“ODE TO JOY”: The Peculiar Community

A musical ensemble is peculiar. Dictionaries define this word as “distinctive”, “odd,” “strange”, and weird”. In a word, peculiar means different from the ordinary, the common, or from everything else. Every musical group is unique and made up of individuals that are distinctive, unique expressions of body and spirit. Comprised of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, beliefs, traditions, and disciplines, musicians join for a common goal-making music. The background nature of people is, hopefully, that we all desire to improve, contribute positively to the group, and enjoy our experiences. These positive experiences can lead to joy. With all the disparity that individuals bring to any group, it can be assured, each ensemble is a peculiar community of musicians.

How can we achieve joy? How can the individuals gain strength and influence community within and outside of their group? Prepare not only musically, but intellectually for soul reflecting experiences. Read about the composer and the history that surrounds the music you are studying. Engage in practice so that muscle memory guides your body, so the focus is on your mind and music making. Take time to reflect after each rehearsal to clarify the experience and add a thread to your personal tapestry. Interact with your peers in conversation so that you can hear and learn from others’ experiences and insights. Group time is much more valuable when you have shared distilled thoughts and reflections. Listen to others…musically and verbally. This adds to the greatest blessing of interacting on a deeper level. Strengthen relationships and deepen your overall experience. Building strong relationships is a key factor in making your musical ensemble experience a success.

Joy comes to individuals in a variety of ways. We often spend too much time seeking joy, when the true feeling comes from being a part of something bigger than any individual. Value is that you matter to someone other than yourself. You matter and make a difference when you are a member of a musical ensemble. Every part is needed and respected. Every person can bring positive energy to the group or drag down the ensemble in a variety of ways. For those of us promoting and seeking joy, surround yourself with attainable goals. Prepare, practice, meditate, arrive early and turn your thoughts to living in the moment for each rehearsal. Bring your “A” game to each interaction with peers, members, and audience members whenever possible. This brings joy not only to you as an individual, but to others that surround you. Do unselfish and unexpected acts of kindness or generosity for your ensemble members each week. This builds your community and a foundation for joy. Treat all people as equal to you and one another. Demonstrate your commitment to embracing and sharing joy. Leave any drama on the concert hall stage.

One of my role models and friends, Manny Laureano (Minnesota Orchestra trumpet player/Bloomington Symphony Orchestra Director/Minnesota Youth Symphony founder), is the individual I have had the honor to call on for emergencies. That said, I needed a lead trumpet soloist due to my trumpet players absence, and he accepted the gig to play with a 48-hour lead-time. He comes to rehearsal dressed up, ready to rehearse, and brings the same professionalism to the St. Croix Valley Symphony Orchestra and University of Wisconsin River Falls Symphony Band as he does to the Minnesota Orchestra. Would you believe me if I said he brought “joy”? The group played with an energy, focus and professionalism that was electric. The concert involved Spanish composer/conductor Oscar Navarro and his compositions that have intense, dynamic, and flamboyant trumpet solo parts. At the end of rehearsal, Oscar walked up to Manny and said, “Please come back to Spain with me. You are magnificent”. Joy shared not only between 2 musicians, but the entire group experienced pride. Our peculiar group of individuals is now united with a joyful music making experience. Did I mention my role is playing the samba whistle? We do what is needed for the group at the time. The concert? That is simply frosting on a cake where we share our experience with an audience. The magic. learning and joy happen in the rehearsal room.

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