

Music Lessons for the Spirit

Chapter Four

Rest

"The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses
between the notes - ah, that is where the art resides."

~ Artur Schnabel

"Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it,
and it is grace itself which makes this void."

~ Simone Weil

Ask people what they love about a piece of music and you will hear a variety of responses. They might say they can't get the tune out of their head, or that the song's beat is just the right speed to keep their energy up while driving on a road trip. Perhaps the lyrics of the song perfectly matched their mood as they got over a boyfriend, or they might associate a favorite song with going off to college. They will seldom, however, remark that what they love the most in a piece are the rests.

Rests are the Rodney Dangerfield of music. They "don't get no respect," as the comedian used to say, let alone much notice. Student musicians can be imprecise, at best, in their observance of rests, often playing right through them. Listeners are hardly aware of rests, other than the dramatic ones. The opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony has notable rests – ta-ta-ta da....ta-ta-ta da....but most people would be challenged to come up with a handful of pieces that are distinguished by their rests.

Contrast of Sound

Rests are extremely important to music. At a fundamental level, rests create the most significant thing an art based on sound needs – the contrast of silence. Imagine music without rests, pauses, or cadences and you get a sense of the "run-on" quality that would result. This musical "wall of sound" is undefined and unintelligible without moments of silence, even tiny ones. In a sense, rests punctuate the music. As

punctuations are the “space” between words, rests are the spaces between notes. They are the commas, periods, and paragraphs which group and clarify the musical notes and shape a piece of music.

Rests tell the musician to stop the sound – lift the bow, take the hands off of the keyboard, stop blowing the flute – for however long the rest indicates. Rests can be very short, as quick as the intake of a breath, very long, or anywhere in between. The percussionist who “rests” through most of the symphony and then plays the climactic cymbal crash at the end of a work has a lot of rests! Most often, the music allows musicians only the occasional moment to catch their breath, put down the trombone, blow the saliva out of the French horn, or whatever they need to do. But even those few moments can be helpful, as rests literally allow the musicians to *rest*. Playing music is physically and mentally taxing, and musicians are often quite grateful for a moment of rest in a long or intense piece.

As I contemplate the importance of silence and rest in music, I think about their importance in my life as well. Rest, silence. Everyday life can feel like a run-on sentence, like a long symphonic movement without pauses. Work demands, family life, personal interests—all of these can leave little time for rest, for silence. But I have become more aware of a desire and a need to have rest and silence in my life. Perhaps this comes with age, changing perspective, the sense of more choice in my life. My children are grown, I’ve seen that life doesn’t go on forever. I get more tired when I work long days. I now

appreciate silence the way I used to crave stimulation in my youth. *Rest* is no longer the Rodney Dangerfield of my life – I now show it some respect!

A Deep Breath

My desire to honor rest and silence inspired me to establish a daily meditation practice. Having never formally studied meditation, my practice is a home-spun version. For twenty minutes every day, I sit with my eyes closed and call in Spirit. I invite my breath, my thoughts and my body to slow down. Borrowing from the Native American tradition, I silently honor the seven directions: North, South, East, West, Above, Below, and Within as spiritual orientation points. I call in Guidance. I notice the sounds around me and listen to the quiet within.

I also, I admit, often slip into thinking about my grocery list or yesterday's squabble with my husband! But I notice this, and call myself back into a quieter space. In contrast with my life's active pace, this quiet time helps me feel calmer, more centered, more peaceful.

The effects of meditation can be felt at any moment by simply bringing consciousness to breathing. In a moment of panic or intensity, the stand-by advice, "Take a deep breath!" is wise. A conscious breath can transform tension into relaxation, anxiety into peace. In a pinch, you can also turn your attention inward for a short time and experience inner

silence despite the noisiness of the office, kitchen or carpool. All of these are small moments of rest, but they can make a big difference in one's experience of a day.

Moments of stillness and silence have a myriad of qualities. Musical silences can be settling, peaceful, resolving, charged with drama and suspense, climactic with exuberance. In a concert, the longer moments between pieces allow time for one piece to finish and for us to get ready for what is coming next. The moment of silence is both a completion and a preparation. Symphonies, which are multi-movement works, have a pause between movements. The audience typically does not applaud during these breaks, because it is understood that the next movement is a continuation of the overall composition. Conductors are very aware of the length of time that they wait between movements, because it is time in which something is going on that is part of the piece as a whole. Occasionally, an ill-placed audience member's cough or cell phone ring can destroy the tension in this silence. Listeners might not have been conscious of the quality in the moment until it is unwittingly destroyed.

As with music, life's moments of silence have many qualities. *Repose* is a synonym for rest. So are: "peace, ease, release." The dictionary says, "All of these nouns mean freedom or relief from labor, responsibility, or strain." The word *rest* means "cessation of work, exertion, or activity." Most of us could use more of that in our lives.

The Cat's Routine

I read about someone with a long-term illness who consciously integrated rest into his recovery program. Home all day long, he noticed his cat's rhythms of resting, eating, and playing. He decided to follow the cat's routine for awhile; resting when the cat did, eating when it ate, playing and being active only for the amount of time the cat was. The cat's pacing of repose and activity had a healing effect on its owner, and gradually he became well again.

Silence and rest bring time for recovery, as well as for integration and reflection. These processes are vital to our well-being and are usually in short supply in our daily schedules. How often do we sit without the TV on, without a book in our laps, without a cell phone in hand sending us text messages? When do we use time to day-dream, muse, mull something over? How often do we let ourselves do nothing?

Resting doesn't come easily to me. I like to accomplish things, check them off my list. My tendency used to be similar to our culture's – I valued productivity so much that having rest time, silence, repose – was almost unheard of. Our culture admires busyness and productivity to such an extent that we sometimes wear our busyness like a status symbol. We exclaim (in a slight bragging tone) how full our lives are with activities and commitments, how over-run our schedules are, how over-tired we are from all we do. We seldom talk about our children or ourselves as having unscheduled time, "free" time (interesting phrase, *free* time...), or having spent a weekend quietly at home. There are connotations around inactivity and having *less* to do which imply boredom, passivity or

being uninvolved. These are challenging attitudes to overcome, so we tend to give in to the norm and keep ourselves running at a fast pace.

Our busyness is at such a high level that our tiredness is equally intense. A friend recently complained that instead of getting chores done on his day off, he often “collapses.” We also say, “I *crashed* at the end of the day.” These words are telling about just how tired we are. Coming to a screeching halt after going 80 miles an hour all week brings us into *exhaustion*. We might even worry that letting ourselves get in touch with our tiredness will make it too hard for us to start back up again! When we get to this level of exhaustion, it does take longer to recover. More rest, repose and stillness along the way can help us avoid such deep tiredness and make recovery a little easier.

Even vacations, those longer stretches of time we eagerly anticipate, are often filled with action instead of repose. It can take a few days of vacation to slow down our pace and relax our habitual compulsion to be in doing-mode. But if we don’t slow down, we might come back to work needing a vacation from our vacation, rather than feeling rested and composed. It might be time to re-think the habitual question we ask each other after vacation. Instead of, “What did you do?” we might ask “What *didn’t* you do?” or “How did you *be*?”

Be Still

In music, rests appear between notes and between phrases, helping the music breathe. They provide definition and structure. Silence was part of the inspiration for a famous piece of music by American avant-garde composer John Cage (1912 – 1992), who wrote a piece entitled “4’ 33”” (four minutes, thirty-three seconds). Composed for any instrument or combination of instruments, the score instructs the performer to *not* play their instrument for the duration of the piece. While this is a piece about silence, it is also a composition made up of the environmental sounds that the listener hears while it is performed. The rustling of the increasingly restless audience, a dropped program, an ambulance going by, are all part of the piece. This intentional structure for “silence” acknowledges our culture’s lack of silence and also our discomfort with it. Cage was a student of Zen Buddhism and mentioned in many interviews that he felt this piece was his most important composition. It certainly invited a new discussion about sound and its contrast, silence.

The necessity of silence has been part of spiritual practices throughout time. One of the Psalms tells us “*Be still* and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Being still is a path to knowing God, to knowing the God in us (“know that *I* am God”). In Buddhism, there is a story told of a man seeking enlightenment who came to a Zen Master. The Master received the man and called for a pot of tea to be served. He took the man’s cup and poured tea into it, continuing to pour even though the cup was quickly full and started overflowing. “What are you doing, Master?” asked the man. “You are like this cup of

tea, my friend," answered the Master. "You are full, and must empty yourself before you can receive any new understanding."

Space, rest, emptiness are requirements for growth and evolution. We are invited to weed the inner garden, make space for the new. When we make room for "no-thing-ness," profundity can enter. We consciously create space for the unconscious. The rewards are rich, as *Time* magazine reported in this article about the effects of silence in meditation:

"Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine has used several types of imaging systems to watch the brains of subjects as they meditate or pray. By measuring blood flow, he determines which regions are responsible for the feelings the volunteers experience. The deeper that people descend into meditation or prayer, Newberg found, the more active the frontal lobe and the limbic system become. The frontal lobe is the seat of concentration and attention; the limbic system is where powerful feelings, including rapture, are processed. More revealing is the fact that at the same time these regions flash to life, another important region – the parietal lobe at the back of the brain – goes dim. It's this lobe that orients the individual in time and space. Take it off-line, and the boundaries of the self fall away, creating the feeling of being at one with the universe. Combine that with what's going on in the other two lobes, and you can put together a profound religious experience."

“The feeling of being at one with the universe.” As the line from the movie, “When Harry Met Sally” goes, “I want what she’s having!” If meditation and deep silence offer that possibility, I think I’ll go meditate! I close my eyes, I rest, I am silent, I am One with the Universe.

Reflections on Rest

Rests are breath in music, the air and space between the sounds. As rests allow the music to breathe and have shape, so rest and silence create the breath and air in our lives that are vital to a healthy existence. Human beings can live without food or water for weeks and days on end, but without air we cannot survive for more than a few minutes. It is vital to the health and well-being of the Body, Mind, and Spirit that we breath deeply, have open space in our lives, rest.

1. Begin to listen for the space between words, thoughts, activities. Notice it: leave it be. Don’t fill it up with conversation, noise, tasks.

2. Notice if you have an attraction to busyness. Does it serve you in some way, keeping you from taking on something you would like to do, or helping you avoid something?
3. Begin a practice of being quiet and still, even for a short time, on a regular basis. Sit out of doors without reading, having a conversation, or multi-tasking in any way. Take a silent walk. Turn the phone off for an hour.

Meditation

Sit comfortably, but with gentle alertness, feet on the floor, back straight. Close your eyes and become aware of your breath. Gradually let your breathing slow down and deepen. Notice the sounds around you, but allow them to become more distant.

Repeat silently a word that is calming for you, such as: peace, Spirit, love, harmony.

This word is called a mantra.

Gradually, say the word less frequently, allowing more time between repetitions.

Bring your awareness to the space between the repetitions of the word, until you are more conscious of the silent space than of the words themselves. Feel, or imagine, a sense of depth and Presence in those spaces. Eventually, the mantra can be set aside as you settle into silence.

Remain in this meditational quiet until you're ready to return to alertness. If words or thoughts rise, gently remind yourself to step into the space between them.