must rely on findings of archeologists and other scholars who are diligently trying to uncover more information about our forebears.

It is more or less commonly accepted that in ancient times mankind's basic relationship to the gods was one of appeasement, that is, seeking protection from the elements—drought, flood, thunderstorms, earthquakes—by raising one's voice in praise of the gods. We may assume that in the beginning it was an individual effort: one voice plaintively chanting a supplication. Later, a communal petition came into being, many voices joined in the chanting, and primitive instruments were added. Probably the first of these were skins stretched over wooden frames, some to be struck by sticks and others with strings to be plucked.

Migrations of Chinese and Hindus added their contributions of traditions handed down orally through the generations. It is thought that the ancient Greek traditions probably came from Asia Minor importing the novel idea of one God—Zeus. And after the advent of Abraham, in time there came the psalmist, David, who contributed some one hundred fifty Psalms, texts dedicated to one God, which live today through being sung in synagogues and churches. Originally, the psalms were accompanied by the psaltery, a dulcimer-like stringed instrument which the player plucked.

Allow me a momentary digression for the benefit of today's youthful generation of Bahá'ís—many of whom are musicians who can, at a moment's notice, produce an instrument case and from it whip out a guitar, ready to accompany themselves in song or to encourage the eager group surrounding them

to participate in a sing-along. This is in the tradition of the troubadors, twelfth-century lyric poets who traveled throughout southern Europe, accompanying themselves on stringed instruments. Often they were the purveyors of news picked up as they went back and forth through eastern Spain, southern France and northern Italy. Today's troubadors, Bahá'í youth on projects throughout the world, share songs they have picked up along the way, as well as their own tunes.

Returning to the subject of music related to religion, the most famous hymn of the Greek Church, Akathistos, thought to be from the fifth century A.D. is still sung today in the Feast of Annunciation service.

Then came the surge of great music suffused with religious emotion—the cantatas of Bach and oratorios of Handel (undoubtedly inspired by Luther's impassioned Protestantism), and the masses and requiems of Mozart, Berlioz, Brahms, Dvorak, and a host of other well-known eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers. The western world is familiar with these compositions sung by huge church choirs, the texts of which are rooted in Christianity.

In his great work on Bach, Dr. Schweitzer pays this tribute to the man: "Music is an act of worship with Bach. His artistic activity and his personality are both based on his piety." In another passage: "All great art, even secular, is in itself religious in his eyes; for him the tones do not perish, but ascend to God like praise too deep for utterance."² Schweitzer quotes from the rules and principles of accompaniment that Bach prescribed to his pupils: "Like all music, the figured bass should have no other end and aim than the glory of God and the recreation of the soul; where this is not kept in mind there is no true music, but only an infernal clamor and ranting." Hmm—one could almost imagine Bach had a forewarning of the music of the last half of the twentieth century.

At this juncture, it would be pertinent to ask what Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, had to say about the work

of artists, craftsmen and scientists. The following brief excerpts will serve to show the high regard in which He held this pursuit.

The third Tajallí (Effulgence) is concerning arts, crafts and sciences. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.

And:

The fifth Taráz (Ornament) concerneth the protection and preservation of the stations of God's servants. . . . In this Day the sun of craftsmanship shineth above the horizon of the occident and the river of arts is flowing out of the sea of that region . . .

Finally:

It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind.

Though Bahá'u'lláh is addressing all humankind, and we are aware that all work done with care is akin to worship, we must distinguish between the exceptional and the pedestrian when assessing the work of those who place the results of their creative endeavors before us. The burden falls on fallible human beings—all of us. In my view, with regard to music, people can be classified as those who create, those who perform, and those who listen. Those who listen constitute by far the greater proportion of humankind. They may never compose or perform on an instrument, though they may attain the joy of raising their voices in song. And it is to them my plea to read and digest the above words of wisdom from Bahá'u'lláh is addressed.

We should all be concerned about the state of music today.

Parents of young children and soon-to-be parents need especially to be aware of what is happening to the current crop of teenagers according to the findings of a California State University study, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, June 1986. The intent of the study was to ascertain the impact of song lyrics on youth. Two excerpts from that study will suffice:

[Only] 2% or 3% of all teenagers devote their full attention to lyrics; most use rock'n'roll as background noise. Teenagers cannot accurately describe their favorite songs, they are seriously lacking in literary skills to understand and interpret metaphors and symbolism.

This sad state of affairs didn't just appear in the 1980s. It is an insidious virus that has been slowly developing since the 1950s. However, before further commenting on the present, let's take a peak at the past.

The use of music to enhance drama wasn't a discovery of the twentieth century. Ancient Greek dramas rediscovered by the Renaissance were not just plays with spoken verses but dramas requiring actors and actresses who could sing! Seventeenth-century Claudio Monteverdi, composer of madrigals and part songs, delighted by this new development, set about to write music for the stage—his works were called operas. We are the beneficiaries of Monteverdi's zeal. Operas by Mozart, the Italians—Verdi, Puccini, Bellini, Rossini—and others too numerous to mention grace today's opera house stages. Even seventeenth-century works of Monteverdi, *Orfeo* and *The Coronation of Poppaea*, have been revived. Opera lives today because it communicates through its music. Arias are carried in one's head to be savored over and over again.

Now to revert to the plight of today's teenager and his inability to absorb the incoherent lyrics of so many of the cur-

rent songs. Two instances that occurred during my stint at MGM studios in the 1950s will illustrate the importance of understanding the words of a pop song. The writer/director of a black-and-white movie about the pupils and teachers in a high school located in a New York slum district asked me to hear a record he had which he felt caught the spirit of the film he was about to make. He was right. The music *and* the lyrics supplied the color he was looking for to set the mood of his picture. The record he played for me had been released by the record company some two or three years before and, as they say in show business, it died. I wrote a 24-measure drum solo in the style of Gene Krupa which built up in intensity to the first words of the record—"Rock Around the Clock." The film, *Blackboard Jungle*, became a sensation. The record by Bill Haley and His Comets was reborn; to date it is second only to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" in the number of records sold. The point is, while the rock'n'roll rhythm was loud and incessant, *every word* of the lyric was heard distinctly. The young people dancing in the theatre aisles were singing along with the movie! It happened every time the picture began.

The second instance involved a rising young pop singer who was making his first movie at the studio. Listening in the control booth at his first recording session, it was impossible for me to distinguish the words he was singing. The sound engineer was asked to adjust the microphone set-up, but the singer's manager objected, saying, "That's the sound we get with all his records and they sell." His argument was that if a teenage buyer couldn't understand the lyrics, he (or she) would buy another copy.

And that, I'm sorry to say, was his method of selling the records of his singer. This incident underscores my belief that the deterioration in pop music started in the late 1950s. Teenagers today react to the loud, driving rhythms of what they see and hear on television and videos. If you were to

read the lyrics of a Top-40 song without being distracted by the superstar charisma, the flashing colored lights, the gyrations of the performer, you would discover another reason why youth are unable to describe their favorite songs. In the vast majority of cases, the words are incoherent or utterly devoid of meaning.

Having examined the art of music, where its name comes from, and its historical relationship to religion. Now we need to determine, as Bahá'ís, how we can use music to support the thesis that man is created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Those who comprise the largest group—the listeners—are reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's words in the Kitáb-í Aqdas: "*We have permitted you to listen to music and singing. Beware lest such listening cause you to transgress the bounds of decency and dignity.*"³ They can also follow the advice given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. That is, from the earliest age, teach the child the verses of God, expose him to music that, in the words of Bach, are tones that "do not perish, but ascend to God like praise too deep for utterance."

Those who create music have an enormous responsibility. We know that in bygone days, composers were given sustenance by royal patrons. Mozart, for instance, composed for the royal court. Bach was a church organist and composed for the weekly services held throughout the year. Today, to earn his livelihood, a composer may find it necessary to spend much of his time and God-given talent on producing music of a secular nature. But in whatever he does he should maintain the highest standards. God willing, in the future, national governments will recognize their responsibility to provide subsidies to qualified artists who will then be able to contribute to the well-being of mankind. The performer may or may not also be a composer, but he should be guided, as is the composer, to so develop his artistic talent that his performance provides a "*ladder by which souls may ascend to the realms on high.*"⁴



CHARLES WOLCOTT
editing music at his desk at the Walt Disney Studios, c. 1945.

What about the teenage Bahá'í composer and/or performer? Everything depends on God-given talent. Is it present? If so, that person should be given whole-hearted encouragement by parents and peers. Talent is an elusive thing. Proficiency is often confused with talent and can be the source of eventual heartbreak for the proficient but untalented musician. Nevertheless, there is a place for those who lack talent, but have sufficient ability to give enjoyment to an audience. They belong to a category into which falls the majority of Bahá'ís who are guitarists, drummers, or other instrumentalists. They constitute the reservoir of manpower on which Bahá'í youth projects often depend.

We can't all be stars, but we can all be Bahá'ís!

Charles Wolcott
Haifa, Israel

Editor's Note: Charles Wolcott, musician and member of the Universal House of Justice, passed away on the day he dictated this essay.

Notes

1. Johann Sebastian Bach, Vol. II, Chap. 20, p.8.
2. Ibid., Vol. I, Chap. IX, p. 167.
3. Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on Music.
4. Ibid.