Sound Systems

The Future of the Orchestra

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Why Gödel and Escher But Not Bach

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"Some music *is* better than other music, you know," he said. "And I am right. And the students, they are just wrong." Though he shared this sentiment with a chuckle, the meaning was blunt, and jarring. Some people laughed. Not all the people there, but a few. And nothing was said in response. His statement just sort of sat there, untouched and unquestioned. It *was* picked up later, when we broke up for coffee, after the session was done, not surprisingly by three people of color: an African American community strategist and scholar and two Indian American professors (I was one of the latter). We stood at a tall table, coffee cups in hand, somewhat bewildered by what we'd just heard. *Did he really say that?* we wondered. What was he thinking?

We had all been invited to be part of a conference on the role of beauty in our professional lives. Titled *Beauty at Work,* this conference brought together scientists and musicians, educators and artists, engineers and fashion designers. An eclectic bunch, as demanded by the topics at hand. Over the two days, our goal was to explore questions such as these: "Where do we find beauty in our work? What role does it play in what we do, and how might it help or hinder us?" We were trying to, as the conference website

described it, "illuminate the role of beauty in shaping work across a variety of domains."

The moment that took me aback happened during a paper-presentation session—one with a relatively innocuous title, "Convergences and Divergences in Art and Science." At some point, the conversation turned to music. One of the speakers, a professor of classical music, shared that students often challenged his idea of musical beauty, citing examples of music from their own lives. He said that he found it disturbing, and decried just how misguided his students were in their understanding of musical beauty.

The arrogance of this statement troubled me. I wondered what he would think of my musical tastes—a weird mixed-up grab-bag of contemporary and 1950s Bollywood, Latin fusion, classic rock, Sufi ghazals, and whatever unexpected gems Spotify throws my way. And it also brought home to me the complex relationships between ideas of beauty, our tastes and preferences as individuals, our personal histories, and our shared histories and stories. Paradoxes and tensions abound in these contexts, and often are left unsaid and unexplored.

This was just one of the tensions that I had felt at the conference. The other had to do with the space where the event was held. Somewhat appropriately, given the theme, we gathered in a beautiful fieldstone Gothic-architecture building on the campus of the Catholic University of America, in Washington, DC. Maloney Hall is more than 100 years old, a classical building with pointed arches and spires, rich in intricate decoration and detail. It's equally impressive inside, with a large open space, high vaulted ceilings, and beautiful stained-glass windows that flood the interior with light from the outside.

In many ways this is a sacred space. A space of calm. A space for learning and reflection. Few people would be able to resist its beauty and old-world charm.

And yet, the building is also strangely modern. It is, after all, home to the Busch School of Business and Economics, and recently underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation, making its amenities comparable to those found in other top business schools. This leads to some interesting contrasts: ornate statues of saints standing silently next to large monitors that promote an upcoming business fair, with bold type and images of smiling good-looking young people, and marble staircases that lead to technology-rich, whiteboard-walled rooms for collaboration. The building also hosts a chapel, maybe the only prominent business school to do so.

The sacred, cheek by jowl, with the profane.

The Sacred and the Profane, as it happens, is also the title of a book written by the Romanian-born historian of religion Mircea Eliade and published in 1968.[1] Eliade, the Sewell Avery Distinguished Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, was a historian, philosopher, essayist, and novelist. He authored many books over the course of a distinguished career, spanning genres and styles, from memoirs to theoretical treatises, fantastic novellas to scholarly works. But the ideas he introduced in this slim volume have been maybe the most enduring and influential. He argued that the human experience of reality, of space and time, is split in two—the sacred and profane. In Eliade's telling, the sacred is a divine creative force that manifests itself in human life in many ways, through rituals, symbols, and sacred objects. The profane, in contrast, encompasses the ordinary and mundane aspects of reality that do not reveal any transcendent meaning or value.

All of these musings and memories got me wondering about why the profane, the mongrel, the mashup, the mixtape has always been more meaningful to me. At that conference, I was confronted, along multiple dimensions, with Eliade's ideas. This confrontation was manifest in the design and experience of the space itself, where the sacred and transcendent rub shoulders with the messiness of

business and commerce. It emerged in that discussion on identifying beauty in music, where the classical-music scholar so blithely undermined the musical experiences of his students. Certain spaces are better—elevated, perhaps, closer to the rarefied realms of the sacred. Certain forms of music are better.

These questions are relevant to this discussion we are engaged in, in this book, about the future of orchestras. Pondering these questions in light of my own life experiences has brought home to me the complexities of the underlying issues. At one level, as a non-practicing cultural Hindu (if I can co-opt a phrase from Richard Dawkins[2]) I can feel moved by architecture; the classical Gothic architecture of Maloney Hall, despite being rooted in European cultural norms and Catholic symbolism, speaks to a certain universality of aesthetic experience. Yet, at the same time the almost throwaway comment about certain kinds of music being better than others emphasized to me just how much of an outsider I still am.

Although I recognize that all cultures and religions have ways of creating spaces, times, and events that allow people to connect with the sacred and escape from the profane, there are, and will continue to be, spaces that are not open to all, myself included. And even if we can agree that music is one of the ways that people can create or express or connect with the sacred or the profane—and that different forms or genres can evoke alternate realities or even transcend reality—the concept of music excluding those who "don't get it" extends beyond mere disturbance or offense at disruptions to order. It encompasses the nuanced realities of musical appreciation that require a certain sense of cultural literacy or acculturation—a "training of the ear," if you like, that any music demands, beyond what it sounds like. It requires understanding the web of references and allusions to other compositions, or the historical and cultural context that enriches our appreciation of a piece. This exclusion of people from the sanctified spaces created by and

with music stems not just from a rejection of the unfamiliar. It also reflects a gap in access to or familiarity with these deeper layers of musical engagement, where the full appreciation of a piece's innovation or its dialogue with tradition presupposes a level of acculturation that many may not possess.

And when it comes to classical music, clearly it is something I do not possess. That said, it isn't because I have not tried. Back in high school, I was introduced to a book by Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*.[3] The mathematician Martin Gardner wrote in his review of the book for *Scientific American* (which is how I first learned of it), "Every few decades an unknown author brings out a book of such depth, clarity, range, wit, beauty and originality that it is recognized at once as a major literary event. *Gödel, Escher, Bach*... is such a work."[4]

I had an incipient love of math and science, of art and paradoxes, so this book, with its exploration of deep ideas of self and soul, combined with silly wordplay and whimsical illustrations, appealed to me deeply. Hofstadter, in his unique manner, explores the connections and parallels among the works of three geniuses: the mathematician Kurt Gödel, the artist M.C. Escher, and the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. He seeks to demonstrate how all three used logic, art, and music to create complex and beautiful patterns and structures that provide deep insights into the nature of reality and the mind. He argues for the value of using self-reference, recursion, and paradox to challenge and transcend the limits of logic, art, and music. To say that I was fascinated by the book would be to miss the point. I devoured the book. Over and over. The ideas of Gödel and Escher moved me, opening vistas of thoughts and ideas that are meaningful to me to this day. I admired their brilliance and creativity, their rigor and elegance, their playfulness and profundity. Even today, the ideas I read back then as a teenager in New Delhi inspire me and the work I do, whether they be self-referential examples of visual wordplay or the paradoxical

"Happy New Year" videos I make with my children every year. They have stayed with me in my love of math, though I am not and never will be a mathematician.

Bach, however, was harder for me to grasp than Hofstadter's other two subjects. The words on the page seemed to make meaning, but the music did not. Bach's music, to me, was like a foreign language that I could not understand or appreciate. It was not that I, as a teenager, understood Gödel's theorem, but I felt that with effort and enough college credit-hours, I would get it—and that it would be cool to have done so. Bach's music did not move me or inspire me the same way. And trust me, I tried. So hard. I would listen to cassette after cassette of Bach, as well as Mozart and Liszt, wanting desperately to hear what Hofstadter was telling me was there. When I met Hofstadter many years later, during graduate school, I told him as much. Gödel and Escher made sense to me. Bach just did not. And my childhood hero, surprised and puzzled, suggested that maybe it was because I hadn't tried hard enough. The beauty of Bach and the connections to Gödel and Escher and self-reference and play just seemed so obvious to him.

I wasn't so sure. I had tried and tried. It just didn't work. That music does not touch my soul. But all it took was listening to one song in Mehdi Hassan's recording of his ghazals at the Royal Albert Hall to transfix me. Just one time listening to Pink Floyd's *The Wall* to blow me away. These albums still move me. They touch me in ways that Bach, and other Western classical music, never has.

The reason I am bringing all this up is to complicate the story. There are no straight threads to follow here. Connecting with a piece of music has to do, clearly, with individual taste, likes and dislikes. It has to do with the culture we grow up in, the music we listen to during our youth. But it also speaks to our ability to break out of the culture that we grew up in, as we mature and explore the world. It also speaks to aesthetic experiences that are regarded as

being sacred by one group, which may not come across the same way to other groups. There are histories of power relations involved as well: histories of groups that have regarded certain forms of art and beauty as being superior and have imposed that sense of superiority on others. These norms of beauty and goodness have been justifications for genocide and the decimation of whole swaths of people. There is a bloody history here that I cannot ignore. This is why Mehdi Hassan's ghazals may never be regarded as having the same cultural and intellectual value as a concerto by Bach.

And yet, I am a child of the Enlightenment. These values, cooked up in the salons of France, the bookshops and scientific and literary organizations in England, speak to me. They inspire me, even while their history tells me that I am not included when these august intellectuals write of the equality of all men. (Clearly, women are excluded from this grand notion of equality as well.)

I have always felt uncomfortable in symphony halls. I have never felt like I have belonged there. But how much of my discomfort comes from the fact that they are regarded as "sacred" spaces, with forms of decorum and accepted modes of engagement that have kept me away? I wonder if my preference for the mongrel and the profane is a sign of my continued ignorance, or of my rebellion against this imposed notion of sanctity, built as it is on exclusion and violence.

As I reflect on these ideas and wonder about the future, I hope that orchestras and their music can change and grow. Orchestras need more mongrelization. To me, the future of orchestras lies in this. It lies in becoming more respectful and responsive to the diversity and complexity of people and cultures. That they recognize music is deeply cultural, but also deeply personal, and deeply human. That orchestras can become places that are sacred to all, where music is created and performed that speaks to the soul of every person and every culture. Music can both connect and

transcend the binaries we create to navigate and understand our lived experiences: the logical and the mysterious; the mundane reality and the lofty spiritual; the self and the other; the sacred and the profane. Music can also lay bare the contradictions and paradoxes that exist in our lives, our complicated histories. It can be simultaneously the source of creativity and conflict, of beauty and pain, of growth and stagnation.

I hope orchestras can be critical and curious, open and humble, mindful and responsive. It will require respecting difference, being open to other options, not rejecting the experiences of those to whom certain classical styles may not speak. This orchestral future must not reiterate the statement of the music professor: I am right, and you are wrong.

Epilogue: Eliade in India

In writing this essay, I came to learn of a deeper connection between Eliade and India, my land of birth. Eliade traveled to India when he was in his twenties, and wrote a piece of fiction about his time there, about his falling in love with a 16-year-old woman, Maitreyi Devi, and how that love was not to be. That book, published in 1933, was a bestseller, and helped to launch his career as a man of letters. The novel fictionalized the Eliade stand-in character, including his name and nationality, but named the young woman involved—in fact, he titled the book *Maitreyi* (though it is sometimes known as *La Nuit Bengali or Bengal Nights*).

The real Maitreyi Devi did not find out that Eliade that written this book until years later. She was shocked by some of the of the things Eliade had made up, which caused untold pain to her personally, and affected her socially as well. She argued that not only had he made up many of the events in the book, he had completely misunderstood Indian culture. Despite his erudition, he had been

unethical and disrespectful. Decades later, in 1974, she published her own version of the story, *Na Hanyate*, which was a bestseller in India, but received little traction in the west. Maitreyi Devi, by all accounts, had a successful life in India as a social activist and artist, while Eliade was a famous professor at the University of Chicago. They did meet once more, many years later, when she visited Chicago and got him to promise not to publish the book in English during either of their lifetimes, which is why it did not appear in English until 1993. Despite this, it's not surprising, given his relative fame, that it was his version of the story that ended up becoming a movie in 1988, starring Hugh Grant as the young Eliade.[5] Devi had to sue to ensure that the name of the lead female character would be changed. As it was.

There is just so much here to unpack—from the power of colonialism to elevate certain perspectives and undermine others, to whose stories get told and who must fight, against overwhelming odds, to protect their name. It is this history that we need to question. We cannot exclude and silence, and hope that the art will still speak to all.

This somewhat tragic story of two humans, existing in two different worlds, seeking yet failing to connect, resonates with the challenges that orchestras face today: how to blend and build bridges among diverse cultural registers, while also confronting the forces of exclusion that undergird classical music's sacred aura.