

## Advice to a Graduation

by Glenn Gould

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I know that in accepting the role of advice giver to a graduation, I am acceding to a venerable tradition. However, it's a role that rather frightens me, partly because it's new to me, and partly because I'm firmly persuaded that much more harm than good accrues to gratuitous advice. I know that on these occasions it is customary for the advice giver to tell you something of the world that you will face – based, of course, upon his experience – one that necessarily could not duplicate that which may be your own. I know also that it is customary to recommend to you the solutions that have proved themselves valid within the speaker's experience, sometimes to dish them up anecdotally in the "When I was your age" – or, even more mischievously, in the "If I were your age" – tradition. But I have had to reject this approach, because I am compelled to realize that the separateness of our experience limits the usefulness of any practical advice that I could offer you. Indeed, if I could find one phrase that would sum up my wishes for you on this occasion, I think it would be devoted to convincing you of the futility of living too much by the advice of others.

What can I say to you that will not contravene this conviction? There is, perhaps, one thing which does not contradict my feeling about the futility of advice in such a circumstance as this, because it is not based upon calling to your observation something demonstrable – that is to say, something that need be demonstrated and hence will most likely be rejected – but is simply a suggestion about the perspective in which you view those facts that you possess already and those which you shall subsequently choose to acquire.

It is this: that you should never cease to be aware that all aspects of the learning you have acquired, and will acquire, are possible because of their relationship with negation – with that which is not, or which appears not to be. The most impressive thing about man, perhaps the one thing that excuses him of all his idiocy and brutality, is the fact that he has invented the concept of that which does not exist. "Invented" is perhaps not quite the right word – perhaps "acquired" or "assumed" would be more acceptable – but "invented," to return to it, somehow expresses more forcefully, if not quite accurately, the achievement that is involved in providing for an explanation for mankind, an antithesis involved with that which mankind is not. The ability to portray ourselves in terms of those things which are antithetical to our own experience is what allows us not just a mathematical measure of the world in which we live (though without the negative we would not go far in mathematics) but also a philosophical measure of ourselves; it allows us a frame within which to define those things which we regard as positive acts. That frame can represent many things. It can represent restraint. It can represent a shelter from all of those antithetical directions pursued by the world outside ourselves – directions which may have consistency and validity elsewhere but from which our experience seeks protection. That frame can represent a most arbitrary tariff against those purely artificial but totally necessary systems which we construct in order to govern ourselves – our social selves, our moral selves, our artistic selves, if you will. The implication of the negative in our lives reduces by comparison every other concept that man has toyed with in the history of thought. It is the concept which seeks to

make us better – to provide us with structures within which our thought can function – while at the same time it concedes our frailty, the need that we have for this barricade behind which the uncertainty, the fragility, the tentativeness of our systems can look for logic.

You are about to enter – as they say on these fearsome occasions – the world of music. And music, as you know, is a most unscientific science, a most unsubstantial substance. No one has ever really fully explained to us many of the primevally obvious things about music. No one has really explained to us why we call high "high" and low "low." Anyone can manage to explain to us what we call high and what we call low; but to articulate the reasons why this most unscientific, unsubstantial thing that we call music moves us as it does, and affects us as deeply as it can, is something that no one has ever achieved. And the more one thinks about the perfectly astonishing phenomenon that music is, the more one realizes how much of its operation is the product of the purely artificial construction of systematic thought. Don't misunderstand me: when I say "artificial" I don't mean something that is bad. I mean simply something that is not necessarily natural, and "necessarily" takes care of the provision that in infinity it might turn out to have been natural after all. But so far as we can know, the artificiality of system is the only thing that provides for music a measure of our reaction to it.

Is it possible, then, that this reaction is also simulated? Perhaps it, too, is artificial. Perhaps this is what the whole complicated lexicon of music education is meant to do – just to cultivate reaction to a certain set of symbolic events in sound. And not real events producing real reactions, but simulated events and simulated reactions. Perhaps, like Pavlov's dogs, we get chills when we recognize a suspended thirteenth, we grow cozy with the resolving dominant seventh, precisely because we know that's what is expected of us, precisely because we've been educated to these reactions. Perhaps it's because we've grown impressed with our own ability to react. Perhaps there's nothing more to it than that we've found favour with ourselves – that the whole exercise of music is a demonstration of reflex operation.

The problem begins when one forgets the artificiality of it all, when one neglects to pay homage to those designations that to our minds – to our reflex senses, perhaps – make of music an analyzable commodity. The trouble begins when we start to be so impressed by the strategies of our systematized thought that we forget that it does relate to an obverse, that it is hewn from negation, that it is but very small security against the void of negation which surrounds it. And when that happens, when we forget these things, all sorts of mechanical failures begin to disrupt the function of human personality. When people who practice an art like music become captives of those positive assumptions of system, when they forget to credit that happening against negation which system is, and when they become disrespectful of the immensity of negation compared to system – then they put themselves out of reach of that replenishment of invention upon which creative ideas depend, because invention is, in fact, a cautious dipping into the negation that lies outside system from a position firmly ensconced in system.

Most of you at some time or other will engage in teaching some aspect of music, I should imagine, and it is in that role that you are most liable, I think, to what I might call the dangers of positive thinking.

I am, perhaps, in no position to talk about teaching. It is something that I have never done and do not imagine that I shall ever have the courage to do. It strikes me as involving a most awesome responsibility which I should prefer to avoid. Nevertheless, most of you will probably face that responsibility at some time; and from the sidelines, then, it would seem to me that your success as teachers would very much depend upon the degree to which the singularity, the uniqueness, of the confrontation between yourselves and each one of your students is permitted to determine your approach to them. The moment that boredom, or fatigue, the *ennui* of the passing years, overcomes the specific ingenuity with which you apply yourself to every problem, then you will be menaced by that over-reliance upon the susceptible positive attributes of system.

You may remember the introduction that George Bernard Shaw supplied to his collected writings as music critic, and in which he describes an early ambition to develop the native resonance of his baritone and grace the stages of the world's opera houses. He was encouraged in this, apparently, by a lively charlatan, one of those walking fossils of music theory, who already had ensnared Shaw's mother as student and who proclaimed himself in possession of something called "the Method." It seems that after several months' exposure to the Method, Bernard Shaw took to his typewriter and was never able to carry a tune again.

I do not, for one moment, suggest that you minimize the importance of dogmatic theory. I do not suggest, either, that you extend your investigative powers to such purpose that you compromise your own comforting faith in the systems by which you have been taught and to which you remain responsive. But I do suggest that you take care to recall often that the systems by which we organize our thinking, and in which we attempt to pass on that thinking to the generations that follow, represent what you might think of as a foreground of activity – of positive, convinced, self-reliant action – and that this foreground can have validity only insofar as it attempts to impose credibility on that vast background acreage of human possibility that has not yet been organized.

Those of you who will become performers and composers will not perhaps be quite so vulnerable, if only because the market in which you will have to operate is insatiably demanding of new ideas, or, at any rate, of new variations upon old ideas. Furthermore, as performer or composer you will in all likelihood exist – or, at any rate, should try to exist – more for yourself and of yourself than is possible for your colleagues in musical pedagogy. You will not be as constantly exposed to the sort of questions which tempt ready answers from you. You will not have quite so great an opportunity to allow your concepts of music to become inflexible. But this solitude that you can acquire and should cultivate, this opportunity for contemplation of which you should take advantage, will be useful to you only insofar as you can substitute for those questions posed by the student for the teacher, questions posed by yourself for yourself. You must try to discover how high your tolerance is for the questions you ask of yourself. You must try to recognize that point beyond which the creative exploration – questions that extend your vision of your world – extends beyond the point of tolerance and paralyses the imagination by confronting it with too much possibility, too much speculative opportunity. To keep the practical issues of systematized thought and the speculative opportunities of the creative instinct in balance will be the most difficult and most important undertaking of your lives in music.

Somehow, I cannot help thinking of something that happened to me when I was thirteen or fourteen. I haven't forgotten that I prohibited myself anecdotes for tonight. But this one does seem to me to bear on what we've been discussing, and since I have always felt it to have been a determining moment in my own reaction to music, and since anyway I am growing old and nostalgic, you will have to hear me out. I happened to be practising at the piano one day – I clearly recall, not that it matters, that it was a fugue by Mozart, K. 394, for those of you who play it too – and suddenly a vacuum cleaner started up just beside the instrument. Well, the result was that in the louder passages, this luminously diatonic music in which Mozart deliberately imitates the technique of Sebastian Bach became surrounded with a halo of vibrato, rather the effect that you might get if you sang in the bathtub with both ears full of water and shook your head from side to side all at once. And in the softer passages I couldn't hear any sound that I was making at all. I could feel, of course – I could sense the tactile relation with the keyboard, which is replete with its own kind of acoustical associations, and I could imagine what I was doing, but I couldn't actually hear it. But the strange thing was that all of it suddenly sounded better than it had without the vacuum cleaner, and those parts which I couldn't actually hear sounded best of all. Well, for years thereafter, and still today, if I am in a great hurry to acquire an imprint of some new score on my mind, I simulate the effect of the vacuum cleaner by placing some totally contrary noises as close to the instrument as I can. It doesn't matter what noise, really – TV Westerns, Beatles records; anything loud will suffice – because what I managed to learn through the accidental coming together of Mozart and the vacuum cleaner was that the inner ear of the imagination is very much more powerful a stimulant than is any amount of outward observation.

You don't have to duplicate the eccentricity of my experiment to prove this true. You will find it to be true, I think, so long as you remain deeply involved with the processes of your own imagination – not as alternative to what seems to be the reality of outward observation, not even as supplement to positive action and acquisition, because that's not the way in which the imagination can serve you best. What it can do is to serve as a sort of no man's land between that foreground of system and dogma, of positive action, for which you have been trained, and that vast background of immense possibility, of negation, which you must constantly examine, and to which you must never forget to pay homage as the source from which all creative ideas come.