

# LETTERS TO OUR FRIENDS



Forty-one year North Carolina Symphony veteran Jimmy Gilmore answers your questions and discusses your observations about the orchestra.

During a conversation before a performance at Meymandi Concert Hall, I mused with a concertgoer about the analogies between music and sports. On the surface, this may seem absurd, but he was right in pointing out some of the parallels. To me, the most basic commonality is that music and sports are both performance endeavors demanding a great deal of discipline. Orchestral players are performers as much as they are musicians. I don't think it stretches the analogy too far to say that a professional athlete is a performer who plays basketball, or golf, or whatever. Music and sports are the vehicle the performer employs to express himself. And the audience is essential. Otherwise, we're just practicing.

With my students I always compare golf to music because golf is an individual sport that demands mastery of all the skill sets involved in playing the game. Although we join together "in concert," each musician in an orchestra also must command a large variety of skills to perform the repertoire. The player feels a great deal of pressure in the solo spotlight. One can also imagine that it must be very nerve-racking to attempt a twenty-foot putt in front of a gallery of live spectators and a television audience of millions.

Underscoring this comparison is the concept of perfection. Musicians can never be totally satisfied with their performance because, no matter how well we play, it could theoretically always be better. In golf, as in music, you can never rest on your laurels. The perfect game of golf would be a hole-in-one on every hole. That is unattainable. In golf and music you're always playing against perfection, and the pursuit of that perfection demands mentorship, a long process best begun at a young age. It would be rare indeed for a person to join a professional orchestra or the PGA Tour with no prior training. No matter how good your God-given ear or your natural swing, there is a body of knowledge

too vast to comprehend without guidance from a professional. Equally important are all those years of practice: building muscle memory, efficiency of production and consistency, all under the watchful eye of a teacher.

But wait! There are other analogies even less apparent: The ideals of form involved in gripping the club and the proper swing could be compared to the way a string player holds the bow, or the wind player forms his embouchure. Speaking as a highly qualified duffer, I can tell you that man-handling the club or forcing the swing has the same disastrous results as over-gripping the bow or pressing too hard on the string. Basically, all of this boils down to the fact that the rules of form must be an integral part of your game, and there is little tolerance for individual variation.

Of course, in some rare instances, someone finds another way to skin the cat. In the 1968 Summer Olympics, Dick Fosbury cleared the high jump bar backwards, thereby inventing the Fosbury Flop. The Flop became a sensation and instantly became another way to get the job done. And how about Tossy Spivakovsky, who held the violin bow similar to the way one would grip a bludgeon? His Brahms Concerto was essentially an impassioned rhapsody, but most teachers would never recommend his unorthodox method of producing the sound.

For many years, I had a picture of Larry Bird on the stand in my studio. (The only reason it's no longer there is that my present-day students have no idea who Larry Bird is!) The picture showed him practicing shooting baskets at the gym. The point of the short article that accompanied the picture was that discipline is a requisite for excellence. I always emphasized to my charges that Larry Bird practiced 1,000 shots a day. Many fans thought he was a natural player, not realizing that what they saw on the court was the result of an arduous process.

Sportsmen can learn a lot from musicians too. When Bobby Knight was the basketball coach at Indiana University, he invited fellow faculty member and world-renowned cellist Janos Starker to speak to the team about the rigors of becoming a master musician and performer. Despite his infamous temper, Coach Knight was eager to educate and find unique ways to inspire excellence in his team.

Returning to the golf analogy I use with my students, many people don't consider golf to be a spectator sport like basketball or football, and usually only those who have actually played the game get a thrill from watching a great player chip in the ball from thirty feet off of the green. Classical music draws a similar reaction and is most likely to be enjoyed by people with some experience and familiarity with the subject (though one wonders what would happen if children had the same intensity of exposure to participate in music as they do in sports). Many of our audience members learned to appreciate music because they participated in musical activities in their formative years. For the initiated, attending a concert is indeed a spectator sport, and people go to see a concert as much as to hear it.

The most common misconception surrounding classical music is that it appeals only to the elite, a bum rap if there ever was one. One of the greatest challenges we face is to shed the elitist image and ensure that music is more accessible to the public. We don't have to dumb down the music in order to accomplish this, but undoubtedly we must employ new technology to reach potential audiences. If we are successful, we can only hope that the step from the living room to the live experience in the concert hall will be a short one.

— Jimmy Gilmore

*Have an idea or question you'd love for Jimmy to tackle?  
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