

Comments on the article, "Plain Talk on Musical Genius"

There are no discussions of techniques or other practical methods in Schillinger's article, "Plain Talk about Musical Genius," which has recently been uploaded to this site, but the structure of its argument bears many close similarities with System of Musical Composition's (SoMC) theoretical prose, and for that reason I recommend it to anyone who wants a microcosmic "feel" for the system before studying it. As with SoMC, the underlying approach is quite strong; Schillinger brings up both novel and interesting ideas. And, as with SoMC, I took issue with some unnecessary subjective commentary and a few problematic details that don't have any logical place in his argument.

Here's the outline as I understand it, along with some comments. The article's introduction states that "absolute pitch" recognition relies on a volatile, non-absolute tuning system and thus doesn't really exist as defined. It serves well to keep you reading, but otherwise has no real purpose, so I haven't included it in the outline.

- "Absolute pitch" ability is a mnemonic ability related to musico-cultural influences (e.g., 12-tone tuning system), which any fairly intelligent young child with proper training can achieve.
- Absolute pitch falls into the same category as other skills commonly recognized as "highly developed musicianship," such as performance memorization and imitative improvisation, also naively acquired at a young age. ["Thus, vain and ignorant people are trying to glorify an ordinary and normal physiological reaction inherent in children, and in animals as well"]

This must have caused a bit of a stir when published. Modern scientific research actually supports Schillinger (with regard to the ability of young children to acquire "absolute pitch" and similar mnemonic abilities with proper training) – something many people might still find surprising today. I should add that some research suggests that adults can acquire these abilities, but with considerably more practice and non-rote methods.

- Some excellent composers have not had these traditional "musical" abilities, so assumptions about compositional ability must be flawed or incorrect.
- The origin of these assumptions is in 'hero worship' of the performer and the common notion that only great performers can make great composers.
- Evidence of composers *usually* being distinguished performers does not actually contradict the above point, since that idea of a necessary connection between performance ability and compositional ability always precedes the evidence, and actually creates a self-selecting group.

Here, Schillinger claims that a performer "should be classified as a parasite—since he develops his own success by usurping the result of thought and effort expended by someone else, usually long since dead." I'm pretty sure he means as follows:

- One expresses new and relevant musical ideas through the act of composition; therefore "musicianship" should apply to skills and abilities required for composition, rather than performance.

After that he should have noted that some composers actually perform and compose simultaneously (improvisation), and that you can record a composition through performance, rather than paper, given

the technology to do so. In both cases, performance may play a more important role than Schillinger's statement implies; still, that role is only as an *accurate record* of the composition.

- Imitative ability is not necessarily an important musical skill, since it does not directly relate to the quality or the originality of a composition.

I think Schillinger walks a fine line here between logical fact and opinion. If by "imitative ability" he means "exact imitation" like in a canon, then this point makes sense. The common conception of imitation, though, is as a starting-off point for invention, i.e., as a learning tool. So a tool like imitation *could* directly relate to the quality of a composition, and could even directly relate to originality if the composer carefully selects which components to imitate (see the first positive requirement for musicianship, below). Perhaps Schillinger gets this notion from his mathematical background, where exactness in imitation would be taken for granted, or perhaps he takes his cue from aestheticians who would claim that parodies have less artistic value than other works because of their imitative aspects, though such statements rarely follow any recognizable chain of reasoning.

Schillinger's tangent about Mozart opens up a whole other can of worms that has nothing whatsoever to do with the points he has to make. Like in SoMC, though, these ridiculous and entertaining notions don't harm his underlying argument. One can easily play the "history" game in complete circles. Here's a taste: the Sammartini brothers had a considerable influence on J.C. Bach and Haydn, both of whom had a considerable influence on Mozart (who also studied in Italy). Mozart's imitative abilities were supplemented by all the skills listed at the end of Schillinger's article. Personally, I like Mozart's music more than J.C. Bach's, though I notice many similarities. Obviously, Schillinger would have preferred J.C. Bach's symphonies (I've actually only heard his symphonias) -- but that's a question of taste.

I take a little issue with both next point as it appears in Schillinger's own words, so like the last point I've tamed what he says with the words "not necessarily."

- "Inspiration" is not necessarily an important musical (compositional) skill, given the examples of people like Beethoven who labored obsessively over their ideas, even down to the thematic material.
- Primary Conclusion: "the nature of musicianship must lie not in mechanical memory of hearing or in muscular habits of finger agility, but in [something else]."

I do not think the inspiration statement makes much sense (see comments below), but I also don't think it interferes with his primary conclusion that traditional notions of musical genius incorrectly rely on mechanical habits and memories.

Part two:

- A composer must have some dissatisfaction with other people's music, which stimulates the urge to do better things. He must instinctively judge the value of other people's music.
- A composer must have originality of thought and conception, as opposed to imitative and mnemonic abilities. Originality is accomplished by "producing new combinations out of the [set of possible] sounds," and by isolating oneself from all kinds of musical routine.

- Originality with basic thematic material is irrelevant (given the tradition of using folk tunes); rather, the skills that lend themselves toward keen and original organization and presentation matter the most.

There's more—he compiles a list of qualities at the end of the article, which call for little commentary and no summary, since he expresses his views with concision and clarity.

I have a few problems, though, mostly based around the first thing on the list: "The ability not to be impressed too much by, nor to remember too much of, somebody else's music." I know he wishes to downplay the supposed importance of traditional "musical genius," but it doesn't help to take it a step too far by saying mnemonic skills actually *hinder* true musicianship. A composer can gain considerable knowledge through his mnemonic skills if he coordinates what he remembers with those positive attributes on Schillinger's list. Really, "inventiveness" is the ability to alter material that you already know so it sounds new (or to make unfamiliar material sound familiar – either way requires resourcefulness and imagination).

And I know Schillinger agrees with me here, since it's one of the assumptions of his system: he provides knowledge of musical patterns and techniques – which he surely wants you to remember – and then leaves originality up to you.

I also think that Schillinger makes a bit of an error when he equates inspiration with other instant memory-based abilities. Inspiration – a subconscious activity – almost always comes to those who are already working hard on a problem, who are already applying the positive attributes of musicianship listed in Schillinger's article. Luckily, like the other problems in the article, this last one does not hurt the important points Schillinger makes about the nature of musicianship, as requiring values other than those commonly associated with musical genius (absolute pitch, imitation, and other mnemonic abilities learned by children). These values include originality, well-defined musical taste, a sense of formal gesture, a sense of proportion, a sense of tension-and-release, analytical ability, and independence from routine, from the prejudices that result from routine. You can generalize and extend many of these values, especially if you view your life as an act of creation, originality, and balance.

Eric Taxier – 11/17/05

As usual comments about my, umm, comments, are welcome at the community forum!