

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Blurring the Boundaries from Classical to Contemporary Music

Professor John Wallace OBE, FRSE
Principal of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

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Arbroath High School

Music frees the human spirit. It has the power to uplift the individual and transform nations. Professor Wallace argued that a society which encourages music, and the other performing arts, paves the way for wider intellectual, scientific and economic achievement. As well as being among Scotland's most respected figures in arts education, the Professor is a renowned trumpet player – performing solo at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer. His wide-ranging lecture encompassed everything from a performance on a replica Renaissance serpentine trumpet to insights on how we can recover the energy of the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment. This, he suggested, is important for a country that is good at many things, but has dropped far behind many international competitors.

The enjoyment of music is deeply personal, but it can also bind whole peoples together in a sense of common purpose. Professor Wallace opened his lecture by playing a brief excerpt from a recording of Verdi's Nabucco. Describing the overture as immensely important, written during the period of resurgence in Italian national pride and identity called the Risorgimento, he argued that all forms of music can allow the listener to transcend the mundane.

“There are no boundaries. Music speaks to us whether it is good, bad or indifferent, whether it's classical, contemporary, traditional, jazz, rock, pop, garage, indie, dance rap, all the different genre, because it is all to do with how it affects you. It's in your head, your heart, that funny thing we call a soul, in your gut, and in your instincts that you feel music. The boundaries become very blurred and after a couple of seconds our minds are free from this terrible thing we are locked in, our bodies, and our minds are free to roam wherever they want to go. We move into a boundary-free zone.”

Indeed, music is hard-wired into humans and other species at a genetic level. While birds may get practical evolutionary benefits from song, such as finding mates and marking territory, the Professor said that research suggests they also do it for sheer enjoyment. The urge to make music is not confined to creatures of the land and air, but is common to whales and dolphins. It may even stretch back to our common ancestors – with the Professor speculating that dinosaurs might have sung as they trundled across the Earth.

Humans experience music in the womb, said Professor Wallace, and enter the world with precious talents that can all too easily be squandered. “We are all born with perfect pitch. But we have to use it or we lose it.” In China, perhaps because pitch and tone play an important part in speech, a far higher percentage of adults seem to retain perfect pitch. At the same time there are now 80 million pianists in China, five million at Grade 8 or above.

In 19th century Britain there had also been an immense appetite to play music, closely linked with a desire to break free from toil. Three months after the Nabucco overture's premiere at La Scala, Milan, it was being performed by a working men's band in Merthyr Tydfil. “The music of Verdi says something universal. It brought freedom to the newly industrialised men with their 12-hour shifts, six days a week in the mines. By the end of the century there were 30,000 such bands up and down Britain and a million players, around one in 30 of the population.”

The capacity of music to bring a sense of freedom even in the face of tyranny was something the Professor learned from Timothy Dokshizer, one of the finest trumpet players in the Russian tradition. Born in the Ukraine in 1921, his family walked to Moscow to escape the famine caused by

Stalin's reforms. Aged 12 Dokshizer joined the army as a mounted bugler and managed to work his way up to become a well-known conductor and a trumpet player in the Bolshoi. There were times when he looked up from the orchestra pit to see Stalin as the guest of honour in the equivalent of the royal box. And yet, rock and roll, jeans and baked beans helped bring down the Iron Curtain. "Oppressive regimes tend to ban certain kinds of music. They fear it because they know it has the power to modernise."

According to Professor Wallace, the story of the trumpet in western culture underlines the power of music to affect people individually and collectively, and its connection with our deepest motivations. "The trumpet, for me, sets music free. From the earliest times it has been a military and a religious instrument." An ancient Carnyx, now in the National Museum of Scotland, was a priestly instrument carried into battle by our ancient Celtic ancestors. In the Renaissance the Italians became the first to translate the heroism of the trumpet into art music. Professor Wallace played an example of an early 17th century sonata by Girolamo Fantini on a replica serpentine trumpet. By the end of the 17th century the French had learned from the Italians. Professor Wallace played from a *Te Deum* by Marc-Antoine Charpentier written to celebrate a victory of King Louis XIV. "War, battle and religion again. You can see it is French: aristocratic, haughty heroism." It is also familiar today as the theme to the Eurovision Song Contest.

In the 18th century the British, full of confidence from the union of Scotland and England, was producing its own magnificent trumpet music celebrating its self-image as a land of heroes. A new dimension was introduced by the French Revolution when the trumpet shifted from being an aristocratic to a universal instrument. And with that came the Marseillaise, originally a trumpet tune, which celebrated the heroism of ordinary men and women.

Beethoven then took up the cause of the universality of humankind – giving us the Ode to Joy in his 9th symphony. From there it was a short step to the music of Verdi, and Garibaldi's struggle to win Italian independence from the Austrian Empire. "Verdi was an emotionally-committed patriot, a freedom fighter through his music. All of his operas before *Aida* were written in the shadow of war and revolution. The fervour of Verdi's melodies and the irresistible tidal surge of his underlying rhythms had the power to generate mass emotion."

The Professor argued that the performing arts are a vital instrument of education – music is freedom, drama is liberation and dance a continuum in time and space. "They also expand a society's consciousness and raise a nation's game. And wherever the performing arts flourish, modern economies flourish."

Scotland has a great tradition as a centre for the performing arts and remains an international influence – as is emphasised by the national theatre's success on Broadway with *Black Watch*. But recent decades have often seen a decline in the value placed on the encouragement of the performing arts. This contrasts with Professor Wallace's own experience of being sent to a junior band at the age of seven, moving to the senior one at eight, and being able to learn by doing and enjoying. Later, the passion for opera among his teachers at Buckhaven High School provided a fun-filled learning experience which helped launch his career.

Professor Wallace argued the performing arts are not just an end in themselves, but benefit every area of education, including the sciences, by engendering a sense of fun, a striving for high standards and the capacity for self-expression. The promotion of the performing arts in education breeds an adult generation able to imagine beyond the bounds of the everyday, as the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment had done. "Back in the 1960s my school was a sort of opera factory. I saw that the performing arts could give a school the ability to be anything it wanted to be. It was that experience that put music and freedom on the same page for me."

Professor Wallace called for the performing arts to be given a place in the nation's Curriculum for Excellence. "Music works, drama works, dance works. They liberate the consciousness to think the unthinkable and to make the future a better place than the present. And it's my feeling that music, drama and dance can work for Scotland. We happen to be very good at all three. They work through play; they are all fun. Only when we are turning out a generation of young people who

know how to coax their own potential to its optimum will this young country of Scotland fulfill its own potential.”

Questions

Asked what could be done to encourage more young people to join choirs, Professor Wallace called again for the performing arts to be given a more important role in schools. He added that following an initiative by Jack McConnell in 2003, the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland had done a tremendous job in reviving music and singing among schoolchildren.

Questioned on the origins of his replica trumpet he said an American musicologist had identified one like it in a picture from the 1580s and that there are a number of surviving examples in museums, including in Verona. Similar ones were created in Nuremberg by a maker called Haas.

A vote of thanks was offered by Willie Payne, director of Hospitalfield House, a residential arts centre in Arbroath.

Matthew Shelley

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