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Reading and Forum Posts:Monday, May 11: Music and Ethics in the 21st Century; the Power of Love

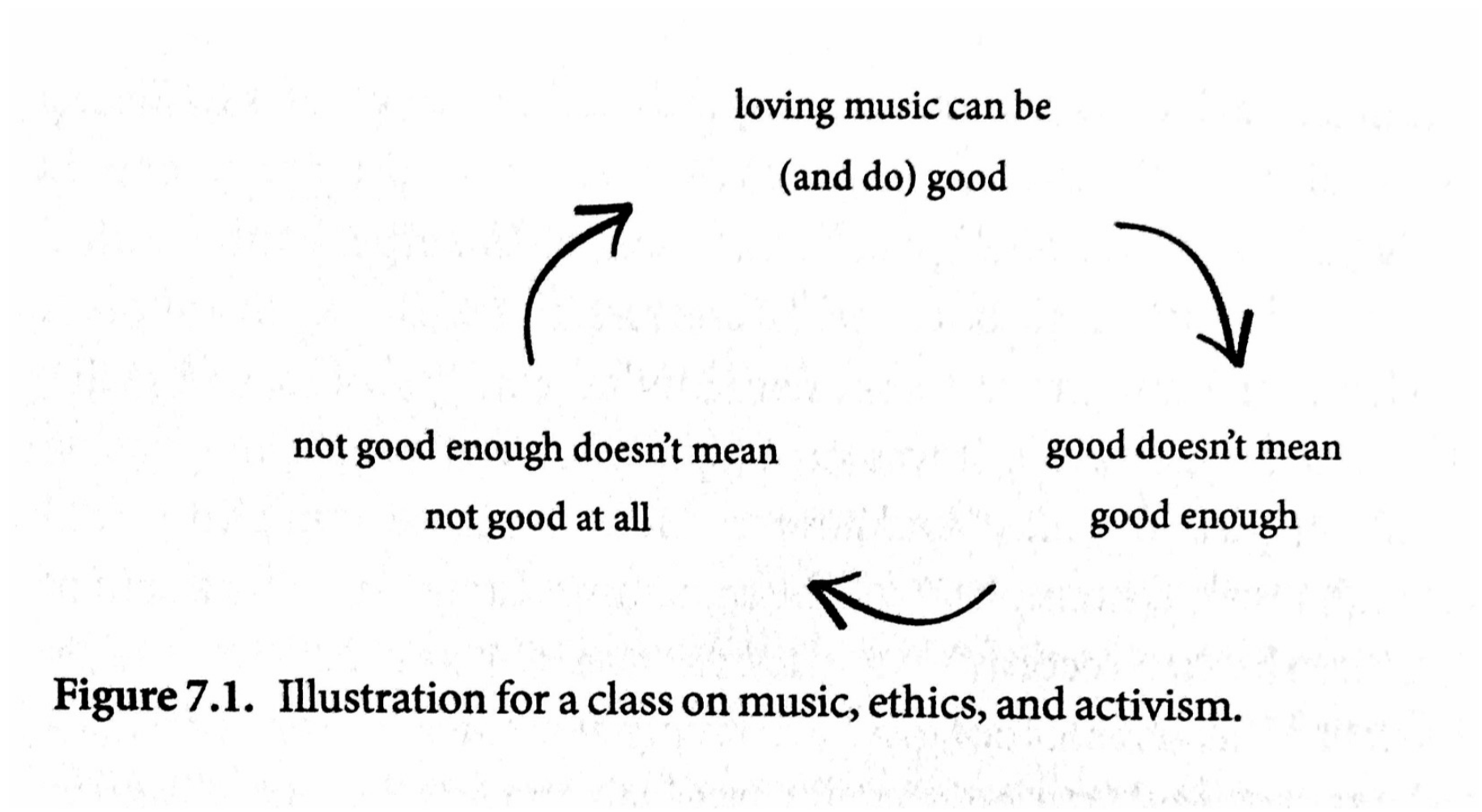


Figure 7.1. Illustration for a class on music, ethics, and activism.

Reading:

Cheng, Willam. Excerpts from *Loving Music Till It Hurts*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 1-6, 33-62.

** I've given you here a bit of the introduction and the second chapter of this book. Forum assignment is explained on the forum**

(FWIW, the other chapters of this book deal with: 1) the myths that listening to certain repertoires demonstrates that you're a "good person," 3) on "blind auditions," 4) on overcoming narratives and "inspiration porn" in reality television competitions, 5) on connecting voice shaming to slut shaming and sex shaming, and 6) how musical judgements can kill, particularly vis-à-vis the murder of Michael Dunn in 2012).

No required listening for this week

- Cheng reading.pdf

- Download folder
- Edit

Discussion Forum: Overall thoughts on the week, only discussion leaders need post

Jump to...

Lecture and Listening: Wednesday, May 13: Music and Protest (video lecture)



Music, Power, & Politics, post-1945

Spring 2020

Student Discussion Forum on Music and Ethics

Discussion Forum, Week 15: due on or before Wednesday, May 13, 11:59pm

Topic: Music and Ethics

Hi all!

On the forum:

1) Please write a short paragraph response considering the assigned reading by Will Cheng (on musical love/ethics in the 21st century). Cheng's recent work is a good example of a book with a strong/clear-cut argument; while it's never a requirement that you agree with any scholar's argument in part or in its entirety, I'd like you to think about what in the selections we read from Cheng resonated with you, troubled you, provoked you, gave you food for thought, etc. While you can pick up on anything you'd like to discuss, this paragraph should at minimum include two fleshed-out comments and one question based on the readings.

Thanks and talk to you all soon! —

Student Response: The two largest concepts I took away from this article were pain and elitism. We've talked about the connection between music and pain with topics such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and torture. Cheng beautifully illustrates how music can go hand in hand with pain: a song brings up bad memories, an awful performance is seen as 'disrespectful,' Schubert is used to deter homeless people, etc. In my own life I've experienced sound as a form of physical pain, as I have a (super fun) sound processing disorder. From all this, especially my own experiences, I've learned that a) yes, sound/music can REALLY hurt and b) this pain is subjective. I think everyone can agree that getting stabbed would hurt, but not everyone has the same bad memories associated with a certain piece of music. In some cases this pain is not meant for everyone - take the example of Schubert in the bus station - which brings me to my next topic: elitism.

The story of good old Josh in the subway is one I despise. Anyone who says that classical music doesn't have a god complex should take a look at this story because it has everything: the general public being too ignorant to recognize 'great art,' a central [male] genius who goes unrecognized, and the conclusion that in the end it's the music and its maker which is right and everyone else who is wrong. By ignoring that people may be too busy to listen or may have completely different taste in music, and that the performance space itself has a fraught history, Weingarten paints a picture of Bell as some sort of woefully underestimated genius who must return to show us all how wrong we were to ignore him (don't worry - we'll be sorry in the end!). Cheng's comparison of Donald Gould vs the man who died in the subway Bell performed in shows how the musical establishment seems to only value life when it has 'talent.' Can you imagine how many people could have been taken off the streets by big-money musicians and their supporters if they could only play piano?

Cheng himself is able to sum all of this up wonderfully, and I found his argument convincing. I had the opportunity to see him give a paper in Boston last fall, which left me conflicted, to say the least. It was about how we go about forgiving musicians, namely James Levine, in light of the Me Too movement, and at one point he played a Levine recording of Brahms 3(?), telling us how much he loved this recording for its beauty. Can this view of Levine as someone

whose music should be saved because it's beautiful be reconciled with his views of music as a force that can be used for harm? I personally don't think so; I'm fine with throwing all of Levine's recordings away no matter how they sound.

Student Response: In the first opening remarks, Cheng discusses the idea of music being a sentient being. This greatly disturbs me. Music is only sound waves that exist temporally. Music itself does not have emotions, music is sound waves and vibrations. The only emotion that is tied to music is the emotion that the listener, performer, or associates with the music. This association is based off personal experiences or outward stimulus that is provided by the composer in liner notes. Loving music and supporting the music you love is acceptable as long as it's not hurting the people around you.

Student Response: This article is a great way to conclude our semester together. The prelude made me think particularly about our own lecture and discussion as to why music is powerful as opposed to good or bad. Cheng states that music is a tool that can be used as a weapon. I feel as though most of us have come across a musician, at one point or another, that makes us question our alliance or respect for them. This particularly made me think of Michael Jackson. He's been a beloved superstar and is definitely a staple in pop culture, but he also has been an accused child abuser by several people over the years. Yet the song "Thriller" is probably one of the most popular Halloween songs and people still listen to his music. The quote that Cheng uses to answer her rhetorical question really comforted me, "Love music and love people. If ever in doubt-or forced to choose-choose people."

Regarding the Bell experiment, I agree with Cheng that this is a tale that channels the inner "sucker and skeptic" within each of us. Although I understand why one might want to carry out an experiment, it's extremely flawed and honestly disrespectful. This experiment is a perfect example of someone using their privilege at the expense of those less fortunate. If Weingarten was so inspired by the actual homeless keyboardist, who may be still suffering and living his life in poverty, why not offer that man direct help instead of using his existence as an inspiration to carry out an experiment to prove some point that's honestly old news anyway. The whole idea of the "ugly laws" is just disgusting and the idea of trying to disguise a famous, financially comfortable man as a homeless man just sickens me. And the fact that they see nothing wrong with it is even more mind-boggling.

The question that I have revolves around the musical mystique and the Gould story. Should a person's exceptional musical abilities really put them above any other individual? Sometimes as people, and fellow musicians especially, we tend to place higher value or attention on those that have incredible skill. Why do we do this? Of course, it's important to appreciate and respect others' talents, but is this really the message that we want to send out to the world about music and its power? The better the performer means the most deserving? There are millions of impoverished and homeless people in the world. I'm glad that Gould's musical abilities helped him, but that's one man's journey. One great story may warm the public's hearts, but we still have a lot to do folks.

Student Response: Throughout this reading I definitely picked up on a Rousseau approach to humanity, that people are innately good and learn the evil and ill intentions from their parents, the government, and over time, society. The example of the parents telling the children who wanted to stay to listen, that they must keep walking is the most obvious section where this is emphasized. The capitalistic ideals that are more or less drilled into our brain from the day we are born do affect perspective and it's therefore no surprise how this affects who is deemed "human" and deserving of love and who is "worth saving" as was discussed in the statement "music humanized Gould." This broke my heart because I don't want to believe that this is true, but our society does base human worth on abilities and who is viewed as acceptable. Gould wasn't seen as worthy until a woman with a social following exposed his talents. Also, the section stating, "we are ALMOST all of us, musicians- who can distinguish one instrument or one singing voice from another." This conditional yet big statement is the key example of how we want there to be a unity brought upon through music, but that is not in many cases, a reality. I remember taking a test in general music in third grade where we listened to sounds and had to distinguish them from each other, not knowing that if we "passed" we were allowed to join band the following band, and if we weren't, we were not. I do believe that everyone has their own talents and abilities, but I can't help but think how I would not be pursuing a music degree right now, had I not paired the sound played

correctly in the third grade. The statement "If everyone is born musical, then everyone's musical experience is valid" contradicts this practice.

My question: can we come up with a less condescending way to test natural talents without turning students away from a potential passion before they are even given the chance to learn and grow?

Student Response: Overall very interesting topics and very relatable to discussions we have everyday.

I don't think it's the music we feel we are doing an injustice but rather the memories, artists or performances we associate with them. Music is just so STRONG. I think of how many people are using the arts in general to cope with this situation. We are looking now more than ever towards artists, shows, bands to entertain and soothe us.

Why does someone feel ashamed or embarrassed to listen to a certain genre or music, even in front of certain people or caught?

Life moves too quickly, there's a schedule and time slot for everything, where people can't stop and listen to the music even just for a second. I also found it odd as one of the reasons people didn't stop was because of the choice of music they were playing. Can't we admire beauty as it is even if the repertoire isn't as popular? Would they have listened if it was a rendition of a Bach cello suite or Beethoven's 5th? I think these street performers people overlook and rather watch a "famous" person, they could be discovered, that day, next year or even the next hour. So why not stop for a future famous person.

Discussing the homeless person facebook post- Reminds me of a discussion we had in music and disability studies. The second "HOMELESS" man is put in front of the title, the world is in shock, pauses to watch, showering praise/donations to feel as if your "like" meant something. To feel as if you helped this man and turn it around to feel better about yourself, putting them on a pedestal for living on the streets. Which is why the caption she decided to use and state how he was in the way on the streets- disgusts me.

Can all musicians bring joy to people? or what's the standard. Lastly blind auditions...are the worst there is always a sense of not really being blind at least in a collegiate audition.

Student Response: I found it interesting when Cheng mentioned the idea of giving human characteristics to music in some sense. I connected this to discussions that I've had in a theory class that I'm currently taking as well. Some of the key components that create music are gesture, timbre, and syntax. We've spoken about how gesture can represent the way that music moves and acts, timbre represents the way the music speaks, and syntax represents the things the music intends to do. These characteristics add to the idea of "bringing music to life" as many people would say.

Another thing I found interesting had to do with the Weingarten Washington Post article. As was stated, many readers of the article recognized that people who are in a rush to get to work wouldn't stop to listen to music played by someone they don't know. However, based on my own experiences, a lot of musicians that perform in a public area like that are met with similar results even when people are not in a rush. Often times, I've seen people just walk right by without even acknowledging the performer. As a musician myself, I've never been a fan of seeking this. I always try to at least applaud any public performers that I see as a way of letting them know that I hear them and I appreciate what they're doing. The question that I have connects to this same concept. What do the people that walk by in passing actually think about these types of performing musicians? Do they allow the music to reach them as they walk to their destinations or do they just ignore it entirely?

Student Response: This reading highlights some of the sentimental attachments to music very well. I definitely experience the sympathy toward music when I feel a performance has "wronged" it. The idea of wanting to protect our music is an inner feeling we all experience, but when written out in this reading, makes it sound completely illogical (with good reason). This exists with the indie fan base that doesn't want their music to gain too much of a following that the music will be ruined, or my own father that claims that 60's pop is the pinnacle of excellent music and it will never reach that point of quality ever again. This protection the indie artist experiences is "protecting its innocence" and my father's feelings are "protecting and claiming superiority." I certainly objectify music as well. I think of music of a box with a quality to assign to it. This subjectivity is where the aggressive feeling to protect and defend and debate comes from.

We are personalizing music with moral implications. If someone picked on you, you would defend yourself; as they are personally attacking you. People associate their identity of judgement with certain types of music and decide to be the agent of protection for something that can not feel the pain of being disliked.

Classical music is an excellent example of moral implications with music! People feel morally and intellectually superior for enjoying and understanding classical music. Has classical music ever made you inspired to feed the homeless, donate to an animal shelter, or defend someone against hate? Most likely no. Personal taste does not enhance your moral compass or quality as a human being. For some reason, this feeling continues into the 21st century.

Student Response: Maybe I'm just missing the way music and its interaction with people makes me feel, but this text made me get emotional and I think it is so beautifully written. Cheng says:

"Hurts because a part of you wants a sublime harmony or high note to last forever, yet you realize the moment means something precisely because it is, as with the searing paradox of mortal existence, gone too soon. In the grandest scheme, maybe loving music can hurt because you're all but overwhelmed with gratitude for the sheer fact of music's existence in a universe that didn't owe us music, or really owe us anything at all."

I never had thought about music in that way. I suppose it's because we grew up with the accessibility to listen to the same recording of music as many times as we'd like to. It really makes you appreciate those fleeting musical moments. I personally thought the experiment was a bit tacky, honestly. Musicians love the beauty of music (see above) but that doesn't mean that everyone else does. I feel like musicians have this weird complex that shuts people out if they don't appreciate their music, but it's unrealistic for everyone to stop and watch a performance. I did find it interesting (and unsurprising) that children tried to stop and listen. I was relieved to see that Richard Taruskin agreed with me a bit later in the reading.

What do you think would happen with this experiment if they had someone like Renee Fleming sing? Do we think it would yield "better" results?

Student Response: If I'm being honest, I was extremely overwhelmed when reading this article- and not in a good way. It's one thing to read about music being used for evil; in the concentration camps, as interrogation tactics, and more, but to read about our inherent love of music being problematic was too much for me. I guess I found Chen's argument a little hard to follow. I got so bogged down in the criticism of the experiments and on the discussion of the homeless population that reading the few lines at the end of these sections when Chen stated his own opinion -usually a mediant between the two extremes- was confusing.

He kept bringing up the idea of music hurting a person and even went as far to say "Love music and love people. If ever in doubt—or if forced to chose— chose people." I appreciate the sentiment and agree whole-heartedly, but I don't get the context to which he is referring. I don't understand what he means by picking music over humans. In the example of the homeless population, I must argue that people's lack of acknowledgment is not tied to their elitist classical music viewpoints but instead to the problematic relationship society has developed with the homeless population. So where is the choice between humans and music? I see instead a choice between being a prejudice human and a non-prejudice human.

Acknowledging the power of music: both positive and negative is of course important. But how does that translate into the love of music being negative? It's not someone's love of classical music that is problematic, it is there prejudice and reaction to the other forms of music that they term "less-superior". If we start criticizing the few things that make humans inherently good (like love) then what's that point? Again, holding humans accountable for prejudice, hate, and injustice is vital, but let's not confuse a love of music being a vessel for those feelings and a love of music being the creator of them.

Student Response: When reading this article I could not find myself agreeing about what Chen was saying about choosing music or choosing people. Music should be about bringing people together and make something that means everything to them. People and Music and walk hand in hand in terms of music can be made without the emotion of the words that an artist/musician is trying to portray to an audience to make them feel what the artist and musicians are feeling on stage. When Chen said

"Hurts because a part of you wants a sublime harmony or high note to last forever, yet you realize the moment means something precisely because it is, as with the searing paradox of mortal existence, gone too soon. In the grandest scheme, maybe loving music can hurt because you're all but overwhelmed with gratitude for the sheer fact of music's existence in a universe that didn't owe us music, or really owe us anything at all."

This quote explains that the existence in a universe that didn't owe us music or really owe us anything is basically saying that music doesn't owe us anything. Basically, music for me personally is one of the best things that I could ever ask for! Chen stated above the loving music can hurt because you're all but overwhelmed with gratitude for the sheer fact of music's existence.... and it goes on from there of what I mentioned above. He is saying that music can hurt? What does he mean by that? I don't think music can hurt anybody. I think that music can heal anything from my experience! From videos of senior citizens in nursing with brain malfunctions when playing music can remember everything that made their life so memorable! So I leave you with this question, Why do you think that Chen is saying all these things about music can hurt? Is it from his past experience with music or maybe a family member had a terrible experience with music?

Student Response: The first concept from this reading that caught me by surprise is the idea from page 4 that humans can care about the music that is meaningful to them more than other beings. This is, sadly, almost certainly the case. People develop connections with music to the point where they can care more about the things they love than complete strangers. However, it is less a substantial choice by these people, but more of an unconscious action I believe. While this is still not okay, I think it scary that this does happen, even unintentionally. My question would be: what steps do we take to make this no longer the case? It is a similar situation to privilege where it is not an active choice by those with privilege to have it, but rather a passive force that often times we are born into. That being said, as an advocate for all people of all walks of life, we need to take steps to acknowledge these injustices as well as correct them. This is just as true about privilege as it is about those who care more about "their" music than the humans around them. The second point of interest I took from this reading ties in with the first point, and that is the short story on page 44 of a homeless man who was noticed for his musical skills. Those around him were not noticing him, but the music he was creating. The concept of "invisibility" is a common one within the homeless community - a community I do a good deal of charity work with back home. All too often people choose to ignore or "make invisible" the homeless community, and it is a shame that it takes a talent, musical or otherwise, for those with privilege to notice homeless. You see stories like this often in media. One that rings with me to this day was Ted Williams, a homeless man with a great "radio voice" who was given a job with the Boston Celtics after someone filmed him doing some lines with his voice and the video went viral on the internet. While these stories are generally a good thing, as it shows a homeless person rising above their unfortunate situation, it shines light onto the idea that we do not notice the homeless - or anyone around us - unless they are providing us with something.

Student Response: One quote from the reading stuck out to me: "If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then what else are we missing?" (p. 34). I found this quite striking because we often rush through our daily lives missing many things that we are completely unaware of. However, this scenario seemed to be affecting adults that were quite aware of what they were missing and intentionally so. Children wanted to stop and listen, and their parents were the ones hurrying them along. So clearly they were aware enough to make the decision not to watch but we also live in a world where we're taught to avoid strangers. So it was an interesting notion that our modern way of life has conditioned us to not take the time to stop and appreciate these opportunities. While I do think we tend to rush through life too much, I think this particular example speaks more to the fact that our society fears the unknown. Why have we developed this culture of street performing when our society conditions us from a young age to think that strangers are bad and equal danger? These two notions seem to contradict each other, yet they both exist side by side in the same cultural society.

Student Response: This was a very interesting read that really made me think about how I perceive music and how it is perceived by the world. I really love how Cheng describes the love for music. When I am listening to a performance I

really took it for granted most of the time. After reading what Cheng said I really realize now that each performance is a unique piece of art that truly ends too soon. It really made me appreciate performances more but at the same time made me sad as I realized all the past performances of music that has been lost in time. Cheng points out that music is a tool and like most tools it can be used as a weapon. We've already seen this in class and I very much agree that people can turn something as beautiful as music into a weapon that can cause pain to others. I agree with Cheng's statement about this "Love music and love people. I ever in doubt-or if forced to choose- choose people". I wonder if this experiment was done in a different setting would it have gotten better results? I imagine that if a player is performing during morning rush at a subway not many people are going to stop to listen. I know from personal experience any subway or train station (Especially New York) is a big rush and sometimes can be very confusing and overwhelming. That's why I doubt people have time to stop and listen to this performer while trying to catch their train.

Student Response: I found Taruskin's reaction to the Weingarten-Bell experiment surprising at first, but just after contemplating it. The experiment was set up to fail and both Weingarten and Joshua Bell both knew it. They had Bell play during rush hour when everyone was trying to go where they needed to, also it took place at one of the busiest stations, and the acoustics were quite poor. It seems this experiment was conducted with a good deal of confirmation bias along with a belief in the "musical mystique". One of the biggest themes of the reading is the fact that nothing is ever black and white. One concept that the author likes to bring up is that we as a society try to buy into narratives, how music can transcend and bring beauty to our lives, but sometimes it's not that simple. How can we use music to continue to bring beauty and enrich our lives, but also be honest and aware of what we're actually doing?

Student Response: I really find The Washington Post Experiment intriguing. It crazy this experiment took place in 2007 (I believe) and most people are too busy walking fast and keeping their heads down to take in any sights or sounds. Today in 2020 it's even worst with cell phones. I feel the privilege of having a cell phone makes people walk even quicker. I know personally sometimes I realize I'm looking at my phone too long while walking and don't even realize how far I've gone. But, the main point that grabbed my attention was the experiment decided to use a renowned musician, Joshua Bell, to perform in the same public space as other musicians and see if people would stop. He received the same attention as any musician playing in public. They could have used a musician who played regularly in this space and give him some good publicity, but rather use an A-listers. It's really problematic that this is a common theme to receive good publicity. Celebrities disguise themselves to seem like a common person in public only to reveal themselves later on. I never really thought about this myself until Cheng discussed it, but it's really disgusting that rich people pretend to be poor to get media attention.

The idea of music is a living body with organs and emotions is incredible to think about. When I first read it in the prologue, my immediate response was "This is a really Romantic era idea." I didn't really understand how music itself can feel emotions or pain, but this rather comes from the idea that how music can be interpreted can create emotions; usually when a piece of music we love is violated, as Cheng said. For example, a band didn't play a piece of repertoire well enough. One might say this band didn't do the piece justice, and this assumes the piece has its own rights. Cheng makes another good point in the prologue that why are some people stopped from listening to music that they love and some aren't. He's really straightforward that it has nothing to do with the music, but the race of who is listening to said music. I appreciate that he's so outright about what the main issue is and doesn't just beat around the bush as so many others do. What other sorts of emotions or feelings can be used to support this idea of music being a live person?