

The *Classical Connoisseur*: A wine-tasting approach to music benefits both listener and performer.

Kim Diehnelt
Music Director of the South Loop Symphony

Finding meaning and understanding in classical music has traditionally been considered accessible only through the study of structure, historical facts, and correct identification of musical materials. Indeed the typical music appreciation class asks you to memorize composers' names and birth dates, learn when a piece is in sonata form, and - my favorite - identifying the instruments of the orchestra in what I call the bird-watcher's approach to fine music. A wine-tasting approach to music however, opens new doors of awareness into the art of music at the dynamic intersection where composer, performer, and listener all convene - at the juncture of metaphor.

Wine-tasting and listening to music pair well, of course, and share some important traits. First, both are perceived by a 'hidden' sensory organ. Tasting and hearing happen inside the head in a way that makes it very difficult to point out to another person just what, where, or how an object is to be perceived. Unlike visual perception, there is nothing to nail down for all to witness. Second, wine-tasting and music are both about metaphor. When speaking of wines we use words and phrases such as: silky, lingering, steely, intense; rich in blackcurrant, vanilla and spices; shades of damp leather; notes of dark chocolate. All this from grapes. With music, we may speak of golden sunsets, cold solitude, remorse, lush pools of color, stark terror, or possibly re-live an earlier moment in time, or discover a sudden recognition. All this from sounds. Clearly there are no gooseberries in a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, nor majestic mountain peaks in a symphony, yet we connect to wine and music through these types of metaphors. Music, especially, is full of metaphor. Call a note 'high' or 'low' - and we're already in the world of metaphor.

Nonetheless wine and music are matters of serious human concern - and affection. For me classical music is an art to enjoy, explore, and savor. Just as you can explore the palette of your taste-buds, you can explore the palette of your ears. The *Classical Connoisseur* is about awakening the palette and finding the connection between sounds and meaning. For this, metaphor creates the magic.

The format for a *Classical Connoisseur* event is very much like wine-tasting, where music is 'tasted' with brief samples of 10 seconds to two minutes of duration. The excerpts are short, but we may repeat listenings numerous times. I rarely provide the composer's name or information at the time of listening but offer a full list of works at the end of the session. Feedback from listeners has been quite avid; they prefer doing without the "added pressure" of knowing composers.

I work with either a CD or live musicians and over the course of an hour and a half I guide listeners in exploring samples - or tastings -- of music. I use gestures and my conductor-instinct to guide the listeners' ear. The ear is an amazing muscle, and once listeners receive feedback on the how, where, and what to listen for, the palette comes to life. For an introduction to a wine-tasting approach to music I progress through ideas of color, texture, movement and time, gesture, and on to the realm of metaphor in music. Listeners respond strongly and positively to an environment where the focus is on awakening their sound-palette rather than learning facts.

I recently gave a *Classical Connoisseur* presentation on loving and longing in music. The event was scheduled around Valentine's Day so the venue suggested loving and longing as the topic to explore. I was fortunate to have live musicians with me: a woodwind quartet of flute, oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. We explored not just how a composer might create loving and longing in music, but how musicians can shape music to make connections between sounds and meaning. Working with live musicians allows me to feed directly off audience questions. We can try out the character of individual intervals, for example, and hear how small changes will create completely different characters and

gestures in the music. We can hear varieties in breath, vibrato, articulation, dynamics, energy levels, pacing, color, phrasing, etc. The tool box for creating and expressing music is wonderfully bottomless.

You may begin to see how the *Classical Connoisseur* benefits musicians, too. In a *Classical Connoisseur* setting, I guide performers through how they can create metaphor and how the composer may be asking them to create metaphor. Why is this passage written in the lower register? How does the melodic interval create a distinct quality? Why would too much vibrato kill the mood? Which note carries rhetorical weight? Would a faster bow make the sound less personable? How long does a sustained note carry meaning?

One of my favorite aspects of music is time. Music uses time, composers use time, and listeners are asked by music to relate to time. I love exploring time because it is a very personal and human part of every musician's and listener's life. This important and musical art of using time is a skill which can only be learned in front of an audience. Most musicians play, and are trained to play, according to the clock. In other words, the clock or ticking pulse, dictates events rather than the musician or composer. But how quickly is quick enough for this moment? How does a split second of silence shift the inflection of a phrase? At what tempo does color fade into texture? How do we create and pace expectation, or prolong anticipation?

Conductors often make such choices of metaphor building. For example, in a presentation on *Sound Qualities* I offered two versions of the opening of the Andante of Bruckner's 7th symphony. One conductor stacked the viola/tuba line with the brass tucked homogeneously inside the violas, resulting in a very passionate, pulsating, and human effect. We heard full viola vibrato performed in a mid-range, resonant tessitura. Another sample, however, offered the five tubas as the main event, stacking the top tuba line as a solo melody. Without the viola line and its flavor exposed, the result was very different – muscular and majestic. Here, instead of the influence of string vibrato, we heard the breath required by the brass players and how it adds its own expressive nuance. When working with live musicians I provide hands-on opportunity to explore musical choices and offer insight as to how these choices affect a listener's concept, enjoyment, and understanding of a piece.

The goal of making classical music meaningful to our listeners and ourselves is a vital artistic endeavor. Unfortunately classical music and wine have a common ability to terrify those who feel uninitiated or “uneducated.” In the wine world, Leslie Brenner has a book called “Fear of Wine.” The opening sentence reads perfectly for the world of classical music:

“How in the world did we manage to get so far in life and still wind up so terribly afraid of something that's just – dare we say it – a beverage? “

Indeed, how did we manage to get so far in life and still wind up so terribly afraid of something that's just sounds? My presentations as the *Classical Connoisseur* demonstrate that listeners are highly perceptive. A wine-tasting approach gives them the skills to overcome what previously had been carried as a burden of ignorance or fear: “Well, I didn't like that, but if it's a superstar performer then it must be good. The problem is me - I must not understand music.” The benefits of a wine-tasting approach to music include developing an ability to discuss and articulate what was heard, a better understanding of one's personal tastes, and an increased comfort level - what I call being ‘many-eared’ - when hearing new works and varied styles.

For professional performers whose studies are focused on technique, historical-traditional, and textual correctness, the *Classical Connoisseur* approach provides concepts for recognizing how composers use their tools of metaphor and how a performer's musical choices may affect a listener. Musicians then develop a process for seeing beyond the notes to a deeper layer of musical intent and meaning. With this insight a performer has a rich array of communicative tools and a direct understanding of their implementation.

Today's audiences are hungry to explore what it is they are hearing – not in terms of the anatomy of music, but through discovering the connection between sound and meaning. Today's musicians, too, want to reach audiences in a way that creates a vivid experience for the listener and an artistically

satisfying moment for the performer and composer. The *Classical Connoisseur* events allow me to coach listeners in the art of experiencing the magic of music, and to coach players in the art of making magic out of sound.

I leave listeners and musicians with these three wishes as they continue on as a *Classical Connoisseur*:

- ◆ Be driven by curiosity and wonder, rather than the need to be right, or knowing.
- ◆ Be many-eared, as there is no single style of listening that reveals the whole.
- ◆ Insist that music and its practitioners – composers, performers – honor the metaphor.

It is through this imaginative realm of metaphor that we, perhaps, become less of a stranger to our self, each other, and the human experience.

Websites:

www.kimdiehnelt.com

<http://maestrakimd.blogspot.com/>
