

Phillip Bush

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CMSCVA. Can you name the first piece of music, performance or person that inspired you to take up an instrument, or to become a professional musician?

Without question a transforming experience was when the NY Philharmonic came to my hometown (Charlotte NC) in the early 1970s, when I was a little kid. They did Bartok Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta and the experience of hearing that exciting second movement, with the strings all doing pizzicato (plucking) and the piano playing those funky syncopated chords against it...the light turned on for me in the sense that I realized that classical music could really have a serious groove. I was especially turned on to lots of 20th century classical music from that point on. Eventually of course my tastes expanded backwards to Romantic, Classical, and Baroque periods!

CMSCVA. What is the most memorable chamber music experience you've ever had, and why?

There've been quite a few memorable experiences. Anytime you play the Messiaen Quartet for the End of Time it has the potential to be one such memorable occasion, simply because of the profundity of the piece, the extraordinary ritual aspect of a live performance of that work. I was playing it at the Grand Canyon Music Festival nearly 20 years ago, in a hall on the South Rim of the Canyon. It started to rain and this building (not completely acoustically sealed) amplified the gentle pitter-patter of the rain falling on its roof. Hearing my friend and colleague, the clarinetist Alan Kay, playing the solo "Abyss of the Birds" was extraordinary with that added bit of atmosphere, it really felt "abyss-like" and lonely, and for the whole performance we all felt very much in deep contact with the natural world, the birdsong, the elements, and indeed all of Creation, which is a big theme in Messiaen's work after all.

CMSCVA. What's the most striking thing an audience member has ever said to you after a performance you played?

This is kind of funny, but I'm thinking now of a time right after finishing an exhausting performance of the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio, a nearly hour-long marathon for all three players, pianist no less than the two strings. A lady came up to me afterwards and, with all the sincerest good intentions in her heart, said "I just want you to know I really respect the work of the accompanist." Dripping with sweat and panting with exhaustion, part of me wanted to say "Accompanying? What are you talking about? Ma'am, that's more like a piano concerto!" but of course instead I thanked her very much for being there and for her compliment! And the memory of that makes me smile every time I think of it, or play that piece!

CMSCVA. What can you do as a performer to truly reach an audience member through performance? Or what do you think a listener should take away from a performance?

I think if you are completely focused on the music, with every fiber of your heart, soul, and mind, then you have done what you can as a performer to open the door for the listener to walk through so to speak, you are doing what you can to offer the listener a pathway or journey through the magic of the music. You can't control how or what an audience member takes away from a performance, which is the great thing about this music: no two people hear things the same way. But I think many people, including those who may not have necessarily heard much classical music or chamber music, are naturally drawn in to listen with greater concentration when they perceive sincerity, an open heart, a deep focus, emanating from the stage.

CMSCVA. What is the role of a "classical" musician today, and how do you think it's changed?

Oh boy, those answers could fill a book (and they have!). I'll keep it brief! At heart, I believe that as classical musicians, our role is to offer people a pathway to an aural experience that is radically different from what mass media or the predominant commercial culture offers them. That's true whether we're talking about music composed in the 18th century or the 21st. That's why, while I'm all for taking the "stuffy formality" out of the concert experience and open to bringing this music to new sorts of venues and experimenting with ways this music is presented, there is something very essential and needed in our current American society for an experience where you sit undistracted for an hour or two, unplug from your electronic devices, and just listen, allowing your mind to go where it will. And there is so much amazing music out there, spanning the centuries, miracles of human inspiration and creativity...and while it's true that you can find almost any piece of music on the internet, there is something unique about sharing the music through live performance and so there will always be a need for people to have the chance to experience this music for a first time, or a twentieth time!

CMSCVA. What's the biggest challenge you are dealing right now with as a classical musician (or a person whose profession is "musician")?

The same challenge that I think probably just about anybody now in any profession or field of endeavor is dealing with: time management! We all have tools that supposedly makes it possible to deal with things much more quickly: email, texting, google for instant information and answers, but it seems we all feel more than ever that 24 hours in a day or 7 days in a week is just not enough to take care of what we need to take care of! For me as a musician, that particularly means balancing the needs of family, my work as a teacher in a state university setting (think LOTS of emails!), the details of concert life, and most critically, preserving time to practice. To do what we do requires lifelong practice, both to preserve the physical skills to play and to keep growing as musicians, because you're always finding new things in the music, even after you've "known" these pieces for years!

