Essays on Music, by Jason Espada

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Our sole distinguishing feature over all other life forms is our humanity, our ability to love and to feel compassion for others. Art, in its purest state, is the ultimate expression of this humanity. For it singles us out in the universe as we know it, as not just another life form but as a miracle not yet understood, a magical event.

So we must place our art in a very special niche, for it will then comfort us, and provide a channel for all manner of creative things: good, and lasting and true. It is the touchstone to our inner beings...

- Frank Espada, from a letter to his students, in 1996

Ten Albums

A few years back, I was invited by a friend on facebook to list ten albums in ten days of music that has meant the most to me. I took this as an opportunity to re-visit some of the joys of music, and offer a few reflections.

Comments on albums one through five

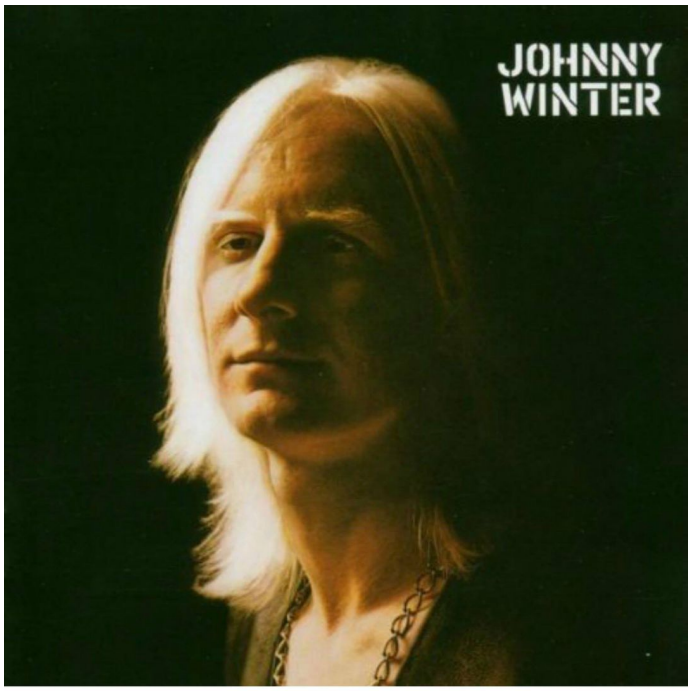
1. Mozart Piano Concertos 15 and 21, played by Alfred Brendel.

This one represents all of Mozarts's 27 piano concertos, which is by far the music I've listened to the most over the years. As much as I love Bach, and classical guitar, it’s not even close for some reason.

Mozart’s music for me is like the sunlight and open air, Summer perfection, and being in luxurious gardens where we are joined by angels.

I know that when the mind darkens it doesn't permit beauty, and that it effects everything, right down to who we feel we are, and what we sense is possible. Mozart's music is one way that light has reached me over the years, and sustained me. I understand now why it was my father's favorite. With all that weighs heavily, persistent troubles, there is this glory too, that is always there for us.

2. Johnny Winter



Day 2 of 10, having been asked by a friend to share the music that's meant the most to me over the years. This is Johnny Winter, who I listened to with Bruce Muir and our crowd back in the mid 70's. I remember connecting the real feeling you get with roots music, and the toughness of it being rock n roll. We got to see him a bunch of times, including once with Muddy

Waters, in DC. Few people could light it up like he did. - as any of his early albums testify.

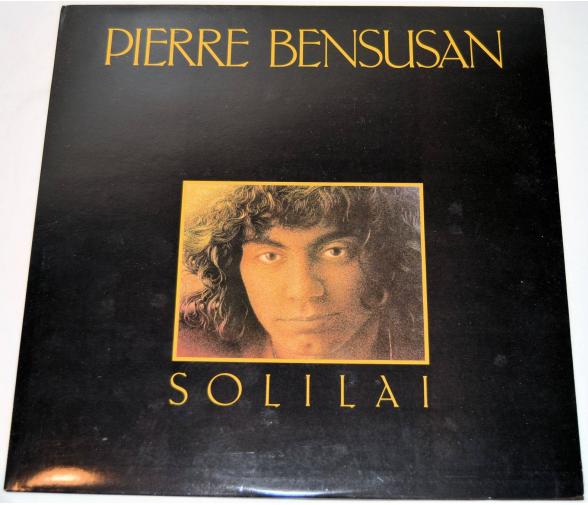
3. The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan

This is a third entry, in no particular order. Like the last two, Mozart and Johnny Winter, this one is also representing a set of recordings, in this case Bob Dylan's early albums. I remember hearing these in New York, when they were released (my father singing 'O where have you been, my blue eyed son'), and years later, on the way to school. That someone could be a socially conscious human rights activist, and also a poet made a deep impression on me, as it did a whole generation.

It's rare that art and spirit and community meet so brilliantly, and when they do, that light reaches far.

'...to dance beneath the diamond sky
With one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea
Circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
Driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow...'

4. Pierre Bensusan - Solilai



It's hard to to measure the effect this one album has had on me. Because of it, I set out to learn to read music, and moved from electric to steel string guitar, and then to classical, and all of this can be traced back to this remarkable artist, and to this record in particular.

Being used to thinking in one musical line, and copping licks off of records, to hear more than one voice being played by a single guitar moved all my thinking about the instrument I'd played for a decade by that time.

I heard the first track, Nice Feeling (‘Nice’ as in the city in France), on the radio in the early 80's, and called around looking for it. None of the record stores at the time had heard of it. Part of it was that this was the some of the first celtic guitar to make its way here, and stores didn't know where to put it. It took me 6 months, but eventually I was able to find a copy.

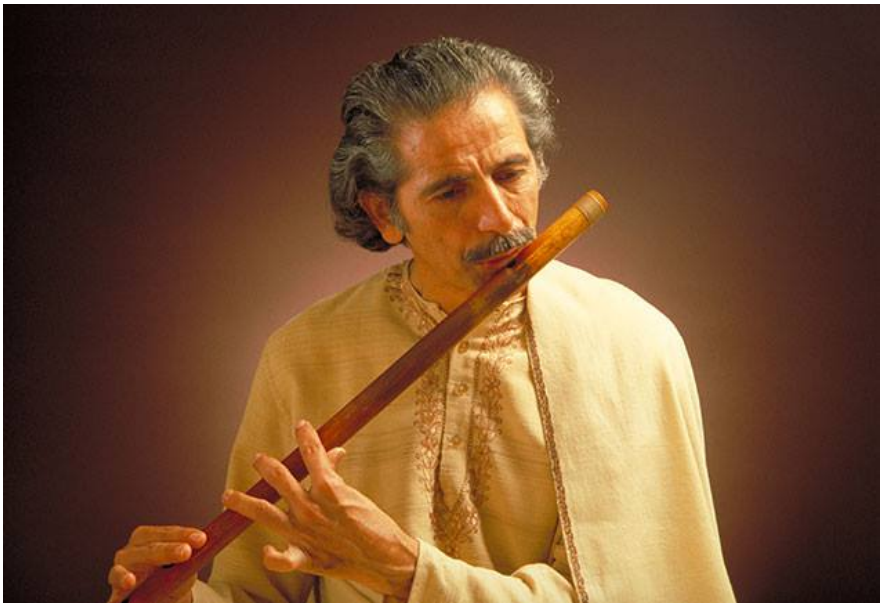
When I was finally able to sit down and listen to the whole thing, I had the image of someone kneeling in prayer the whole time, it was that deep for me. I didn’t know at the time that this was his third album, or that he was both the best representative of European folk music, and very much his own artist - I only knew that with this music, I was in the presence of a divine genius.

The original album was released here by Rounder records, and to me it was perfect. If you can find that version, you have found something of paradise. Unfortunately, they went ahead and changed two tracks in subsequent releases - such perfection, it seems, is hard to remain long in this world.

The music is exceptional on all three of his early albums, Pres De Paris, Musiques, and this one, but Solilai will always have a special place in my heart.

5. Sachdev - Master of the Bamboo Flute.

This album represents for me the beauty and depth of Indian Classical Music. It came as a surprise to me to learn of this Tradition, shortly after coming to San Francisco, in 1979. At that time, 'new age' music was often used in meditation groups, as was this genre. What intrigued me about it,



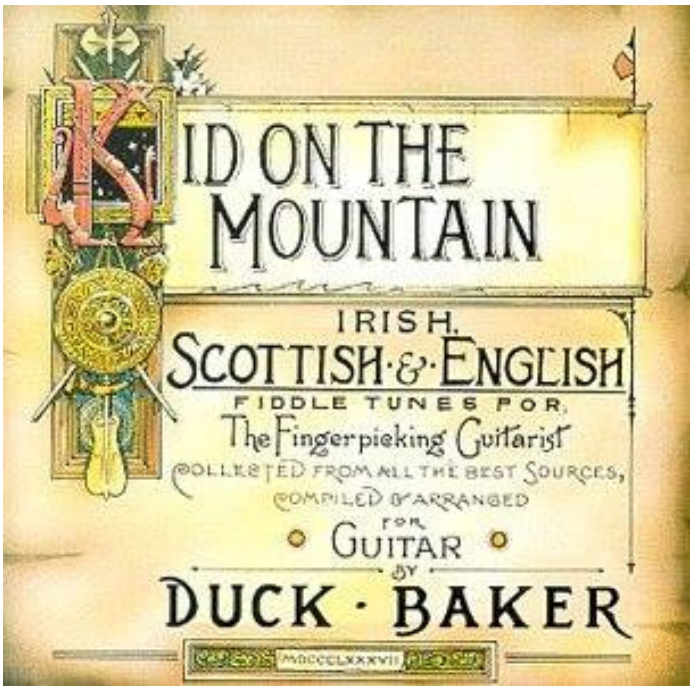
and drew me into it was that it is a tradition deeply connected to Indian Spirituality, and to meditation. For those new to this music, his a fine place to start, as is the music of Ravi Shankar, and Ali Akbar Kahn.

{I also have a longer essay on Indian Classical Music in this collection, written when I was going to City College, in back in 1985, called 'Third Ear Music'.}

Number six of ten.

Homage to Kicking Mule Records

Before classical guitar and learning to read notation, I played a steel string, and read tablature, which is a simplified notation for guitar music. I was motivated to study acoustic after hearing Pierre Bensusan (see my fourth post in this series).



Once a week I'd make a pilgrimage across the bridge to Mill Valley, and Down Home Music, where I discovered Kicking Mule Records, a label founded by the great Stephen Grossman. It featured Roots music, ragtime, and celtic guitar, and the best part was that the records came with tab books. This opened the way for students like me, with only a little formal music education at that point, to access a wide range of pieces.

Some of the albums had a wild variety on them, and it was on one of those odd compilation albums that I first heard Jon Renborne playing renaissance music. That led me to notation, and the world of classical. If not for Kicking Mule then, there would have been for me no Bach, Sor, Giuliani, Latin American Music, and the rest of it, and so I have much gratitude for Mr. Grossman, and the artists that recorded on his label.

Of all the Kicking Mule releases, Duck Baker's Kid on the Mountain was a rare find. His arrangement of Irish airs, fiddle tunes, and harp music is a delight, and, all the pieces are quite playable too!

Seven of ten: Julian Bream, Classical Guitar

In 1985, my father took me to Tower Records in North Beach, and got this album for me. It was my first time hearing what the classical guitar could sound like, and I was astonished. Here, Julian Bream is playing a guitar by the Spanish maker, Jose Romanillo, that is capable or producing an exquisite range of tones. Bream described the classical guitar as 'a miniature orchestra', and this is one album where he shows that to full effect. His great recording of Albeniz and Granados, perhaps my favorite of his, is another.

Eight of ten: Pepe Romero Plays Bach

To hear Bach played by the first generation of guitarists to transcribe and record his music is to hear a lot that is added on, for the sake of texture. Finding Pepe Romero's performance of this music then was a revelation. Listening to it, I felt as though I was hearing the music Bach wrote for the first time. Of course, to play single line music, with implied harmonies on a guitar takes a great technique, and here Pepe Romero brings a full, beautiful sound. This recording led me to transcribe the third 'cello suite, and it's been a solid companion lo these last twenty five years.

Nine of ten: J. S. Bach, the Brandenburg Concertos, performed by Trevor Pinnock and the English Chamber Orchestra.

This is surely one of my desert island recordings, for a few reasons. The first is that it is some of Bach's greatest music, and that's saying a lot. He was in a league by himself when it comes to being prolific - his catalogue lists over 1100 compositions.

This particular set of six multi movement concertos holds the distinction of being of being sent by Bach to the Margrave of Brandenburg as a sample of his work, as application for a position. That he didn't get the job marks these as one of the most remarkable 'failures' in musical history (right up there with Clapton's Layla). The Margrave's loss was all our gain.

These days if you listen to Baroque music, chances are you're hearing the latest iteration of what they call 'Historically Informed Performance Practice' (HIPP, yaa?) often on period instruments. This is a movement that began in the 1970's, when revolutionary scholar - performers took up the challenge of emulating they way they believe the music sounded in the 1600's. In choral performance, this often meant smaller groups singing 'one voice per part', and fewer Baroque era instruments the chamber and orchestral works. The emphasis here is on distinct clarity of the musical lines, that is so important in contrapuntal music, faster tempos, and more bounce to the dance movements.

Trevor Pinnock was one of the pioneers of the Performance Practice, and these recordings, released in the early 80's has all of the freshness and excitement of being part of a new era in music making. With their energy and joy, their unique sounding instruments and outstanding performances, these have remained my favorite version of this music.

The Dark Mysteries and Arvo Pärt

When it comes to the expression of the dark mysteries *in music*, if not for J.S. Bach, the profundity of Arvo Pärt would never have made much sense to me.

In Bach we have a music in which nothing is left out, and where all resolves at last in *Grace.* It is there through even in his most deeply sorrowful work. There is the presence of an unseen hand, that raises up all who receive it to the peace and perfection of love.

Discovering Arvo Pärt decades after living in Bach's world was a revelation unlike any other I can remember with music. Here is this 20th century Estonian composer who went through his atonal phase, only to rediscover early modal Western religious music, and bring it into his composing.

I recall when one of my friends in Taipei gave me a copy of Arbos, and said, here, you probably won't like this, but give it a listen anyway. I went home late that night and put it on. Before the first three pieces were over, I was all in. Here is a musical language that is both unique and universal, and that doesn't shy away from the mournful, but that takes to heart the deep wisdom that can be found in it.

Wholeness results from not denying the dark mysteries, and though we need the utmost skill, and great resources of strength and courage to even so much as approach them, the end is a fuller life, one of far greater awareness and sensitivity, and ultimately reason for hope. *There is light in the darkness*, as the Zen teaching says.

At last, a greater peace is found through embracing what is most difficult about our lives, and being with it, holding it, and in time, transforming it with love.

Third Ear Music (1985)

We usually listen to music in an active way, reaching out, linear. Certain types of music, however, require a different kind of listening for their appreciation. On Saturday night I went to see Ustad Habib Khan (sitar) and Swap an Chaudhuri (tablas) at the Vedic Cultural Center in Berkeley, in a performance of ragas, traditional music of India. To the physical ears this is music that is melodically and timbrally foreign.

I have found that it is possible to listen to this music in another way, not as much physically listening as hearing in a subtle way, a mixture of feeling and hearing.

The musical form itself, a raga, is an extended improvisation by either the flute, sarod, or the sitar (both string instruments). This is usually accompanied by two small pitched drums called tablas, playing complexed improvised rhythms, and by another stringed instrument called a tambura providing a drone background.

Just as listening to certain forms of Western music takes practice, listening to the feelings evoked by non Western musics takes practice also, and is equally rewarding, if in a different way. The music that is heard in this "non-physical" way, if you will, felt more than heard, I refer to as "third ear music". The ragas are especially suitable for this.

On Saturday evening I found myself confronted with the fact that Indian music can be listened to in at least two ways, and I found myself shifting back and forth from one mode of listening to another.

Outwardly, the sounds produced by the sitar cover a wide range, from warm and crying sounds, produced by bending or pulling the strings in and out of pitch, to a thin tone that may perhaps seem brittle or harsh to the physical ears. The melodic improvisation is quite interesting in itself. Inwardly however, I found myself allowing conscious ness to drop down beneath the music, so that the physical sounds were on the periphery, and there was then a sense that the improvisation took place over a steady underlying theme. To me, this is the life of the music that is revealed through the playing .

Each raga began with a solo introduction by the sitar, generally playing slow and expressive lines, and building in momentum. The solo would conclude and at that point all three musicians would continue within the same movement of music that carried the introduction .

As improvisation, the ragas have much in common with other forms of inspired or improvised art, be it jazz music or free form dance. These other forms can also be listened to with the third ear. The performer is drawing closer to expressing the character of the music and gradually merging with the spirit, until the musician or dancer disappears, and the theme, the dance, the art itself alone remains.

Mr. Chaudhuri and Mr. Khan played off or each other's improvisation quite a bit, and while their interplay had warmth and humor, they were provoking each other to go more deeply into the music. Mr. Chaudhuri was amazing. He played the tops, sides, and center of the tablas to bring out different tones. Mr. Khan would answer at times in call and response

fashion and at other times the unison playing showed their intuitive connection. It was a joy.

As I followed their feelings, it appeared as if it took awhile for them to get into the flow of the music, but shortly before the mid-point of the concert they were truly taken by the music.

I inwardly followed the musicians' immersion and as a natural result, I was no longer listening to the outward form of the music. It was still there, but I had gone with them into the music.

When the performers, the music, and audience are joined in the moving soul of the music, there is really no separation, and I believe this is what people come to experience when they listen to any inspired music. I noticed again on Saturday that listeners will often approach Indian music in a devotional way. The same could be said for the young adherents of some new wave music. They go to participate in the music much more fully than if they were to sit back expecting to be entertained, while rationally dissecting the elements of the music. The listeners come to throw themselves into that current that lies beneath the music and become a part of it. They are much like the faithful that go to ritually bathe in the Ganges.

Much is missed if this music is only physically listened to. This is true also for certain 20th century forms of abstract music, forms that avail themselves well to third ear listening. Active listening is reaching out to follow, and this definitely has its place. In a receptive approach much more is literally taken in. Following Indian music in a receptive way, as I

rediscovered last Saturday, leads to an inner quiet in which the Music is heard.

Afterwards, I felt like a river had passed through me, but I also felt the limitation, the inadequacy of words to express this. It is formless and so simple. There is inspired sound above an Indian river, uplifting. There are two worlds, cheek to cheek.

* * *

Note: this was written as an assignment for one music appreciation course I was taking at City College. As I recall now, I got a 'B' for it (the only time anything I wrote in school was marked down) because I was a few days late with it. I wanted to impress this teacher I had a crush on though, and had to wait for a concert to write about. After all that, I guess she wasn't so impressed. As my piano teacher at the time said about taking chances and my foolish, passionate attachments, 'Well, whatever happens, at least you have the music to go back to!' And how right she was.}

A few defining characteristics of classical music

Before talking about any one composer, or piece of classical music, I thought I'd write out a few brief notes about this kind of music in general. Hopefully, this will provide context for the recommended performances.

When I think of classical music, the first thing that comes to mind that distinguishes it is *the instruments* that are played.

Oh, the instruments!

Of course, we have guitars, violins, and keyboards in other kinds of music as well, but we should know that in this kind of music especially, the instruments that are sought out and played are of the highest quality.

I remember in my mid twenties, when I switched first from the electric guitar, to steel string, and then to nylon string classical. I had the feeling that I was only then beginning to explore the quiet end of the spectrum of sound. If we learn to listen, there are tones and textures that can be heard in classical music that are seldom found in other kinds of music.

Looking back now, it seems to me that the louder music becomes, the less is actually heard. I wouldn't have expected my twenty year old self to know this, but it became clear to me the more I involved myself with classical music.

I was also surprised and delighted to learn that *classical musicians develop their technique*. Each instrument has its own pedagogy, that is the

knowledge, accumulated over generations, on how to play that instrument well.

Over many years, *they develop their tone,* which can become unique to the player, and identifiable.

Of course, we need a good environment, or recording to hear this at all, but it is there, and worth seeking out.

I had one experience in my twenties that highlighted this for me. I went to stay with a friend who lived in a trailer in the mountains above Malibu, here in California. For some reason, he left me there alone for the evening, and, as I had my classical guitar with me, I decided to play a bit.

I noticed that the environment there was so quiet that I could hear the instrument like never before. I knew then that there are worlds of sound to be discovered.

We may wonder why there are so many recordings of the same pieces of music, or why the most famous compositions are so often heard on the radio, or in concerts. The reason is that *different interpretations* can result in a very different piece of music.

To illustrate this, if I were telling someone about it, I would sing the melody to a Bach minuet, first slowly and gracefully, and then at a more lively tempo. Examples abound.

The classics are called this because they offer endless possibilities.

It's a wonder then to behold world class musicians performing the same composition. The world is enriched by that much.

To enter the world of Western classical music is to enter *a tradition* that has developed over five centuries, and that continues to develop. And it is a living tradition, that is being added to by every new generation of composers and musicians.

The different genres of classical music, and the main figures in each era should be known, for a start. A brief survey will usually begin with music of the Renaissance, followed by the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Modern eras.

Each era in classical music builds on what came before, and so, for example, the music of Beethoven, who is often considered the first Romantic, made much more sense to me after listening to a lot of Mozart. He began with the classical era as his starting point, and took off from there.

All of this is what we are heirs to, if we receive it.

A word here can also be said on *the wonders of modern recording*. Although nothing can replace a live performance, in an excellent recital hall, the advances made in recording over the last twenty years are astonishing.

The technology we have now, in 2022, can capture the quality of diverse instruments, and the voice like never before. This may not be as important

with pop or rock music, but with classical music, more comes across in the recordings. I find this especially true when I listen to Baroque music, where unique instruments contrast with each other.

Perhaps this will suffice as the briefest of introductions to the great world of classical music.

Hearing Beethoven

When we talk about the major figures in Western Classical music, Mozart is seen as representing the unique genius of Classicism. His music is the easiest to approach. J.S. Bach is on another level, such that it is almost difficult to think of him only as a composer. His art is filled with mystery, passion, profundity, and exaltation. He is thought of as the apex of the Baroque.

The influence of Beethoven, in comparison to other composers, in my thinking, eclipses the boundaries of music. When his music is known in context, we can begin to understand just how much it changed, not only music, but all of Western consciousness and Western Culture.

A number of years ago I saw a movie called 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding', and I remember thinking that this film highlights what is best in American culture – the way we can be enriched by honoring and celebrating the diversity that is here.

I remember after watching that film that I wrote something about the geisha and mathematicians (of all things – but bear with me here a moment). It was about how, although they are as distant as can be from my own life, I am made somehow more by them. Their deep devotion to their way of life – the only way their existence is possible – affirms our own unique path, every one of us.

In the late 1700's and early 1800's, Classicism had reached its full development. Its characteristics in music are harmony, proportion, beauty, symmetry, refinement and elegance.

These were elevated standards that were the norm, and that were expected of a composer.

Late Mozart, especially the late symphonies, broke the mold in many ways. These works were not only music for entertainment, but for music's own sake – substantial compositions that deserved – demanded – to be heard, demanded that people stop what they were doing and listen.

The difference for a writer would be as if it had become possible to write a full novel – ideas could be developed like never before. The status of the composer was lifted too by this. He was not only an entertainer, 'the paid help', but a creator, a person of high and noble standing.

In early Beethoven we can hear him adapting himself to the classical forms. This he does with considerable facility. Even early on though, we can hear some restlessness in his music – something wanting to break out. We can hear some things, harmonically, rhythmically and in terms of accent that tell us he's never really fully at home, at ease in Classicism as it was.

With the Third Symphony, Beethoven is born. It is one of his 'signature compositions'. After the first movement of the Third Symphony nothing would ever be the same again, for Beethoven, or for the world.

There is something liberating about Beethoven's music, for all people. It is inspiring as music, but more than that, if it's heard in context it is empowering on a whole other level.

If we are familiar with the boundaries that were set, and with what was accepted, encouraged, expected, and supported by patrons, then we can better appreciate Beethoven's courage.

I think it happens often, like it did for me, that for a while I didn't really 'get' Beethoven. It was only after listening to a lot of Classical era music (especially Mozart) that I felt like I started to 'hear' Beethoven.

It's this way, mysteriously, with music, or perhaps with all of the arts. If we come back to some era or style, or composer after a while, then there's always the chance that we will hear them in some new way – that they will make sense to us. I've likened it to gradually or suddenly making out the sounds of a language. There's the unmistakable feeling of 'Ohhhhh…. Now I get it…'

It seems like it was somehow inevitable that Beethoven's character would come through, but like all breaker-of-forms, it took a power of inner conviction that empowers us all to be who we truly are.

Beethoven cannot be imitated, and that's just the point. We are each unique, and this is boldly affirmed and encouraged listening to Beethoven's music, his message to the world. There's beauty in it, even when it's raw, or harsh, ugly, jarring or dissonant.

He was such the individualist, saying at times, 'this is how it goes', not matter what the convention. The language of Classical music up to his time was his starting point, and the starting point of his listeners, but he used this language and added something to it that was his own to bring something entirely new into the world. He's thought of as the first Romantic composer, opening the way for the freedom of expression in the arts in the 19th century.

I'm sure it's been said before, but it bears repeating here, that the manifestation of Beethoven as an individual has surely had its effect on this key component of Western culture.

For better and for worse, our culture emphasizes the unique person; it elevates that, it honors that. We do have the strength to stand alone when we need to, more so, say, than in cultures where harmony and unanimity are the most important traits. Beethoven's gift to humankind, I feel, is that of the power and fearlessness to be ourselves.

The Sixth Symphony, the Triple Concerto, and the Ninth Symphony, are relatively easy to listen to, compared to much of Beethoven's music. They are good introductions though, because they still have elements in them that characterize Beethoven's music.

His 'signature' pieces include the Third Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the Kreutzer Sonata. In these works, as in the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, Beethoven's power fully reveals itself, and what he encourages in each of us can be known.

Liner notes to Classical Guitar music to put your mind at ease, 2009

Reflections on my 'first child'

About three years ago, a man came into the store where I was working, just as I was sitting down to play guitar. It as a warm Spring day, and for some reason he was wearing a Winter coat, dark glasses, and ear muffs. He stopped to listen, standing a few feet from where I was warming up, and, after every short piece, he sighed and said, 'Oh, that's so nice', or, 'Oh, that's so good', or something to that effect.

Now, I didn't think what I was doing at the time was all that good, but clearly he liked it, and what's more, I could see that it helped him relax and that it brought him some peace and happiness to boot. I'm sure he didn't know it, but he taught me a valuable
lesson that day.

A short while before I had bought some home recording equipment- mic, preamp, speakers, and the like, and I was in the process of learning about recording. At the same time, I began to think about what music I might like to record first, so I could focus on those pieces and get them up to some acceptable standard.

One thought that was with me fairly consistently was, 'not good enough, 'not good enough…' This, after playing for more than 25 years…

The life of a musician, vis-à-vis music, is an interesting one. Almost certainly, we are the only ones who get to hear our best, as in – our most

moving, or inspired playing. Whatever other Rewards there are (and there are many), that's just the way it is. On the other hand, musicians do have the faithful companionship of whatever music they hold in their hearts. Our music is nourishing, invigorating, and it brings us lifelong joy.

I remember something the pianist Roslyn Tureck said about performing (and recording). She said that, 'for a musician, performing is just the tip of the iceberg'. Out of our whole life with music, we can just give these few minutes, or this one hour, and hope that to be… good enough…

By this, I remember the feeling that we can have, the deep wish that it be at least representative of the music we play, and what it has meant to us. So sometimes the 'not good enough' is a valuable thing. It has a purpose.

As useful as idealism can be in helping us to bring forth our best efforts, at some point though, you have to share whatever it is that you have to give . This is what I learned from that man in the store that warm Spring day. After seeing the peace and happiness that can come to another, even one other, I felt I had to just do my best. Really, I could not justify not giving whatever I could.

Amazing, isn't it? This is a lot like life, eh? We have our Ideal, and then there is the reality of what we can actually do. And if we are not oppressed or stopped by our idealism, our perfectionism, we can then give our gifts, with all sincerity, and with the simple wish that others receive their beauty as well. And so it is with my first hour of recorded music.

As in music, so also in life. Always aiming to better ourselves, and yet, our gifts, even as they are now, can bring happiness to others.

And so, I hope that you too, dear readers and listeners, will enjoy
and be enriched in some measure, as I have, by this hour of music.

I write this reminiscence with all good wishes, from my sister's kitchen table, on a foggy morning in San Francisco, May 17th, 2012,

Jason Espada.

Liner notes to Holiday Music for the Classical Guitar, 2009

Winter has always been one of my third or fourth favorite seasons. For someone who likes to step back and think about things, it's got a lot going for it. For one, it's cold. Then there's the frenetic mode of shopping people usually go into this time of year. For me, these are two very good reasons to stay inside. And then there's the music. Aah, yes, the music.

If Jingle Bells, and Rudolph were once charming, they've become victims of their own success – same can be said for pretty much the rest of the top 20 or so of the tunes we hear too much of from Thanksgiving on. Fortunately for us all though, we are also heirs to a great wealth of musical traditions that are pretty much immune to commercialization. Here, it seems the more a person looks, the more there is to find.

What have come down to us as carols are a case in point. They are in that interesting position of being both worship service – friendly, and also being popular tunes. You don't have to subscribe to any belief to sing along, and I'm sure this has been a comfort to many people over the centuries who have stopped into a Church over the holidays mostly to get out of the cold. Anyway, what I mean to say is that it feels like the carols transcend religious organizations. They belong to us all. Now that's my kind of holiday music.

Another kind of music with universal appeal comes from J.S. Bach. You'd be surprised how often I've heard people have ask, after hearing one of Bach's more well known melodies, 'What is that?' 'Who is that by?' 'That sounds so familiar!'

One piece on the cd that I'd like to say something about is track 32, What is This Fragrance?, described as 'An old French carol'. I found this a couple of months ago on a cd by Duck Baker, called 'The Salutation'. I had heard the cd before, but this time around I was listening and looking for something to express more of what I feel the holiday season is, at its best.

I was keen to hear something celebratory, because that is also a part of this time of year, and because I had just finished reading what turned out to be my favorite book of 2009. It was a title by Barbara Ehrenreich, called 'Dancing in the Streets – A History of Collective Joy'. On the front cover of this marvelous book there is a painting of some people from the middle ages, in simple dress, doing what looks like a round dance. That image, and what I got from that book – the confirmation that joy is necessary for human beings – has stayed with me. This is what I think of when I hear What is this Fragrance?

It's been a delight for me also to bring together these pieces. It's a little like making a mix tape – only I get to play the music! These pieces, for me, bring to mind some of the best things that this season is about: peace, introspection; love and wonder; gratitude and giving what we can; family and friendship. Enduring values.

If you're reading this, then clearly we've made it through another year, and that in itself is cause for celebration. I'd like here to express my thanks first to my parents and sister for their love and support; and to Dennis Gould for his kind encouragement.

May we all be blessed with good health, peace and joy.

Jason Espada, San Francisco, Winter, 2009

Liner notes to From the Soul of Spain

The Gift of Spanish Music

Each culture offers, as its unique gift, arts that could have only come from that place and people. Such is the case with Spanish music. The history, language and collective memory of a people all flow into their arts. Without these, in fact, no art would be possible.

A number of years ago, I heard an interview with the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman, who was on his way back to Israel to play Klezmer music with the folk musicians there. In it, he said that 'Music is the soul of a culture'.

In the most generous, most poetic sense, music is the melody and rhythm of a peoples' language; it is expressed in their gestures, food, dance and social graces; it is the fragrance and flavor that lingers, the pulse and light that is shared.

The Arts, at their best everywhere, as is seen with Spanish music, take our whole lives, including all that is difficult and tragic, and hopeful and innocent, and create something beautiful, something redemptive out all of it. The Arts leave nothing out, and make living worthwhile. In fact, you can dance to it. This is what I hear so clearly in Spanish music: a whole culture's drama, passion, and tenderness; its mysterious, and profound nature.

All Art that deserves the name needs to be personal – no 'cookiecutter'

imitations take us to any deep level at all – and when it is truly taken personally, by the composer and performers, then the paradox is that we can touch something universal; beauty can lift us from what is bound up in time to the time-less.

With so much so easily available today, my friends, it's vital that we remember what Art can be, and not lose sight of this.

The Living Arts are our heritage. They belong to us all equally. As players of lesser and greater stature, as composers, and as listeners, music gives us all a place in the world; it gives us all a place in our greater human family. *How wonderful is it to be here, in this time, and in this place.* Engaging the Arts in this way, as we can see, does comfort, heal, and nourish us.

For a guitarist, the music of Spain is an extraordinary gift. The guitar is its National Instrument, with its influence infusing all varieties of Spain's music. In fact, the two are so connected, it's hard to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. As an instrument, the guitar can be warm, intimate, lyrical, bold, mercurial, forthright and proud. Just like the Spanish people.

Choosing what to play from all that is available was not easy – as there is so much to draw from. My thought was to select an hour of music to play that is representative, in that it speaks to me most deeply and most clearly of Spain. It is my hope that the spirit of the music will then be heard by others too, and felt, and enjoyed.

Classical Music and the Nationalist Movement

From the middle of what is called the Romantic Period in Classical music – the mid to late 1800's, a movement started where composers, trained in classical forms, began celebrating their heritage by drawing on the melody, rhythm and harmonies of their native culture. Some of the best known examples of this were the composers Chopin in Poland, Tchaikovsky in Russia, and Dvorak in Czechoslovakia.

In Spain, the Nationalist Composers included Isaac Albeniz, Enrique Granados, and Manuel De Falla. The music of Albeniz in particular is seen by classical guitrarists as a great treasure. Although he wrote for the piano and for orchestra, Albeniz himself, on hearing some of his music performed on guitar, was heard saying that he thought his music sounded better on guitar. (this story has always been a point of pride for us guitarists).

A word here about los flamencos, and classical guitar: although I am not a flamenco player, I thought it would be fitting to include one short Solea, a traditional flamenco piece, in this hour of music.

I do this as a gesture of respect and appreciation for this essential stream that has entered into the river of what we know as Spanish Classical Music. Many composers, such as Albeniz, have also used flamenco forms for their music, thereby honoring this lineage with their compositions. I want to join them also, as best I can, in saying: respect and gratitude!

I will end here by – not ending – but with one more quote that I heard that says, *'Art begins where ordinary language leaves off…'*

And so, to all my friends and family everywhere, I say, enjoy!

Much happiness to you all!

Jason Espada,
San Francisco, California,
Mother's Day, May 13th, 2012

A few thoughts about art (2007)

A letter to a friend

I may have told you I was studying with my teacher from 22 years ago - it was good for a while, but I stopped because he wasn't giving me what I need most. I told my friend (the one I work for) that we become the teacher we never had, we become the teacher we always wish we had. I thought of how I was (and am) as a teacher and I realize that I at least tried to be kind and encouraging, because that is what I needed (and still need) the most. Everything else, for me at least, is secondary. Everything else will come if there is warmth and consideration, and no fear, and no doubt, but a shared commitment to learning.

I know you won't hear teachers talking like this about education there in Taiwan. They don't even talk about it too much here, but, occasionally you do hear something like this... mostly I had to find these things out by myself...

I read a book that came through the store called 'Practicing - A Musicians Return to Music' and I thought it would be about this journey - from doing things for the wrong reasons, in an environment that does not support a sensitive artist's development - to finding the elements that make music and art a joy, life affirming, a source of strength and meaning. Instead the book was mostly this persons remembrances of his graduate study days, and all the stresses and limitations that whole experience was about for him, and is about for many many people.

It was disappointing, but it did make me more aware than ever that even though they pretend to foster the arts, academic environments more often than not suppress art. They destroy art. It is well known that in academic institutions there is pressure, ego, pettiness, competition, fear, jealousy, arrogance and small mindedness - paradoxically since we are talking about involvement with some of the great achievements in cultures, and the development of the whole person. Many people who go through that system stop playing and actually end up hating what they once loved. Back when I was exposed to these things, I really had to ask: where is the beauty in all this? Where is the joy, the love, the wonder, the celebration, the refinement and uplift, the food for our souls? All this gets lost when these other factors are there...

I think it would be better for everyone, and for art also if from the first day of school people are told that the purpose of art is not to make money; the purpose of art is not to get a girlfriend or a boyfriend; the purpose of art is not to pump up your ego, or for you to crush another's feelings with; on the contrary:

The purpose of Art is to feed the soul - the soul of the artist, and the soul of the listener; the purpose of art is to receive the great and beautiful works that have come to us from previous generations, to add something perhaps, and to pass these things along to the present and to future generations;

The purpose of art is to teach us love and generosity of the spirit; the purpose of art of is to give joy, and solace; the purpose of art is to show us who we are, maybe not all of who we are, or maybe not all at once, but it is to teach us about the human experience, about what others have thought and felt and done, and also what we too are capable of; the purpose of art is to liberate the expressive self...

I'm convinced that when it comes to getting a deeper education in the Arts, as it is now, it's unfortunate but it's true - we pretty much have to find our own way.

Interlude: Yes, but is it art?

Despite the presence in our culture of religious institutions, for the most part we live in a secular time. I believe that these days a majority of people don't feel any particular affinity with spiritual traditions. Many people, however, would describe themselves as being 'spiritual', but without being followers of organized religion.

These are the people who find ways to express what they value, to be in touch with the sacred, or with what has the most meaning to them. For some people it's raising children, for others, it being involved in a form of social service. One of the main ways, though, that people practice being in touch with deeper truths about life is through art. This is a path.

Now, we can say the word 'art' very easily, but when you look at it, art is not so easy to define. In fact, the word is used so casually these days there's a risk its deeper meaning will be covered over and forgotten, by everything and anything being called 'art'. ('the art of sales', the art of bartending', 'the art of playing games', 'the art of war', 'the art of clipping your toenails', etc., etc...)

So at this time there's the danger that something precious could be lost- the knowledge of art as a way to truth. It's vital then that we ask some questions, such as: How do we discriminate among all those experiences with the same name?

Perhaps it's not easy to define, except generally, still, we can speak about

how people are effected by what is called 'art'. We can look there. I think art can be defined by its function, by what it does. (So here we go)

Here's a story:

What got me thinking about all the different things that people call art was this: A couple of years ago, a friend of mine was working at a restaurant known for its 'California Cuisine' (you know the type, '...blackened sea toad, with mango-dill chutney; $18.95...') One day, as was giving him a lift to work, he mentioned that one of the dishes they served at his restaurant was so good, that 'it was a work of art...'. I thought about this for a moment, and only half-kidding said that eating in this country is more like a sport. That much got the ball rolling.

I started noticing after that what a variety of things were being called art, and what a range of experiences people seemed to be having. So I went looking for some definitions, prompted in part by that uneasy feeling, that with all these loose definitions, something meaningful was in danger of becoming lost.

First I looked up 'sport', because, after all, I had reflexively joked that sometimes what is called art in this culture is taken more like a sport.

The dictionary says sport, 'connotes superficiality, frivolity, entertainment and play, that has a degree of sophistication or development. It went on to note that sport is not necessarily essential, that it is superficial enjoyment, as in 'to sport'. It is 'that which diverts, and makes mirth; a pastime, a diversion; that which relaxes or amuses'.

A human being can survive without enjoyment, but it wouldn't be much of a life. I think we do need joy for our lives to flourish, so definitely time out and enjoyment have their place. As for what type of enjoyment, when and how much, it's up to the individual to decide what is appropriate.

I trust that as long as people have a clear sense of what's going on they will do the right thing.

Next I began to try to find a definition of art. The dictionary said something like this- that art is any essential expression involving of either a natural, spontaneous, or cultivated degree of development; that has a type of beauty or purpose; and, that is deep, sublime, uplifting, ennobling. (purpose is an interesting word in here)

This was a start anyway. I thought about how it's said that something is 'raised to a level of art', and how sometimes what is sport can become art, as something 'deep, something sublime, uplifting, and ennobling'. It also occurred to me that art is something that takes place in context- that what is art for one person can be something that is not art for someone else.

Beethoven's Ninth used to sell pizza, or at four in the morning when people are trying to sleep, is very different from the same music in a concert hall.

Or another example: if Shakespeare or Mozart or classical Greek sculpture were given to some young city kids it very well might not be art for them, they might say 'so what?', no matter how much 'explaining' were to accompany it. Then again it might be art, even without saying anything

about it. One of the mysteries: it seems anything can be art, if it's experienced by the right person at the right time.

Art is personal.

To say something more about context: what is art for someone at one time, might not be art for them at another time in their life. Or perhaps, something that was unnoticed before, can become art. What has changed is the person, or their sense of context. Change that, change the background of thought, and the experience changes.

An example: spending lots of money to produce an opera- while this may be art to some people, and may have even been that to me at one time, these days I can think of a lot better ways to use that money to benefit people. The scene where this is taking place has changed for me, and so I don't think I could enjoy the production as maybe I once would have. It might fulfill the function of art for other people, but that just means we're looking at it differently.

So the meaning of the word art that I'm trying to get at is something that does not exist in a vacuum. In thinking more about it I started to feel that the 'art' I'm looking for is generally something that puts us in touch with our true nature. People are learning various things, so this is bound to be different for different people.

For me, this art points to something that is not merely technical skill, or inventiveness, or the experience of some extra-ordinary sensation, there's something more to it.

Following this sense, seeking some clarity, I decided to ask a few people that I know 'What is art?' I asked my father, who is an extraordinary social-documentary photographer, and teacher. He replied that art has to do with aesthetics, beauty and truth. He said, *'You come to a point in your life where you are concerned with beauty and truth.'*

This made me think that the art I'm trying to find a definition for does have something to do with being pleasing or exalting to the senses, although it is not only that.

I thought of what is called 'performance art', and how it is sometimes gross, or shocking, to wake people up. So this art works along the aesthetic- anti-aesthetic continuum, if you'll pardon the awkward phrase.

So art involves the ability to communicate, and aesthetics, (being pleasing or not pleasing), are the 'tools' of art.

So far so good.

I asked a co-worker about art and she had something interesting to add. She said, 'There is such a thing as objective art, having to do with symbols, or archetypes that have universal meaning, and that evoke a response in us, whether a person is conscious of it or not.'

I thought about this, and thought that, for something to be 'objective art' alone though, is not enough. It has to be subjective as well, it has to be art to the person experiencing it. The two have to meet.

It seems to me that there are the universal and relative aspects to what we call art. The universal is what is always and everywhere true, whereas the relative applies to a particular situation. There has to be a responsiveness to the truth of a given situation to make art happen. Both the person who is producing the art and the observer have to know the context where the communication is happening. Nothing takes place in a vacuum.

For example, you can't take a person cutting out paper dolls in the middle of a battlefield and expect that to seem anything but absurd. Can you? I think it's safe to say that this would usually be inappropriate.

So much high flown writing and music is like this, I think: It doesn't 'click' for people because it doesn't make sense in relation to the rest of their experience. Art has to speak to a person's experience, in a very direct, immediate and relevant way.

It's occurred to me also that art, in cultures throughout time, has had the role of making people aware of the sacred. Think of the origins of theatre, music, poetry, and dance. Something fundamental is indicated. This was the union of the relative and the universal, or the meeting of what is always true with the specific situation where people are.

Over time, art became 'secularized', moving away from its more obvious religious roots, and this has been a necessary good, I think. It became more accessible for people, while still keeping same vital function of bringing people together and awakening an awareness of universal truths, of what is most important in life.

Problems start to creep in, though, when the same actions become commercialized. Other factors, such as greed, self-centeredness, competition, jealousy, and pride, lessen the effect of art. I think of the caricature of a vapid, self-absorbed 'arteest', at his upscale gallery opening) The purpose of art gets covered over.

It seems to me that the Art I'm trying to speak of has to do with educating the emotions to truth, relative to the point of view of the person perceiving it. Nature can do this.

Sometimes nowadays self-destructive action, or misogynistic, anti-woman 'rap music', is mistakenly called art. Now, I can see art as being a reaction to outrageous, unjust situations, responded to with strong messages for people to wake up- street theatre comes to mind here- but I think the bottom line is how people are reacting, what kind of a response is being produced?

Whether it is music, or contemporary cinema, Is it art?, Is it making people more aware?, or does it have the effect of muting some basic human sense? I think too often the latter is true.

I have the feeling that the experience of art I'm looking for is producing something different than this socially destructive effect, and that, actually, art in some way promotes health for oneself and society. This can be done through rebellion, rejecting something that is wrong, or it can be an all-out affirmation. These are two sides of the very same coin.

All this thinking over the last two years about what constitutes the 'art' I'm

looking to define, has led me to think as well about the word 'intelligence' , and how it is also commonly misused.

There is something like the ability to manipulate forms to achieve an intended result, which I would call 'intellectual capacity', or 'intellectual power', but which I wouldn't necessarily call 'intelligence'. That word should be reserved for something more specific. Intelligence is understanding what is important at any given time or place, and is therefore appropriate activity.

There are a lot of things that are called 'intelligent' that are, in my opinion, a misuse of intellectual capacity.

A few examples that come to mind are: movies or programs that desensitize a person to violence, or produce a coarsening of the sensibilities, degrading human worth; people making weapons of mass destruction; and the tobacco industry public relations experts who find ways to lie about what they are doing.

There are many such misuses of intellectual power. You can probably think up some of your own. A person might even say that there is some 'artistry' to their misapplication of power, but again, this would be bending the word.

I've come to believe, in fact, that what is sometimes called 'art' is actually anti-art, producing sleep, or worse, delusion. It is going in the opposite direction of truth. I think of romance novels, violent shows, advertising, syrupy 'love songs' etc.

The intellectual capacity can be misused, and often is, serving sense pleasure, intoxication, instinctual gratification or some sort of greed. Call it any of these, but don't call it art, unless you want to cloud the whole picture of the range of experiences we have available to us as human beings.

While it may seem a bit silly to try to define something as personal or as general as art- something that is mostly done intuitively, still, I find this much to be useful. I would never want to give a facile, limited definition to art, much less provide some sort of checklist for it. I wouldn't want to keep people from doing what they love, or from doing what brings light into the world- all the different ways to say *yes.*

Art is one of the ways we can behold the wonders of the spirit. It can help us to have a sense of the sacred, of the richness of life, and be in touch with the resources we have. Art can heal. It can give hope. It can bring joy, or satisfaction. For people who can't speak, you give them a voice; for those who can't leap, you let them soar; here's a mask I once wore, a mask that reveals…

I have tried with these reflections to do only one thing, and that is to make some distinctions among the different kinds of experience that people have.

I am convinced of this much: that there is a level of meaning associated with the experience of art that refers to something very precious- a person's being in touch with truth, or sharing some truth. And although it's easier to say what I believe this art is not, trying to arrive at a definition is at least enjoyable. I've also learned a lot from doing this, so it's been worthwhile.

There is something meant by this word 'art' that I feel is so important for us to keep track of, and to preserve.

Art is a creative expression that has to do with educating the emotions to truth; when it is something that is communicated between people, it takes place with responsiveness to context- there is no purely objective art, and is therefore appropriate action; it is personal, as in relative to the perception of the person experiencing the art; and, it promotes health for oneself and society.

With this much said, I think we really can speak of an art of living, an art of music, or cooking, painting, or speaking; the art of healing, or of meditation, the art of gardening, the art of love.

May your life be filled with art.

May your life become art.

Ultimately, of course, it's up to the individual to decide, based on their own experience, what for them is or is not art. What effect does it have to eat something?, or to watch something? What does this thing that is being called 'art' do for you? How does it function? Does it bring light?, or does it increase delusion?, does it put you to sleep? Unfortunately, many things that are being called art have this effect.

It would be everyone's loss if all we knew or associated with the word art was experience that produced some sensory excitation or a dulling of the senses. We should know that there are some things also that can wake us

up, reveal a sense of richness and meaning, and that would have us know the value of all of life.

There are experiences available to us as human beings that are exalting, ennobling, and transformative. And these are among the most important experiences we can have in life.

I'll close these few reflections on the vast subject of art with a section of one of my favorite poems by Hafiz. This is from a book called The Gift, translated by Daniel Ladinsky:

Hafiz says:

Art is the conversation between lovers.
Art offers an opening for the heart.
True art makes the divine silence in the soul
Break into applause.

Art is, at last, the knowledge of
Where we are standing--
Where we are standing
In this Wonderland
When we rip off all our clothes
And this blind man's patch, veil,
That got tied across our brow…

Yes, Art is the conversation between lovers.

True art awakes the
Extraordinary
Ovation.

Keeping track of where we are, and what is actually important for us to do - reflections on basketball, art, mortality and conscience

{written in the early 1990's}

Part One

I think maybe it's human nature to keep making the same mistakes until we learn whatever it is we're suppose to learn. Lately, for example, I've been working out, swimming, playing a lot of basketball, and also watching a lot of basketball on t.v. Personally, it seems that anything I involve myself with I try to do as well as I can. That's the positive side. On the other hand, as my family knows, I can also over-do anything, and have it become excessive, or even obsessive. I can lose perspective.

So again, as I have with other things, I find myself asking, 'Where does this fit in with the rest of life?' My involvement with sports has become a symbol of sorts for me, in that it represents more than what is immediately apparent.

I have the feeling that what I'm trying to do here is, as one teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, suggested, *'to integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole'*.

Why is this necessary? Why do I think this is something a person should aim for? Well, to begin with, life is too confusing when it seems there are all these separate aspects that don't make sense in relation to one another.

There is bound to be conflict whenever we feel we have to avoid some things because they don't fit with our view of the rest of the world.

I think that to integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole is necessary for us to have health and balance. It's something we need to keep our priorities straight.

Professor Huston Smith has a definition of intelligence that I like. He said that *'intelligence is knowing what is important'*. I think this implies that we have some sense of the context of our living. Without having this sense, anything at all can get out of balance. And whether or not our life and priorities are in balance is something that effects everybody and everything around us.

There is a quote I came across from Swami Sivananda, that says, *'A man of broad views sees things in their entirety and in their right relations. Broad view creates harmony and concord.'* When I saw this I thought this is the direction I want to go in- I want to let the context of our living, the sense of where we are and what people experience, tell me what is important to do here on earth, how much and in what proportion. I can see that having a broad, inclusive view is the basis for right action.

A couple of years ago some things happened that made me want to cultivate this point of view. After playing music for more than 16 years more than half of my life, I decided I had to take a break, step back and take a look at what I was doing. At that time there were quite a few things I could see that had *nothing to do* with why I started to play music to begin with.

There were the feelings of competition and pressures to learn in school; there was the pride, the fears, and the whole economics involved with wanting to be a musician. These things all felt inhibiting to free expression. What bothered me most of all though, was feeling the loss of perspective.

At the time I was studying music, I was also trying to be aware of what was going on in other peoples' lives and in the larger world around me. What I noticed was that people seem to be able to get 'carried away' with just about anything just like me. That they would act as if they were in their own world- whether they were football fanatics, or corporate executives, addicts, or preening teenagers. I mean, it seemed like it was everywhere- almost everyone acting as if they were 'in their own world', and hardly giving one thought to anything outside a narrow range of vision.

The more I looked, the more I saw this everywhere. The clearest example for me was, and still probably is, advertising, which seems so often to be really out of touch, and out of proportion, out of place and out of time. When I try to incorporate the message of advertising into any larger picture of how people live, or struggle to get by in this world, it strikes me that something here is really out of balance.

I think I decided at that time that some people simply must not be aware in any kind of visceral way of what's going on around them, otherwise, how can they reconcile what they do with some of the other ways that people live, in poverty, homeless, with hunger?

I also decided that I wanted to try to develop the feeling of being in one world, and to keep that sense with me as much as I can. I thought, *'Whatever can accomplish this I'm willing to do'.*

I know that music can make a person feel connected to life, but when I noticed that the way I was with music was part of some loss of perspective for me, then I had to stop. I felt in a way like I was just the same as all these other people, that I was doing the same thing I was criticizing.

At that time I thought of writing something for my mother, who didn't understand why I would stop doing something I enjoyed, that I had put so much energy into, and that brought some pleasure also to other people. I was going to call it, 'When The World Stops Burning, Ma, I'd Love To Be A Musician'.

What it came down to for me at that time, and what I still try to keep track of is that some actions show that a person has things in perspective, while other kinds of action show that they feel isolated.

From a broad, inclusive perspective comes really meaningful action for everyone, for the whole body. A person's being far seeing leads to positive far reaching actions.

The opposite of this is what happens when a person feels cut off, isolated, estranged. Their actions don't show any sign of their knowing that they are part of a larger whole. And it is this unconscious action that is dangerous, whether we're talking about buying things and supporting slave labor, or

producing waste, or whether we're just talking about the mis-allocation of our resources, or not knowing the effects of our ideas.

We are all always connected with something more than ourselves, so whether we recognize this or not, how we see ourselves, and the way we live, makes a difference.

Many things can help a person feel connected to the whole of life: art, nature, conversation, deep listening, or just walking down the street, and this results in health.

On the other hand, it's astonishing to me how anything at all, any consuming, any endeavor, can be taken out of context and made into something that is out of proportion and not in accord with the rest of life.

This includes the playing of games; it includes fashion, cinema, sports, food, and even what are called 'spiritual pursuits', such as meditation.

Over the past few years I've been especially concerned that spiritual traditions and practices be known in relation to the rest of life. I've seen that the study of philosophy and the practices of meditation can be engaged in a way that doesn't recognize that we are still a part of this world. Some philosophies are 'world rejecting' or world denying.

In a way they too can be out of touch, and this is a great loss. They have so much to offer, so much that can ease unnecessary suffering, and that can help a person find meaning.

For the relatively few people who feel some affinity with a spiritual tradition, then, there remains the challenge of bringing whatever good they find in the teachings into the rest of their life.

Keeping track of where we are, and what is actually important for us to do - reflections on basketball, art, mortality and conscience

Part Two

Whenever something seems to take place 'in its own world', *right there* is delusion.

There are many examples of this happening: I think of sports fanatics, or the fashion industry; of self-absorbed people, or businesses that think only about profits. There are many more examples. Make your own list.

Here are some more: the jewelry or cosmetics industries, gambling, video games, or body-building; there is the way we are in this culture a lot of times towards food; and I think of nail salons and pet grooming- so much vanity and self-indulgence; I think also of the automobile industry. Has anyone thought this through? Where are we going with this?

Many times, these things seem to be 'in a world removed', and that is an illusion.

I don't mean to be only critical here, in fact, I'm seeking a higher affirmation.

I also don't mean to say that all people in any of these areas are 'in their own world', and are blocking out everything else. I don't know what's going on in people's minds. Really, it's only by their fruit that we know

them. Someone could be in a high social position and be involved in using that position to do something valuable in the world, so you never know. Still, I think this is not what is happening most of the time.

A person's perspective and values are revealed in what they do, in what they show as being important to them.

And while it's true that some of these 'separate pursuits' might be necessary at times, and that the human excellence or beauty can teach us about who we are, still some things seem out of place.

If I really understand why people act like they do, I can't get angry. That doesn't have any place. It makes no sense, and it doesn't help. When we see how many factors that play a part in what people do, in what they value, how can it bring anything but compassion? This feeling is not just one of sitting back, it is wanting to better understand and then to act constructively. I want to look more carefully at what is going on.

In many cases, people have narrowed their view about what life is, about where we are. They take a very small piece of the world to be the all of what's here, and what they value comes from such a loss of perspective.

Now, someone might ask, 'What's so wrong with being out of touch?' It seems almost to be something that people strive for these days. If you listen to the radio, watch t.v., or are exposed at all to the values of american culture, you find that the ideal that's being sold is one of independent self-interest. How many commercials do you think a person sees and hears by the time they are an adult?

By necessity there has to be a lot of painted fiction mixed in with such an aim- ignoring how what we do effects others, putting blinders on when it comes to where we are and how many people live. Because of this unconscious perspective, what is called 'disposable income' (What is left after the essentials of food and rent) is mostly spent on entertainment.

'It's a free country', someone might say, 'People are free to do as they please.' And in a sense this is true, but *look at the consequences-*

When people feel removed from everyone else, this is the cause of so much imbalance, in the form of injustice and unintended effects. I think of individual greed, where people are taking more than they need; I think of people that work for businesses that pollute, or that profit from slave labor, and consumers that buy these products and contribute to this happening. I think of opulence and poverty side by side.

These all come from people feeling cut off, and living like what they do has no effect on anyone but themselves. When people feel no relation, they feel no responsibility either for what they do, once its out of sight.

And these are just the direct, recognizable ways that we influence other lives. There is what we do, yes, but because of a loss of perspective there is also what we leave undone.

When we feel separate it leads to a waste of resources. When we have such a narrow view, of course it effects where we put our time and money, our energy and creativity. There is room for many things in this world, but not for waste or the far-reaching effects of unconscious actions.

When we put so much time and thought into separate, small pursuits, what's left? If it were just one person or a few people doing this, it would be one thing, but many people are mostly looking out only for themselves. I'm sure this view effects a lot of lives. What do you think?

Why are there still people who are not fed?

Why is it that there are still people who are dying from preventable diseases?,

who are without adequate sanitation?,

who are homeless?,

or illiterate?,

Why is there still child labor,

or a high infant mortality rate in some places? -

These things are not necessary. Why do these things happen?
Is it that people don't know?, or don't care? Or is it that they know and care, but feel that they are not able to do anything?

(yes, this is still about the arts, and their place in our lives)

It is a mistake to think that the way we live has no effect on anyone but ourselves and the small circle of those we can see. Every action, every

endeavor shows our perspective, and what we value. And any action not known in relation to the larger life can be something that is destructive, or at least negligent.

I'm not advocating thinking all the time, or working all the time. No one can do that. What I'm trying to examine is how we do what we do, the way we live our daily lives.

Sometimes now when I look at all the things people do that 'take them away', the escapist fiction, the fantasies, movies, games, and so on, I think there must be a reason for all this. I think it's true that there is a useful, necessary function for not dealing with heavy issues all the time. No one can be 'on' all the time, I don't think.

So, for me, it brings the question,

What is the right place in this culture, at this time, for 'time-out?' (for rest and refreshment, for renewal)

I ask this because I know we all need to take breaks to rest and to restore ourselves, to get in touch with the resources that we have, and yet, how much is enough? What else is there in life?, I ask: What does the rest, renewal and enjoyment exist as a part of?, in relation to what whole? What choices do we have?

There are so many different ways that people have to get away and restore themselves. For some it might be watching a movie, or going for a walk.

For others it might be exercise, or cooking, or gardening. Still others might find sustenance and renewal in art.

As with education, though, all the things we do for our own betterment could show the same symptom- of being removed from the sense that they are part of something larger, that they are connected to all of our lives.

Sometimes getting away has the intention to never return. This is when retreat becomes escape. Some people, it seems that their whole life is a break.

I recently heard an advertisement for 'non-stop entertainment!' and I asked myself- Now, what's wrong with this picture? When we don't know the place of our work, rest and enjoyment in relation to everything else there is in this world, when there is no awareness, then everything gets moved off balance.

Whether we're talking about our relationship to food, or to music, or sports; business, political or even spiritual pursuits, all these can show the signs of being 'out of touch', disconnected, unaware.

It seems to me that only when we know the relationship between all areas of our life will there be balance.

Anything can be known in a larger context, and when that happens there is more possibility for lasting change, and there is greater health for everyone involved. On the other hand, as again I am reminded, we can also forget where we are in any involvement.

There's more reasons to remember

If through our actions, we would try to be part of some balance in the world, really that's only one aspect of what I would like to speak of.

Personally, I think it's even more important to realize that it is by being concerned with others that we affirm the greater part of our humanity. We are all made for more than just self-centered actions. In fact, we find when we decide to help each other, and act on this choice, that it brings to life who we are as human beings.

Some people think it would be impossible to live without striving to fulfill all their personal desires, that their life would be meaningless, but dedicating ourselves to helping others as much as we can is the starting place for a whole other world of possibilities. The greatest happiness in life is to serve. We are given to give.

I think that what we all need is to have a heart big enough to contain the whole world.

I am convinced that if people really knew where we are and what others go through, they would all be irreversible bodhisattvas- those who serve others with kindness and compassion and wisdom, and, no going back, no quitting.

What keeps us right now from having this open, inclusive view of what's going on, and right action is

1) a lack of education, or mis-education; either we don't know where we are, or who we are and what we are capable of, or we know and then we forget

2) personal suffering, including the fact that this world is at times a harsh place. We can say of our entertainments that- sometimes we go there to hide. This is why I pray sometimes 'may we be able to be without ways of forgetting'.

And a third factor that keeps us from having a broad view, unfortunately, is selfishness. (ego; self-centeredness)

Sometimes I wonder what our life together would be like if we were able to begin every day by thinking about where we are, and asking about what needs exist. I wonder what it would be like if we would continue this awareness throughout the day and have that influence our choices about what we do with our time and creative energy. If we let the context provide the motivation. If there were people doing this, schools, churches, temples...

I think this world is potentially a paradise. Still, it's not just by wishing to remember what is important that it is going to be done. We need to take care of ourselves, and strengthen ourselves to be able to look at what is painful, and what needs our help. We have to stay off drugs of all kinds, and take breaks, keeping quiet so that we can bring together what what we see or hear with our best knowledge.

Ideas need room to develop. And if it's 'easier said than done' to keep in mind where we are and what is important for us to do, so what? What choices do we have other than to do our best? If we have a sense of the potential for gain or loss, then it's being difficult really doesn't matter. It is by seeing that we'll get the energy for what we need to do, as long as it might take, for our world, for our people, for our children, for this earth, for future generations.

Metta and Classical Music Study

I've been a student of the classical guitar since the mid 1980's, and of metta, or Buddhist loving kindness practice for almost that long. There are a number of things they have in common, and so I thought I'd bring these two subjects together, and let each shine their light on the other.

First of all,

Music and metta both come from an overflowing heart

The notes you see on a page, even if they are played in time, are not yet music – they need love to make them come alive.

In a similar way, the phrases we repeat, by themselves are not metta, or loving kindness. As I heard Ajaan Pasanno say, the object in metta is *the feeling* we can generate, which is one of warmth, and of kindness.

Both music and loving kindness come from an overflowing of joy, of gratitude to our teachers and traditions, and of generosity. Both feel to me like a gift.

When we practice metta, we're the first ones to benefit from it

In time, metta can and should improve all our relationships, but the practice simply starts at home, with ourselves. This is just like how it is with music too, where before anyone else gets to enjoy your playing, you get to appreciate and delight in it.

Both music and metta take discipline

There was something unique in formal music training that I'd never heard about with other kinds of music. Before, I played whenever I felt like it, but with classical study, I learned that people aim to practice consistently, however they happen to be feeling. In metta, and in any other meditation practice also, the foundation is made up of having regular practice, and not just sitting whenever we're so inspired. This way we get to meet all our different states and qualities, and bring them into the practice.

Metta and music both take concentration

I remember one teacher telling me the adage that 'half an hour of concentrated study is worth more than hours of practice when you're tired or distracted'. The same is true in meditation. It's more productive to keep a good quality of attention than to have longer sessions.

Both have a method to follow

To my lasting gratitude, there is a method that's been developed to advance in playing my instrument. People have looked at the elements of playing and figured out how to approach its full development, step by step.

In the same way, metta practice has a method that works gradually, one step at a time.

In both, what's difficult is separated out so that it can be worked with. There's a rule in music study, that if something is difficult, and we can

break it down into manageable parts, we can learn to play it, and this builds confidence over time.

In both, there can be beauty in simplicity

A clean line, a simple phrase, good tone, a clear idea – all these can be surprisingly uplifting. Similarly, we don't need a complicated meditation practice. Sometimes a simple practice is more effective, and if we do it well.

It is as Rumi said,

The beauty of a carefully sewn shirt
is the love that it contains

Here we can see the advantage of being gently process oriented, as opposed to goal oriented. As Thich Nhat Hanh has taught, practice should be enjoyable, then we're sure to see good results.

In both, be creative and make it your own

In both metta and in formal music training, we're encouraged to keep making progress

This is where it gets challenging at times. We can get complacent, feeling that 'it's good enough', and at that point a good friend or teacher is needed to encourage us to take the next step.

Both take patience, and humility

I've heard that Ajaan Chah, the great Thai Forest master said, 'I don't teach much, I just teach people to be patient'. In music study and in metta practice, this has great benefits. For one, it's more comfortable, which is already a gift to oneself. For another, being patient means… we …slow … down… and can be more attentive to what we are doing. We actually learn more that way, just as the saying goes across all classical music training, that 'slow is fast'.

In both, appreciative joy is a great help

There are so many great examples of teachers and players, and when we admire and celebrate their good qualities some of that comes to us. It's true. This is something that is taught in Buddhism as well. You'll notice that this is a far cry from the childish, petty ego, that is jealous of anyone else's success. Being inspired is an essential part of both of these paths, and we're blessed whenever we can open to the good things that others are doing.

In both, we can learn a lot from watching our teachers

More than what they say, the effect of watching our teachers is direct, immediate, and lasting.

In both, there can be a feedback loop of practice and performance

In metta and in music, we go out into the world to see how we're doing with our formal practice. After a while we can actually enjoy seeing where we can improve. Instead of thinking, Oh, I missed those notes today, or,

Aacch, I really messed up and got impatient, we can see it as the step that is right in front of us.

Metta and music are both part of something larger

As Ajahn Pasanno said in one of his talks during the metta retreat in 2008,

'Loving kindness doesn't stand alone – it's part of the spectrum of Buddhist teachings, both in terms of it being a support for those teachings, but also a result of those teachings…'

Similarly, art comes from life and culture, and enriches and adds to it. Most accomplished artists will tell you to study broadly, and not just in terms of your own instrument or field.

And lastly,

As I tell my students,

This is something for your whole life.

You may not make money, or become famous from music, but you won't regret it. It adds to your whole life. And the same holds true for meditation practice.

At this point, if I had to choose between music and metta, I'd take the inner discipline, after all, there are plenty of miserable artists and musicians out there, so by itself that's clearly not enough. What I've found out is that a

healthy spiritual life is the basis for everything worthwhile. Fortunately for us, these two - the spiritual and the artistic- can be perfectly compatible.

The arts give us a way to share the life we've received, to give the gifts of solace and refreshment to others. They give us wonderful ways to be together, sharing the best things we've found. Metta and meditation, and the spiritual life, on the other hand support us in all that we do. They help keep our priorities in order, and they give us the overall vision and the strength to live well.

Crossing the desert with Bach

My Spanish teacher in Colombia asked me this week how we can keep going, with right view, with all that is going on in the world. My first answer a couple of days ago was just what came to mind at the time - and I had some time after that to think of a better answer to this really important question. I told him today that in fact I think it is the most important question we can be asking, and finding our own way to answer.

The thought that came to mind this week was that it's like we are crossing a desert. This sounded something like the beginning of a poem:

If you want to cross a desert,
the first thing you will need
is water…

So I asked my teacher, Jaime, *What is water for you?*

Compassion , creativity, and critical thinking, he said.

I told him that for me it is meditation, a connection to teachers, and to beauty and the arts.

This is something different for all of us, but it is fruitful to have the question:

What is water for you? What is it that sustains you, through good times and bad, and even through the most difficult passages?

I was talking with a language exchange partner in Barcelona on Wednesday of this week, and telling him about my favorite movie (Almost Famous) and about all the great music that was happening all at once in the mid-nineteen seventies. I told him that is one of the reasons it's my favorite movie.

Then he asked me if that was my favorite era for music, and I surprised him by saying,

'no, mi época favorita fue el siglo dieciséis'

(no, my favorite era was the sixteen hundreds)

- which made him laugh. I said it was because that is when *Bach* wrote his music.

He then invited me to give him five reasons to listen to Bach in a future meeting. He didn't know at the time what he was asking for, of course, but since this is music that means so much to me, and to others, I have accepted the challenge.

So far, I've been thinking that for someone who connects with his music, first of all, that

Bach is a close friend for your whole life

It feels like - here is someone who understands joy, and pathos, and who is complex, and simply human, with all its depth and beauty.

When we're alone, and unsure of ourselves, or others, or this world, this is music we can turn to, and it never disappoints.

And it brings peace to the soul, which is something we surely all need.

I know that people feel this way about other artists too, and writers, and poets, and musicians, and visual artists. They are life-saving in this way.

Then, two,

Bach's music counters the banal -

the feeling that life is plain, ordinary, dull, or meaningless, and all the insipid things;

As Picasso said,

Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life

I remember feeling this way about blues and rock guitar back when I was in high school. I'd run home in the afternoons. I positively needed it. Yes, you could say I was a fanatic about music even then.

There is also something profound about Bach, and, it's very mysterious, because at the same time, he wrote quite a bit of music that is very

accessible. Many of his melodies are familiar to people, without them knowing who they are by.

Third -

Bach is so generous, that it's amazing. He was prolific, and he wrote for many different instruments of his time, and combinations of instruments and voice.

A post from the Astriaos Chambe Music describes it this way:

Bach was a prolific German composer who in many ways is the father of Western classical music. He was a genius at counterpoint, which means lines of melodies that wind together, creating melody and harmony at the same time...

Often his compositions were grouped as *suites* in six movements, with a prelude, or what sounds like an improvised introduction, exploring the tonalities of an instrument, and then five dance movements from the time. He composed music in this form (often in sets of six suites) for solo instruments of all kinds - the keyboard, the violin, the 'cello, or viola da gamba, and flute.
Fourth:

This is uplifting music, it is something spiritual. It is elevating.

Bach composed at times from what feels like a state of exultation. There is praise and celebration, and deep feeling, and this is what his music

communicates so well. There is something refreshing, and miraculous about it.

In black baptist churches, with their preaching and choral singing, and gospel music, they say they 'raise the roof'.

Imagine how this boisterous music must have sounded back then, to his staid, protestant listeners, in the mid sixteen hundreds.

This is often music that is full of energy, and positively overflowing with joy. The harmony was also often very different for those times. Their minds must have been blown.

And, if I were only to list only five reasons to listen to Bach, personally, as a musician, *it's the most challenging.* It requires the most of someone who wants to play this music well, *and, it is the most rewarding.*

They say, if you can play this music, you can play anything. Many musicians love Bach for just this reason. He understood many instruments and how they blended or contrasted with others so well.

Whatever you put into this music, as either a listener or as a musician, in terms of time and attention, you get back many times over. Like many of the other classical arts though, such as literature, or the visual arts, it's not something that can be fully grasped right away. We need to live with it for a while. Once we have a connection though, the more time we spend with Bach's music, the more we hear. It opens up in this way, and is enriching.

The violinist and teacher Rictor Noren says it like this:

I listen to Bach to bring me back to personhood, as like a tower whose firm foundation stretches through many levels before reaching its apex.

No matter your ability, from a humble keyboard minuet, to the sophistication of The Art of the Fugue, listen to be human.

Invest in Bach and join the generations who have found comfort, solace, genius, and eternity in his music…

I thought at first of giving my friend a playlist, which I may still do, but I really just want to share with him these few thoughts. I'll probably read it to him in Spanish.

The best I can do is -
to do a dance, and open the door

The rest is up to him, and to Bach, of course.

A note to introduce one playlist:

They say with classical music that every different interpretation creates something new, and I think this is especially true when it comes to Bach's music. I say this by way of invitation.

Not only do different performers bring a new feeling to the music, but the recordings themselves can also be quite different. I've chosen mostly

recordings here that are more recent, since their clarity really goes well with Bach and other music from the Baroque. Older recordings should also be sought out and listened to though, since there are some where the musical ideas, and the performances are just wonderful.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLA4hP5V3Izc8BA5uKku1lfy79c1Bsp2MM

Bach the Sublime

If you listen to Bach with your intellect, he is supremely satisfying, of course; and if you listen with your heart, he is a comfort, and an inspiration. He is light for your entire life.

Those who know, know, and not much need to be said. We're part of a community transcending time and place, no matter our age or race or nationality.

And this giving continues, in each generation of teachers, students, performers at every level, and through friends and strangers wanting to generously share these gifts, Bach's divine legacy remains as fresh as when his music was first heard.

There is dance, and melody, and harmony that moves in distinctive ways, such that Bach feels like someone we have known as a friend and companion our whole lives, and he is faithful. We can't say the same most of the time unfortunately for ordinary friends. Bach will never let you down.

When the first Gulf War started, and there was an almost complete news blackout, do you know what I did? I listened to Bob Dylan and Bach's B Minor Mass.

O, Give me a language large enough to grieve in,
and one that has music for when I need to dance…

Where would be we without such depth of anguish expressed, and with the light of hope and faith, transcended? We would be inchoate - shapeless creatures, and so these ennobling arts form us, gently and firmly, as out of clay. They raise us up to a fully human status.

How can we feel anything but wonder and gratitude?

There have been critics, for sure, of performers like Glenn Gould, people who said that they heard Glenn, but not Bach, but miss the point when they do not see Glenn the person. He has shown us the transformation that can be wrought in a person by this music.

His was a state of exultation, and those who find their way there by another music, or art recognize that right away. Someone like that has become a pure channel for grace to pour forth into the world, vivifying everything around them again like rain, like the breath of spring.

I have no doubt that Bach's music will continue, and that those who really hear it will be receiving the same wonder and sustenance we know today. If we were to meet them, no matter their age, or nationality, political or spiritual beliefs, we would find ourselves standing together, nodding our heads in agreement, sharing this warmth, feeling blessed.

And when the last notes are sounded, and there is luminous silence again, out of which all this came, we cannot say the music has really ended, for there will be another verse, and another version of this music in time, expressing the same joy in new ways.

A Farewell to Music

How do you say goodbye to the one who has been your closest companion?

Do I recount our meeting, and adventures, secrets shared and hopes that lived only for a time, and now are no more?

When I was fifteen, I found a nylon string guitar that my father had been given as a gift, and started to play around with it.

My first lessons were with a local guitarist named Charlie in Gaithersburg. He made the mistake of trying to start me with reading music using the Berkeley Method, which was not at all interesting for me.

I told him to just teach me to play by ear, and so he showed me a few chords and rock and roll scales, and away I went. I learned from records back then, Johnny Winter, Hendrix, of course, Black Sabbath and from friends as well - high school buddies Scott Weinrich, who later went on to become a 'death-metal god', and our crew.

I remember one time, driving back from a lesson, it was raining, and I stopped to pick up a hitchhiker, who must have been in his 70's. (I was 15 at the time). It turned out that this fellow as a guitarist too, and I brought him home, as I remember, he played an incredible version of When Johnny Comes Marching Home. Doors open like this one at a time.

He lived in our planned community, but when I went to visit him again soon after, he had moved.

When we moved from Gaithersburg to Potomac, I lived in the lower level of our house, with our band equipment, and a drum kit. It was loud, and great fun.

I remember our band was playfully named R-Mega-Don. We didn't play folk music.

I came out here to California with a box half full of records, the other half with clothes, and my electric guitar.

She deserves some mention, tenderly, with gratitude.

I got my first electric guitar, a Gibson and a small amp from Jerry Lynn, another of my high school friends, and a fine musician to this day.

About a year later, Scott offered to sell me his Wine Red Gibson SG, which was just a wonderful guitar.

I recall years later, understanding that if you have a fine instrument, it becomes your teacher.

This guitar had wonderful intonation - it was in tune *all up the neck*, which went quite a bit above the 12th fret, if I am remembering it correctly.

It was a dream to play, and explore. She was a great teacher.

I remember my girlfriend at the time, Nancy, saying, 'You love that guitar more than me', and I said, 'This guitar was here before you, and it will be here when you are gone…' I was a bit too honest, looking back.

For some time, on account of the joy I found in playing that guitar, I felt like I didn't need anything else.

Then one day in the early 80's out here in California I heard Pierre Bensusan on the radio, and was awestruck, because it was one guitar playing more than one line.

I got a steel string, and started taking lessons soon after that, with a French woman who had a superb Guild six string, and who taught me the bum-chick alternating thumb and blues playing. I went on to learn everything I could on the instrument - from Gary Davis to Scott Joplin.

I've written about both Pierre Bensusan and about Kicking Mule Records, so I won't repeat too much of what I said in those essays, except to recount how Stephan Grossman's albums with tab books opened the world of acoustic guitar music for me. On one of them, I heard John Renborne playing Renaissance music, and that led me to wanting to learn classical.

My first teacher was Curt Renshaw, at the local community music center. He was good enough to start me with Frederick Noad's Solo Guitar Playing, a great book that opened the world of classical.

Classical was a new world in more ways than one. It's still amazing for me to think of how every instrument in classical music has its own pedagogy. People have studied and then the traditions of teaching developed on how to play the most demanding music, or to practice for hours efficiently, without injury. There's a sensitive, whole body awareness that we can see in every fine player of an instrument.

I was also fascinated by the fact that classical musicians would play the same piece many times over, which was something unimaginable to me, up until that time.

At one masterclass at the Community Music Center, I had the chance to ask a world famous classical guitarist by the name of Manuel Barrueco, *How can you play the same piece of music five hundred times?* He answered, *It's only after five hundred times that I feel like I really understand the music.* I knew then that I had entered another world, and I wanted to understand what all this was about…

I got a number of records, including my first album, by Julian Bream as a gift from my father. I have written about that memorable experience. I also made notes of my favorite pieces. After a few months of studying, I remember that I went to a sheet music store. Learning to read music felt like learning to read words, and then going to the library. It was all there!

After Curt told me the instrument I had was holding me back, I got another, better guitar, a Bruné spruce top. I also started taking lessons with Larry Ferrara, sometimes going to his house, and sometime going to the Conservatory to have our weekly lesson.

I remember that my mother and father and sister contributed half so I could afford those lessons.

I remember also that I was in community college from 1985 to 1990, and I took some music classes while I was there. I didn't understand how a person could do that and become a musician though. I asked, and sure enough my harmony teacher, a cellist with the Oakland symphony, told me that a musician would learn their instrument only after they got their degree. I thought, hell with that!

The first day at community college, I remember the wonderful teacher, Mrs. Isham saying that because we were all adult students, we shouldn't be thinking of having a career in music, that those who were professionals had started when they were children.

I thought to myself, Well, what else am I going to do? I figured I'd give it five years and see what happened. I was 25 at the time.

By the time five years had passed, I was good enough to play at a couple of weddings, including one of a former girlfriend, which was a strange experience, and give a few lessons.

At that point, when I thought of continuing with school, or stopping to play music, it was an easy decision.

Most of all, in that time I had improved as a musician, and learned to play a lot of different musics. We musicians travel not only though countries and

cultures, receiving their gifts, we also get to travel through time, and and touch something universal and timeless.

We get to meet the composers of music, and spend time with them, a few hours, or days or weeks, and sometimes if we're fortunate, we get to know them over years.

I've written about Bach a couple of times, and I'll only mention his name here as a faithful companion. Those who have been so fortunate in this life to have a guide and friend through all the changes will understand the unique significance.

It's strange to say that, slowly as a student and then more as a musician, I felt I was living a parallel life. There was what others could see, and then there was this richness and satisfaction, this wonder, and these gifts to share.

Perhaps most artists are not appreciated, but they find a way to continue because of the pure satisfaction they feel from learning and creating something beautiful.

I know that I learned this from my father, who didn't receive the recognition he should have gotten in his lifetime. I remember the look he would have so often after printing for an afternoon. It said to me that - Here is a way to be restored, and to be filled.

What others value sometimes, they don't see, and we are not met.

I remember my father going to 49 Geary, where they had photo galleries, to try to sell some of his art. My parents always struggled when it came to money, and even though very little of what was displayed there was on a par with my father's work, they had no interest in his photography. It's small consolation now that I've helped him get the respect he so deserved posthumously.

My own path with music was different. At the conservatory, I saw pettiness, and egos, and fear and competition, none of which I knew even then fosters a healthy relationship to art and creativity.

Surely they had some good to offer, but looking back now I think that much of conservatory education is willfully misleading. If they were to say, honestly, 'Invest this much', and it is a lot, last I looked, 'and maybe one day you can be a music teacher in a small town', then I'd respect them more.

As it is, so many young people think they will be touring musicians. It's a fantasy that almost never happens, except for very small percentage.

And I remember when I worked for the music store were all the Bay Area classical guitarists got their instruments, I asked the manager, a friend, What percent of musicians over the years completely quit the instrument? I suspected by that time that it was a majority, which is truly a shame.

Music can be an enrichment for your whole life, but this isn't said at the conservatory, at least, that wasn't my experience of it at all.

Music can teach a person patience, and generosity, and most of all it can teach us about love. Oh… These are things we just may have to find for ourselves… what a strange world we live in.

When I let go of playing the guitar the first time, it was in the early 1990's. I couldn't integrate giving that much time to learning and practicing, with everything else I had become interested in, especially spiritual studies and politics.

I remember telling my mother, When the world stops burning, ma, I'd love to be a musician…

My reconnecting with the guitar happened when I landed in Taipei, in the Winter of 1999. I had just finished traveling through different countries in Asia, and I wasn't ready to return to this country, so at the suggestion of fellow travelers, I went there, to see if I could teach English.

At the almost empty guest house, I saw an old nylon string guitar, and thought I'd see what I could remember from my years of playing. Soon, I was back with my beloved instrument. I got a Hopf classical there, that I had until recently.

It's amazing how much a person can learn when they pick up an instrument again. Soon, I had with me everything I had been learning, and then some.

I continued playing when I returned to this country, and was able to at last own a superb guitar. I worked part time at Guitar Solo, when they moved

downtown, and, wonder of wonders, they actually gave me a key to open the store.

It was amazing for me, because the store opened at 9, and so I would arrive a couple of hours early, to play their selection of superior instruments. There were so many one of a kind guitars, new and used.

Both had special, wonderful qualities. A new guitar is full of promise, and needs to be played to open up. Still, past a certain threshold of quality, you can tell what is distinct about any guitar.

It's so personal at that point that the best suggestion I could offer to someone wanting to get a fine instrument is to spend as much time as they can with the guitars they are considering. The choice they make will effect their whole life both as a musician and as a person from that time forward.

An instrument we feel at home with will be one that we want to play, naturally, and with joy. We will discover how it sounds to play at different times of the day and night, in different seasons, and also of course on different strings, at different registers, softly, or with more power. We will learn directly from it.

The guitar I was eventually able to get at that time has been a great gift for me. It was made by Kuniyoshi Matsui, and has some remarkable qualities, sustain, a sweet tone, and, resonance.

Since I was the first owner, I could tell how the instrument actually changed depending on what kind of music I played a lot of on it. It's hard to believe

or express in words but it was tangible for me. I'm sure others have had this experience.

I was able to make three recordings of various guitar musics with this instrument, that I have written about elsewhere.

I wanted to record an hour of Bach, and I was getting close to beginning that project, when in 2014 my father passed away over the course of a weekend. I never fully recovered from that in terms of my being a musician.

I could always tell how my inner life was going by how the music sounded. I found that it takes a lot of emotional stability to be able to have the discipline to practice every day, for weeks and months, and to progress. I'm even more in awe now of excellent musicians for this reason.

When I was up and down, I could tell.

I also had an hour of Latin American music, and another hour of Celtic Music I wanted to record, but, that has fallen away also.

When I think back, my only regret now is that I was not able to share more of the music I felt such joy to be able to hear, and to learn.

I remember the last cafe I played in, where only my sister from among my family came to listen. I remember one young guy sitting and studying with headphones on, and I thought, that's it. No one wants to listen, ok.

This was true even in my own home. Only my father would care to listen, and I'd play for him once a week.

It was a lot of work, and time and energy, and it was mostly for myself in the end - maybe ninety nine percent. So, was it worth it?

Seeing as I've been alone all my life, I would say yes. It's been a fine companion, which is probably why it's hard to let go of, to say goodbye.

I'm 64 now though, and meditating more on mortality lately, both my own and everyone else's.

I've come to think that these gifts are only ours to care for, and to give to others. Which brings me to today.

I have been thinking of loaning my instrument in perpetuity to the High School of the Performing Arts here in San Francisco, for them to offer it to a student who would otherwise not be able to afford a fine guitar. I've been thinking also of all the sheet music, cds and dvds I have. I'd like to donate all of it, but I feel like something has held me back.

Then, earlier today a musician friend I'm connected to on facebook posted about her nephew and his program in Portland that makes instruments and music study available to those who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford, or even know about it.

When I think of the treasures I have here with me for this brief time, I feel joy at the thought of giving *all of this* to them.

Perhaps I can load it up into a van and drive it there, with the guitar.

{Amendment: They don't accept sheet music, so I'll look to donate everything I have elsewhere. Back to square one.}

I know I can't express what this instrument has meant to me to another person, and so I have written this mostly for myself, and to the spirit of the guitar herself.

I remember that I wrote a love poem to the guitar back when I was in high school, and read it to Scott when we worked together at Hahn's Shoes. It was something deep for me, even then.

I had an experience this last year, thinking about letting go of my father's photography, that has its parallel here.

I was walking to the neighborhood store one day, and thinking of which his color photographs I'd like to keep, when I realized the real gift my father gave me was a way to see the beauty of the world, with love.

The guitar has also given me much that will be with me always. There is always more to say, more to play, to dance, to sing out. The creative is boundless and continues in the life of any artist.

This farewell then is only to the form, as once the gift is received, it is forever.

I leave just the unique shape of our knowing each other these years, with an enduring gratitude in my heart for her countless gifts.