

MUSIC-MAKING *VERSUS* THE COMMODIFICATION OF MUSIC: A CALL TO ENLIGHTENED AMATEURS

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Preamble: A foretaste of the supreme moment (*Augenblick*)

Abstract

Music-making, fundamentally a communal practice, is the source of aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual experience of a kind comparable to the Faustian "moment" (Augenblick). The most ideal musical culture is one in which no clear dividing line exists between practitioners and listeners, professionals and amateurs, the remnants of which are still discernible in present-day Thai classical music. The growing professionalism has been exploited by commercial manipulations driven by money and technology, resulting in a smug, push-button consumerism that treats music as a mere commodity. The only way out of this crisis is a return to the practice of music at the family, school, and community levels, whereby chamber music can be cultivated by a large pool of amateurs out of which real professionals can grow.

As a teacher of German, may I be allowed to begin by referring to Goethe's *Faust*? In that important scene in which Faust, out of sheer despair with life, declares himself ready to enter into a pact with Mephistopheles, the

Devil in disguise, there is one word in Faust's condition that is of utmost significance, namely the word *Augenblick*. If the Devil can help him to reach that supreme moment, he can have his soul:

If I say to that *moment*:

Do remain! You are so beautiful!

(ll. 1,699–700)

Faust never quite reaches that moment (or else he would have lost his soul to the Devil), but almost. Nearing his death, having seen so much, done so much (of good and bad), the dying Faust experiences a foretaste of the blissful moment which is the ultimate goal of his pact with Mephistopheles:

To that *moment* I could say:

Do remain, you are so beautiful.

The trace of my earthly days

Cannot dissolve into thin air.

As foretaste of such great happiness,

I am now enjoying the supreme moment.¹

(ll. 11,581–586)

And having uttered these words, Faust passes away.

It takes 9,980 verses and half a decade in the poet's own life to allow Faust to attain only a foretaste of that happiness. There is a joke enjoyed by Germanists who maintain that Faust is rescued from eternal perdition by a subjunctive: "to that moment I *could* say"

What have all these idiosyncrasies of German literature to do with music? My answer would be that we can draw analogies from this literary masterpiece that support the main argument of our common endeavour. First, music can bring happiness; it can bring happiness to many. We may be even more fortunate than Faust in the sense

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¹ My own translation.

that we may be able to experience many *Augenblicke* in our lifetime. Second, each individual has to find his own way to reach that supreme *Augenblick*, but the best that we mortals can achieve within the confines of our "earthly days" is that which Faust achieves, namely a "moment" of a second order, a foretaste of the real thing. Although our command: "Do remain: you are so beautiful!" is never obeyed, to be able to keep happy memories of those "moments" suffices to convince us of the inexhaustible value of music.

I propose to share with you some such moments that I have myself experienced.

The first experience could be called "An Evening Walk along North University Avenue." I was teaching at the South East Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1985. It was a mild summer evening, and my colleagues and I came out for supper as the sun was setting. We were walking along North University Avenue. A trio was rehearsing a Schubert Piano Trio with the windows and front door of their house open. They were nearing the end of the Slow Movement. We decided to stay on to hear them finish the entire piece. The ambience was right, and in the end, we were enraptured. So we exploded into applause, which was answered with a loud "Thank you." I have heard many concerts played by professional ensembles, but none has imprinted itself indelibly on my memory as this one did. This was an *Augenblick* for me!

I would like to call my second experience "A Wintry Night in the Royal Albert Hall." The Royal Albert Hall in London is a colossal multi-purpose hall that is used for indoor sports as well as concerts. On a wintry night in 1960, I was attending one of those "Sunday Classical Concerts," played by the

London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcom Sargent with Yehudi Menuhin (1916–1999) as the soloist. He was playing two concerti in the same concert. The first half of the concert was devoted to the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, which fell flat, exquisitely uninspired. The world-renowned violinist was not "in tune" with this piece of music, and he was literally out of tune most of the time. I was disappointed and resigned myself to witnessing a calamity for the second half of the concert. On the contrary, Menuhin came back a different person, technically flawless and deeply inspired by the Brahms Concerto. It was an experience that makes you grateful to the composer as well as to the soloist and orchestra for such an (extended) *Augenblick*. The critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, two days later, could find no appropriate expression to describe Menuhin's performance of the Brahms Concerto and simply wrote: "He came back in the second half and played like a God." When a critic resorts to hyperbole like that, it means that words must have failed him. The *Augenblick* was indescribable. There must have been over a thousand people in the audience that night, and I could tell that they were transported and transfixed. After the concert, I took the last train from King's Cross Station back to Cambridge. It was a very cold night, and I had to walk all the way from Cambridge Railway Station and did not get to my room until after 1.00 a.m., but I was feeling warm inside.

Such experiences are unexpected, unpredictable, and therefore even more welcome. I do not mean that musicians can leave everything to chance and rely entirely on their instinct or inspiration. Rigorous training and assiduous practice are required conditions. But the *Augenblick* is "a particular kind of communal experience of a

particular intensity in a particular place."² And that is music-making in the noblest sense of the word, whereby communication becomes communion.

The (attempted) perpetuation of the *Augenblick*

The episodes I have related above would tend to privilege the *live* performance over all forms of modern reproduction. This is a point that we shall have to debate, for the experience of people living in the age prior to the advent of "technical reproducibility" (to borrow the term popularized by the German thinker Walter Benjamin) can never be identical with that of those of the subsequent era in which recorded music can be considered an experience of value. But to return to the last example given above, many of those who were in the Royal Albert Hall that night could only wish that that particular performance of the Brahms Violin Concerto had been recorded so that millions of music lovers could have a chance to share that unique experience. The dilemma facing a member of the audience like me comes from the question whether repeated listening to a recording of that performance would give me the same aesthetic pleasure that I experienced in the real performance. I am more inclined to think that it would not be the same, because the "moment" arose out of my being there, being part of a *community* of listeners/spectators, hearing the real sound, seeing the soloist perform

² I have borrowed this succinct formulation from the "Programme and Abstracts" of the conference *The Proms and British Musical Life*, London, April 23–27, 2007. (Day 3, Session 1: Timothy Day, "Malcom Sargent, William Glock and Martin Luther").

in front of me, imbibing the congenial and convivial atmosphere of *music-making*, whose uniqueness cannot be repeated (in the same way that my eavesdropping on the Schubert Trio in Ann Arbor could not be). Menuhin, in the television series *The Music of Man*, produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, argued heatedly with the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould (1932–1982), who preferred music being made in a recording studio, while Menuhin defended the traditional live performance, since he could always *feel his audience*. I would go so far as to say that it might have taken him some time to feel his audience and once he achieved that secret communion with them in the second half of the concert, something miraculous did occur (and of course, it did not occur at every concert of his!). In a way, the essence of music-making is the *presence* of all concerned, performers as well as listeners.

Yet one has to admit that a composer of note would wish to share his work with his contemporaries and to perpetuate his work for posterity. Since the West was committed to the written mode of communication, it was only natural that *notation* was invented. (Thai culture being predominantly an oral one, Thai classical musicians to the present day rely almost entirely on memory.) Notation, as a means of perpetuation, is essentially different from recording technology, for notation induces music lovers to acquire skills in reading music, playing musical instruments, and singing according to the notes on the page. In other words, notation enriches *active* music-making, whereas our *passive* listeners of today rely on push-button technology. Chamber music thrived through notation, as family members and friends gathered in the sitting room (i.e., chamber) to perform sonatas, quartets, and other kinds of music

for small ensembles for their enjoyment. Most of them were amateurs, and as we know from the lives of distinguished composers such as Beethoven, some of their amateur pupils possessed very high standards. Those who could not read music and could not play an instrument had to rely on competent friends. The French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), who was an ardent lover of music and a champion of Richard Wagner, had to wander from one friend to another with a piano transcription of Wagner's music, entreating them to play this music for him on the piano. Besides, notation gave rise to music-publishing. It could benefit a composer in material terms as well, if he had an honest publisher to help him. Brahms became fairly well-to-do with earnings from the sale of his piano music to amateurs (the easier pieces, I suppose!). We can perhaps conclude that notation *activates* people to make music. The advent of recording technology has changed all that.

From high fidelity to infidelity

Recording technology started with a noble mission: to perpetuate great works of great artists. It can benefit both the artist and the public. The artist can lend permanency to his work (by simpler means than notation) and reach out to a larger public. The listener can get to know a piece of music through repeated listening, and, in terms of the aesthetic pleasure derived from certain compositions, recording can help a great deal to increase that pleasure. (We need not talk about the supreme *Augenblick* here.) Besides, we have *historic recordings* of memorable *live* performances. The works of great artists can thus be handed down to subsequent generations who are not lucky enough to have been born their contemporaries. So reputation no longer rests on hearsay but on concrete evidence in the form of

recording, however imperfect it may be. I read a great deal about the collaboration between the great composer Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) and his closest friend Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), the great violinist. When I heard a recording of Joachim made during the early years of the 20th century, I could understand why Brahms wrote that great violin concerto for him (which Yehudi Menuhin superbly performed that wintry night in 1960). The recording's fidelity is much below today's standard, but it is adequate to allow us to gauge his style and above all, his *musical personality*.

There is much to be said for the humility of the early generations of sound and recording engineers as well as producers. They grew up with *broadcasting* and were wont to work with original performances. Their ambition was to capture and reproduce the original work as *faithfully* as possible, hence the use of the term *high fidelity* in recording technology. These were honest people; when they came up with a system of amplification, they said so; that is to say, they wanted to amplify the original sound. And their technology did benefit jazz and popular music. They did not want to cheat us. We now live in the age of "virtual reality" which will soon supplant real reality. Technology has now advanced so far as to be able to produce a second reality that is not to be considered inferior to any original. It may not be an exaggeration to talk about the *arrogance* of present-day technology. A recording of a symphony is technologically perfect, and, in musical terms, it is technically perfect as well: there are no wrong notes, not a single instrumentalist in the orchestra plays out of tune. The perfect "performance" is not a performance in the sense that we used to know it, but a concoction from different "takes," or an

edited version with "repairs" made through technological means. The term *editing*, borrowed from the noble discipline of philology where scholars work with different manuscripts or different printed texts in order to get as close as possible to the authorial version, has thus been soiled by the contemporary recording industry, which no longer cares for an "original." (I am not in any way hostile to electronic music which uses technology to create sounds which are not identical with acoustic instruments and whose compositional principle admits of cuts and pastes by design and not by default.) However, contemporary recording proudly adopts *infidelity* as its guiding principle in order to achieve faked perfection.

The recorded sound soon assumes a character of its own which excites listeners: it is grand, resonant, opulent, majestic, especially the orchestral sound. Some musicians, and especially conductors, have known how to exploit these technological possibilities, and some have gone so far as to coax their orchestras into producing a sound that would suit the process of recording. Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989) was one of them, with his renowned Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra; he was even spiteful of colleagues who knew little about such technicalities and once branded a worthy colleague, Eugen Jochum (1902–1987), as a "philistine."³ With the advent of television, many conductors began to use the new medium for a self-serving and self-promoting purpose, which sometimes provoked a negative reaction from other colleagues, such as the Italian conductor Riccardo Muti, who made the following remark

³ A television interview. (I am reporting from memory.)

about his brethren: "We are a race that should disappear."⁴

It would be unfair to stress too much the negative side of technology. It must not be forgotten that *broadcasting* and especially radio broadcasting has achieved much in terms of bringing music (of all kinds) to a vast listening public. In some countries, like the United Kingdom, radio stations set up their own orchestras, including regional orchestras, initially for the purpose of broadcasting, but soon began to launch live concerts that have been shaping public taste for many decades, such as the BBC's annual Promenade Concerts (known as the *Proms*), which are unrivaled in many parts of the world. Some radio orchestras are known for their quality and rank among the best in the country, such as those in Munich, Hamburg, and Stuttgart in Germany. The case of Thailand is also a historic one: the rise of the Thai popular song, a hybrid genre combining Western popular (big-band) music with Thai classical music, must be considered a boon to Thai musical life, as I have elsewhere demonstrated.⁵ The chief protagonist was the big band created by the Public Relations Department in 1939, where the best composers, musicians, and singers of Thailand congregated to deliver a remarkable number of masterpieces that reflect the depths and range of emotions of the Thai people. The popularity of the

⁴ A television broadcast of a rehearsal of Dvorak's Second Symphony with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, taped and lent to me privately.

⁵ Chetana Nagavajara, "The Thai Popular Song and Its Literary Lineage" (1989), in Chetana Nagavajara, *Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996. 137–163.

genre owes a great deal to radio broadcasting.

commonly shared cultural artifact.⁶

I may have put great emphasis on the communal aspects of music-making when talking earlier about live performances, but it must be conceded that the notion of *community* can be applied also to broadcast and recorded music. Not many people are fortunate enough to attend concerts or recitals given by great orchestras and distinguished artists, and radio and recording offer them access to valuable (though secondary!) musical experiences. A community of fervent music lovers can thrive on broadcast and recorded music, and the level of critical acumen expressed through the exchange of views need not be inferior to that connected with live music. It has to be admitted that *music criticism* based, for example, on recorded music can be of extremely high quality, probably because of attentive listening through repeated hearings. One may even go so far as to assert that recording has enriched and enhanced music criticism. The distinguished British music critic Norman Lebrecht has characterized the virtue of recorded classical music in very apposite terms:

Classical records brought delight and enlightenment to millions who never dared enter a concert hall. More than that, they fostered a sense of community by allowing listeners to compare and contrast one interpretation of Bruckner's fourth symphony with another, sometimes to a nerdish extreme but inherently, invaluable, as a

And of course, he bemoans the imminent demise of the recording industry as a result of the advent of more modern digital technologies. My only reservations would be that while one can enjoy great music in recorded form, one should not deny oneself the (irreplaceable) experience of live performances. Perhaps one can go even a step further: why should one not learn an instrument and assert oneself as an amateur?

Alas, mass-marketed music has more or less killed the amateur—the technical standard is now so high (many professional musicians cannot play live at the technically accurate level of their own recordings) that the amateur is intimidated and embarrassed to attempt an original public performance, for they know they would be compared to the recording artist!

Commodification and commercialization

I have in the previous section described both the weaknesses and strengths of technology in the service of the musical arts. It is well and good to use technology to advance music education for a vast majority of people and in rare cases to capture the unique experiences (those *Augenblicke*) for the benefit of mankind. But let us be honest about it: the dividing line between the noble act of preserving, disseminating, and promoting valuable

⁶ Norman Lebrecht, "Look who's been dumped." *The Lebrecht Weekly*, December 31, 2003. <<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/031231-NL-recording.html>>.

musical experiences and the commodification of music for commercial purposes is a very thin one. There is inevitably a danger in turning a human and humane experience into a commodity that can be bought and sold. Mind you, we should not forget that musicians too have to survive and that we have to reward them for their artistry.

The question is where the middle path lies. In his book *Who Killed Classical Music?* (1996), Norman Lebrecht demonstrates how the cult of celebrity has destroyed the music world, because star conductors, soloists, and singers are paid so much that there is very little left to pay orchestral musicians, resulting in the disbanding of one orchestra after another. In a consumer society, selling and buying are not always related to the quality of the commodities, for the modern witchcraft of public relations and advertising usually holds the public in thrall. When money and technology join hands in the music business, they become invincible. A rock concert that can attract a gigantic crowd needs to depend not only on the prowess of the performers but also on state-of-the-art technologies and, last but not least, on market stratagems and machinations. At every such concert, the audience must be convinced that the Faustian *Augenblick* can happen every thirty seconds, and, more often than not, audience participation serves to heighten those paroxysms. The domain of classical music is not free from such aberrations. People expect a star conductor to perform a dazzling choreographic feat on the rostrum. I have witnessed one who responded so well to his public's expectations that he had to quench his thirst with a glass of water between the movements of a symphony. Of course, you would expect him to produce those supreme *Augenblicke* every

now and then, and it is inevitable that he would put great emphasis on the *fortissimos* and *pianissimos* and not care much for things in between. How many of our idle consumers know how to distinguish between a conviction and a pose?

The market forces are omnipotent, and even in a Western country with a venerable tradition of criticism, it is the business side of the musical enterprise that always wins the day. This was what happened in Germany in 2006. After six years at the helm of the world renowned Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the British star conductor Sir Simon Rattle came under attack by a number of German music critics who were of the opinion that the standard of playing had suffered, especially in that part of the repertoire which had always been the pride of the august ensemble, namely the Austro-German Classics. One of them, the resident critic of the national newspaper *Die Welt*, was more outspoken than the others, who very soon followed suit with their own negative evaluations. The critics most probably overestimated the forces of tradition, for Germany since the 18th century had prided itself as the home of "critical" philosophy and on the eminence of its criticism of the arts, be it in the domain of literature, visual arts, theatre, or music. They did not recognize the advent of a new hegemonic power, the market. The critic of *Die Welt* lost his job and had to switch to earning his daily bread by editing a CD magazine for a record store. No compatriot came to his rescue. Only a British colleague dared to concur with him publicly in saying that "what is lacking in the interpretation [of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*] is a coherent sense of direction and that can be taken as a metaphor for the general state of play in the Berlin

Philharmonic. High as Rattle has risen, he has failed to convince with much of his music-making at the level to which Berliners are accustomed." You could probably guess who the British critic is. Of course, we are hearing the voice of Norman Lebrecht, who concludes with a piece of brotherly advice: "Somehow the bite has gone from Rattle's baton. He may need, in mid-life and for the first time in his life, to read some of the bad reviews and reflect on what is going wrong."⁷

Good criticism has no nationality!

Let us face it: one critical voice can do little against a bastion of well-organized PR campaigns in favour of the deliberately cultivated cult of stardom. "Visibility" is perhaps one of the mildest terms adopted by the contemporary music industry. Many opera houses see no need to retain a regular "company" of singers anymore. They can fly in "international" artists to constitute an "international" cast for specific performances at whatever costs (which in some cases are supported by public money). The only "company" in an opera house is the orchestra, traditionally sunk into a pit (not necessarily as deep as the "abyss" [*Abgrund*] in Bayreuth). The musicians are the mainstay of the house, are badly paid in most cases and *invisible*. Every time I see Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, I wish the audience would have a

chance to applaud the principal flautist who makes Tamino's instrument sound truly "magical." But he/she has to remain invisible; only the conductor has a chance to come on the stage for the final curtain call. In a sense and accidentally, tradition supports the PR-driven craze for stardom.

Yet, whatever one may say about the commercial excesses of the musical world, it has one virtue that is also visible: the presence of an audience substantiates its viability. If we cross over into the domain of visual arts, we shall encounter a strange phenomenon, and I am speaking here of the specific case of Thailand. Public museums of modern art are usually empty, and I have a personal predilection of visiting our National Gallery on early Sunday mornings, for until about 11.30, there are only two people in that well-maintained, air-conditioned space, namely myself and a single watchman! But many of our contemporary artists thrive well in our society. Buyers and collectors are there to buy their "commodities," irrespective of the artistic quality. So buying and selling go on vigorously in a society in which there is no *public* for contemporary art. It is a prerogative among the *nouveaux riches* to collect art works, and they can be easily persuaded by art dealers or sometimes by the artists themselves. (It may be noticed that loquacious artists sell better than those who do not know how to promote themselves.) People these days are ready to forgive a self-serving remark made by a *diva*, but tend to regard a similar statement by a Mike Tyson as raucous or uncouth. This is not fair! We do not need to refer to an authority of the stature of Schopenhauer in order to maintain the artistic superiority of music over boxing. But the market-driven behaviour of many musical stars leaves sense and sensibility behind. "What they

⁷ Norman Lebrecht, "Rattle has a battle on his hands." *The Lebrecht Weekly*, August 23, 2006. <<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/060823-NL-rattle.html>>. See also: Presseportal PARK AVENUE – Simon Rattle bei den Philharmonikern gescheitert. <http://www.presseportal.de/pm/58385/81308/park_avenue>.

lack is the redeeming gift of humility, an urge to be at the service of art."⁸

When music becomes a marketable commodity, humility is not an attribute that attracts a large clientele.

The (precarious) survival of Thai classical music

It would appear that music geared towards mass consumption is not much concerned with quality, for idle consumers with no critical awareness always fall prey to market manipulations. Can we go a step further in positing that a society that consists almost entirely of listeners, with only a tiny fraction of its members practising music—either as professionals or amateurs—is, musically and culturally speaking, not in a healthy state? I cannot help being reminded of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), who as playwright, director, and theoretician, has had immense influence on the theatre internationally. Brecht, in his theory of the didactic play, was of the opinion that the ideal theatre could only arise out of a community in which there was no clear dividing line between performers and spectators, and that amateurs were the driving force behind such a community.⁹ The same principle could very well apply to music, and the case of Thai classical music can substantiate the Brechtian theory. Against all the odds, it has managed to survive the

onslaught of modern life and maintain its high standard of performance. The demarcation line between professionals and amateurs is very thin, as confirmed by the results of the research project "Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society."¹⁰ It is no rare sight to see a member of the audience step into an orchestra and take over (and surely not usurping) the place of a performer who steps out to assume the role of a listener. To formulate it in more radical terms, this is music for musical practitioners and not for passive listeners. It does not care for a mass audience and it does not partake of the process of commodification and commercialization. A virtuoso in Thai classical music is usually known in a small circle of connoisseurs and can never get rich. There is a funny practice of the Thai bureaucracy (which I do not find funny!) that most local schools have to employ their music teachers in the capacity of janitors. This is because most of these masters of Thai classical music have had only a four-year compulsory education, although their level of performance would equal that of an M.Mus. or a D.Mus. in the higher education system. So the only place for them in the Thai bureaucracy is that of a janitor. The "education" they have received is an informal one. There are no fixed curriculum, no graded examinations, and no certification, and the training is mostly done on a one-to-one basis; nevertheless, it is rigorous. The guiding principle is quality, and we owe it to these humble janitors of local schools that the standards have been upheld.

⁸ Norman Lebrecht, "The Singing World's Golden Couple?" *The Lebrecht Weekly*, February 16, 2006.

<<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/000216-NL-alagna-gheorghiu.html>>.

⁹ *Brecht's Modell der Lehrstücke*, ed. Reiner Steinweg. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976. 51.

¹⁰ *From Work of Art Critical Arena. Summary Report of the Research Project "Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society."* (Chetana Nagavajara: Project Leader). Bangkok: Chomanad Press, 2006. 30.

Thai classical music remains community-based, in many cases, with Buddhist temples functioning as community centres. Music contests and music festivals are held, not in the National Theatre or the august Thailand Cultural Centre, but in a multi-purpose hall of a temple. A few years ago, I attended a music contest at a small temple that went on all night, with the Deputy Abbot as the Convener, who also supervised the preparation of the supper for the ten orchestras taking part, which was to be served around 3 a.m. When I took leave of him at around 2.30 a.m., he regretted that I would miss the important part of the event: the orchestras would indulge in musical jokes around dawn! The point I am making here is that this is music-making just for the sheer pleasure of it—worlds apart from the common run of the music industry we have seen above under the section "Commodification and Commercialization."

This is not the place to discourse on the role of the Buddhist temple as the centre of a community. There is no need to stress that it is not just a place for religious worship. Worldly, and sometimes very worldly, problems are to be addressed there too. There is a temple near the notorious slums of Khlong Toey, known as Wat Khlong Toey Nai, which has distinguished itself as a self-appointed conservatory. Youngsters from the slums go there for musical training. Some of them—there is no secret about it—are former delinquents or drug-addicts, but once they fall under the spell of Thai classical music, they begin to realize their own worth, strive for perfection, and gain thereby self-confidence and self-respect. A few of them have been praised as virtuosos. Perhaps in their music-making, they may have experienced those *Augenblicke* which

are much, much more felicitous than the kicks they get out of drugs. If this is one way in which music can function as a therapy, it is a therapy that is based on man's creative ability. Engagement in music can in this case combat base instincts.

Perhaps we can extrapolate a little from the above episode that music-making is also conducive to the development of personality, both at the individual and the collective levels. It is not too difficult to recognize the individual personality of a distinguished musician, but it is by no means easy to speak of the distinct personality of a musical ensemble. The aforementioned research project "Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society" did invite two orchestras from the province of Saraburi to perform at the same concert at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, Talingchan, Bangkok, on June 12, 2005, in the programme called "Pupils of the Same Master Compete at Taling Chan." The two orchestras consisted of members and friends of two families who were relatives, lived as next-door neighbours in the same village, and were trained by two masters (also relatives) who studied under the same master musician in Bangkok. Yet their styles of playing were different; the sounds of the respective orchestras were different, too, even when they were performing the same set pieces. So, living physically close to each other and being next-door neighbours did not homogenize their distinct collective musical personalities. This is the wonder of music, and music-making is probably one of the most effective means of achieving intellectual and spiritual cohesiveness. When we turn to the Western world, we encounter complaints that most symphony orchestras these days sound alike because

they do not work continuously enough under their chief conductors, who jet around the globe guest-conducting this and that orchestra. The quasi-religious belief about the "sound" of an orchestra can go very far, and Sir Simon Rattle has been accused of destroying the "German sound" of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, as though that sound was ethnically and racially determined. But the sound of the Philharmonia Orchestra of London under its chief conductor Otto Klemperer in the 1960s was perhaps more "German" than that of any German orchestra! I am more inclined to side with the conductor Eugene Ormandy (1899–1985) when he said: "The Philadelphia sound, it's me!" The young musicians from the Thai province of Saraburi would readily agree with him.

But such distinctiveness does not necessarily preclude a certain degree of flexibility in adjusting themselves to changing circumstances. Thai classical musicians do not operate exactly in the same way as their Western counterparts when they perform with guest soloists. With the Western system of notation, the soloist, the home orchestra, and its resident conductor do not have absolute freedom to veer from the written text, although a certain freedom is there that is agreed upon during the rehearsals between the soloist and the conductor/orchestra. A Thai orchestra is not score-based, and when a guest musician joins in, the orchestra (with no conductor) and the guest musician have to find their relationship, which has not been prescribed beforehand or written down in the form of notation. They must *instinctively* feel together, be attentive to each other, listen to each other, and be prepared to sacrifice individual personality in order to achieve a new *collective personality*. The process requires great

skills, as well as humility. And we must not forget that they, more often than not, perform together *without a single rehearsal*. I am not claiming that this is a prerogative of Thai music, for jazz music too admits of such collaboration. *Civilized collegiality* is the order of the day.

There is a *ranad* (xylophone) player in Bangkok known by his nickname Pom who roams about town (and sometimes up-country) with two *ranad* sticks in his bag and joins in with various orchestras. (I heard him live once.) As I have explained above, we still live in an age in which each orchestra retains its own style and its own sound, so when Mr. Pom comes for a visit and asks to be allowed to play the main *ranad*, the orchestra has to adjust itself. But the greater the adjustment, the greater is the challenge, and the greater the pleasure of music-making. Of course, such collaborative feats are not possible for the entire repertoire, for certain compositions belong to certain schools and guest musicians will find it hard to fit in. But the available repertoire that permits such collaboration is large enough. Naturally, the way both parties adjust themselves may not be perceptible to the uninitiated, and this is where Thai classical music remains, to a certain extent, music for connoisseurs.

A question may arise as to what, in the nature of Thai music itself, is supportive of such flexibility that, in turn, facilitates collective music-making. The answer is quite straightforward: *improvisation*. Thai classical music is played from memory (and one master musician, Bunyong Ketkhong, had a repertoire of roughly 20,000 tunes),¹¹ that still leaves room for

¹¹ This information was transmitted to me by the German theatre director, Gert Pfafferodt,

improvisation. A classical Thai musician is expected to be not only a performer but also a composer, and it is this second capacity that enables him to accommodate whatever the guest artist may have come up with. Of course, all this freedom to improvise does not happen wildly without design but must respect a common framework within which each musician can be both himself and part of an ensemble.

The concept of *composition* in Thai classical music also needs some clarification. A composition need not be something completely novel. The composer can take a folk melody or an old composition by a past master and adapt it, vary it, curtailing and supplementing the original. He may draw on a common pool of existing melodies and make out of them something of his own. What the French thinker Roland Barthes (1915–1980) says about "the immense dictionary from which he [the scriptor] draws a writing that knows no halt"¹² can perhaps be applied to the process of composition in Thai classical music, although we would never go as far as Barthes in denying the creative role of the artist/composer. Composition,

who worked closely with the Thai music master for almost two years from 1982 to 1984 in the process of preparation for the production of the "hybrid" drama, *Phra Sang-Iphigenie*. I have sought advice on this issue from a number of experts in Thai music, who are of the opinion that, as a "composition" in Thai classical music is an adaptation/variation/extrapolation/recomposition of other works, the assertion may not be an exaggeration at all.¹² Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text. Essays*. Selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977. 147.

in our sense, is therefore "intertextual," but intertextuality does not deny originality altogether. In this free-for-all process of give and take, it is difficult to identify the origin, and the modern notion of copyright which is supposed to be one of the hallmarks of a civilized society can hardly be relevant to the practice of Thai music. The joy of listening to Thai music is that you have the impression of having heard this music before, but what you are hearing here and now is not exactly what stuck in your memory from previous hearings. It is as though you were awakening to the memories of your past lives!

Knowing Thai music does not concern only the music; Thai music can function as a gateway to Thai culture in general. I shall cite a specific example: the constitution of a *piphat* orchestra. Two *ranad* (xylophones) are placed in front of the orchestra: the first, called *ranad ek* in Thai, is responsible for carrying the main melody. The musician in charge of the *ranad ek* is accorded a distinct prominence and is encouraged to demonstrate his virtuosity. Sitting at his side is a colleague who plays the *ranad thum*, literally a *ranad* with a soft sound. The latter musician gives the appearance of playing a secondary role: he syncopates, accentuates, and at times comments on the principal melody. He seems to be content with assuming the role of the buffoon of the orchestra.

But appearances are deceptive. More often than not, the master himself opts to play the *ranad thum*, while giving a chance to one of his top pupils to shine out with the first *ranad*. In his apparently subordinate position, the master directs the orchestra. The colleagues have to listen attentively to him: he may relax or hasten the pace. It

would be a blunder to translate this orchestral structure in occidental terms such that the first *ranad* is likened to the first violin and the second *ranad* to the second violin. The English expression "to play second fiddle" does not apply here. In the Western context, a chamber orchestra without a conductor is directed by the concertmaster, who still maintains his prominence at the first desk of the first violins. We Thai have reversed that hierarchical disposition. I have elsewhere elaborated a theory of the second xylophone, which in some ways can be helpful in the understanding of Thai culture.¹³ Ours is a *ranad thum culture* which does not fit into the contemporary craze for visibility and publicity. The dilemma facing present-day Thailand could be explained in terms of our facile abandonment of our *ranad thum culture* in favour of a hasty and unreflected espousal of superficial values.

A return to chamber music?

In a way, a Thai classical orchestra is akin to a Western chamber orchestra in terms of its size and the intimate rapport among the musicians. The futile efforts to increase the size of a Thai orchestra to rival, or even to outdo, a Western symphony orchestra have produced disastrous results, simply because our instruments sound extremely ugly when played in a very large ensemble. To counter the craze for big sound and gigantic ensembles, invariably exploited by technology and the music

industry, which have turned out docile listeners and consumers, it would be desirable to hark back to music-making at the community and family levels. There is no better way to achieve this than by returning to chamber music. Let us take counsel from one of the most professional of professional musicians, who remained an enlightened amateur at heart.

We shall always come back to chamber music—the quartet, the string quartet in particular—as the highest form of musical activity It is not aimed to produce mammoth effects in volume on mammoth audiences in mammoth halls It is perhaps the greatest contribution Europe has made to civilization.

Chamber music should be played, almost, by amateurs rather than by professionals. Naturally the professional quartet is an amazing achievement, but the civilization that I would love to know rests on amateur performance, on those innumerable small groups that gather in private homes—too few today, the age of “The Knob.” It is my prayer and hope that . . . , when the present generation grows up, they will have the means to play for themselves, for their friends, for their families, to make chamber music at home; . . .¹⁴

¹³ Chetana Nagavajara, "Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste in der thailändischen Kultur," (1992) in Chetana Nagavajara, *Wechselseitige Erhellung der Kulturen. Aufsätze zur Kultur und Literatur*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1998. 69–73.

¹⁴ Yehudi Menuhin and William Primrose, *Violin & Viola*. Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides. New York: Shirmer Books, 1976. 89–90.

There could not have been a more eloquent plea for music-making and a more convincing defence of the role of the amateur than the above statement by Lord Yehudi Menuhin. Thirty years have passed and, let us face it, we shall have to continue hoping—and praying. A strange phenomenon came about in Thailand two years ago when the film *The Overture*, based on the life of a great Thai classical musician, was shown, first to empty houses, and subsequently, through concerted campaigns in the media, to full houses, resulting in an upsurge in the sale of musical instruments—especially the *ranad*, as the hero of the film plays the *ranad ek*—and in the demand for music lessons. Alas, as with most good things that happen in this hapless Land of Smiles, the whole excitement was a fleeting affair. The media's interest was not genuine, and there was no firm educational foundation to keep the flame burning. The state and private organizations have failed to capitalize on the golden opportunity to revive music-making, and we are now back to square one, where millions of television viewers get bewitched by a television show called "Academy Fantasia," which brings young aspirants together in residence (whose every move, including the most intimate ones, is captured by television cameras), and who are trained to compete in a weekly popular song contest, adjudicated by a popular vote via SMS. The weekly contest takes place in a mammoth hall, the ticket price being naturally exorbitant. The age-old *ranad thum culture* has had no chance. We are back to the push-button culture which is situated at the other extreme of the dream cherished by the likes of Lord Yehudi Menuhin.

Education as the last resort?

Over thirty years ago, I went to the Philippines as member of the Secretariat of the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), serving the Council of Education Ministers, which was meeting in Baguio City. We were impressed by the warm welcome accorded us along the mountainous route, where school bands were greeting us as we passed by. The Permanent Secretary of Education told us that it was the government's policy to encourage *every school child* to learn a musical instrument. Within less than twenty years, most musicians playing in the lobbies of first-class hotels in Thailand were Filipinos. They had sensitivity, musicianship, and skills with which local Thai musicians could not compete. They have had *education*, the kind of education that their Thai counterparts did not have. Of course, with the advent of *karaoke*, our Filipino friends have had to pack their bags and go home. Once again in this Land of Smiles, technology and money (or to be more precise, money-saving mechanisms) have eliminated music-making.

The case of the Philippines is of exemplary nature. Concerted efforts on various fronts have been initiated, which are not restricted to actual teaching and learning but also take into account activities of promotional character. The state can be relied upon as the prime mover in constructive thinking and action, including such measures as the passage of the Music Law as far back as 1966.¹⁵

¹⁵ Viola E. Hornilla, "Music Education in the Philippines' Primary and Secondary Schools," *Articles on Culture and Arts*. [National Commission for Culture and the Arts]

Thailand can certainly learn from the experiences (the successes as well as the setbacks) of our ASEAN friends. But who cares about those music-loving monks at innumerable temples who have, as managers and impresarios, kept classical music alive? In the formal sector, the teaching and learning of the arts have not received sufficient attention, and the learning of the various arts is combined into one weekly session. We need a large pool of amateurs out of which professional musicians can be formed. The schools can be instrumental in this endeavour. In one particular area, namely the training of marching bands, they have excelled themselves, even at the international level, but the craze for winning competitions can go too far. In any case, the standard of playing brass instruments is high in our country, and the brass sections of our symphony orchestras often astonish visiting Western conductors. It should not be too difficult to emulate our "top brass" in other musical sectors. Furthermore, to have a substantial number of amateur musicians is a guarantee that there will be sufficient listeners who know how to appreciate good music, for those who play an instrument or sing are, more often than not, better listeners than those who do not. Besides, a school is a tightly-knit community that can encourage meaningful interaction between performers and listeners.

In terms of education for the public, the media have been indifferent, to say the least, and television must be branded as the chief culprit. Prime time is devoted to tasteless soap operas, and at the time of this writing, the government, pressured by

<http://www.ncca.gov.ph/about_cularts/comarticles.php?artcl_Id=159>.

groups of concerned parents, is taking concrete measures to regulate TV programming by allotting prime time to more constructive programmes suitable also for children. A plan to launch a Public Television Station is also being initiated.¹⁶ As far as music, especially Thai classical music, is concerned, they need not worry about a dearth of able musicians and ensembles to create meaningful programmes. Those music-loving janitors and their pupils can get together anytime, and the above-mentioned repertoire of 20,000 pieces is there to serve the needs of the listeners. "Management" of the arts has almost become a dirty word, because we only know the kind of management driven by cupidity. We need a new concept of management intent on promoting a broad-based education for the public good.

Epilogue: An idealistic aside

In an effort to combat the exploitation of music to satisfy materialistic ends, I began this paper by drawing analogies from the notion of *Augenblick* as expressed in Goethe's *Faust*. I must clarify that I do not mean to say that music, as the other arts, must of necessity be an end in itself. I am not prepared to go as far as Roger Scruton, who in his book *The Aesthetics of Music* categorically states that "we must consider a work of art as an end in itself; only then does it become a means for us."¹⁷ I do not think that in real life we distinguish ends and means in a categorical manner at all. In his recent work, *Late Beethoven: Music*,

¹⁶ The idea has since been realized with a substantial state subsidy. The new channel is trying very hard to create meaningful programmes that other commercially driven stations have not been able to deliver.

¹⁷ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 375.

Thought, Imagination (2003), Maynard Solomon demonstrates how a shift in the composer's thinking about life and art has a bearing on his mature creation. Instead of referring to scholarly authorities, I shall return to the musician I most admire. Lord Yehudi Menuhin reminisced about his childhood in a very thought-provoking way:

As a small child playing the violin, my naïve dream was to be able, thereby, to heal the suffering heart, fulfilling thus the Jewish mission. Ever since I can remember, I have tried to relate the beauty of great music to the harmony of life. As a small child I even imagined that if I could play the Chaconne of Bach inspiringly enough in the Sistine Chapel under the eyes of Michelangelo, all that is ignoble and vile would miraculously disappear from our world.¹⁸

The young Menuhin was not overly concerned with the philosophical question of whether music is an end or a means. What sounds most assuring is that here was a child who had already mastered the difficult Chaconne of Bach, who was conscious of the immense possibility of music and also of his own prowess as a musician, and who was filled with an aspiration to rise beyond the common run of music-making to an ideal world. The references to the Jewish mission and Michelangelo's masterpiece in the Sistine

Chapel confirm that he had had a good *education* (though his was a thorough home-schooling), which enabled him, even at that tender age, to anchor his music and music-making in a relevant and meaningful cultural context. Let us face it: we are dealing here with an idealistic aspiration.

The facts of life may not be as rosy as one would like them to be. The exterminators of Auschwitz too were fervent music lovers and saw to it that a chamber orchestra consisting of female prisoners was set up under the direction of Alma Rosé. When she unexpectedly died of food-poisoning, they did her the kind of honour usually due to a highly respected person.¹⁹ How are we to explain such a paradox in human nature? Another story could perhaps better illustrate the power of music to create friendship, and this was told in a television interview by the French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992). While a prisoner of war in the camp at Görlitz (a town now split into two halves, one German and the other Polish), where, he maintained, the Germans treated their prisoners well, although food was very scarce, Messiaen composed a deeply religious work, which has since been immortalized in the repertoire of chamber music, known as the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, which was performed in the prison camp on January 15, 1941. The audience consisted both of prisoners and German officers of the camp, who were united in brotherhood under the spell of this music. (The temperature outside the

¹⁸ Transcribed from *Yehudi Menuhin: The Violin of the Century* DVD - EMI CLASSICS (DVB 4 92363 9).

¹⁹ Richard Newman with Karen Kirtley, *Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz*. Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2000. 303.

improvised concert hall was –4 degrees!)²⁰ Messiaen was trying to convey in this work his vision of the Apocalypse, but, in all modesty, he admitted that this "vision" might have come from the hunger he was experiencing at that time!

We could multiply the stories about the *pros* and *cons* of music indefinitely and never be able to reach a definitive conclusion on the healing and redemptive power of music. "The child is father of the man," an English Romantic poet once said.²¹ And I for one would be ready at any time to align myself with the child prodigy Yehudi Menuhin, who ideally believed that the aesthetic and the moral value of music are identical. A little grain of idealism can carry us very far.²²

²⁰ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003. 61–70.

²¹ From William Wordsworth's poem "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky."

²² Keynote Address presented at the 6th Asia-Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research (APSMER 2007) at the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, July 25, 2007.