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Music To Heal A Broken Ear

January 2010 - Neil Rolnick

People speak of the healing powers of music and art, which is something I do believe in. However, my experience is somewhat different. The piece I'll perform on the April 19th concert for Cutting Edge is a reaction to a personal bit of ill-health, a study for a larger piece I'm writing called MONO. I lost the hearing in my left ear over about an hour and a half on March 31, 2008. In the nearly two years since then I've turned to music not to heal my broken ear, but to nurture my soul and deepen my relationships to those around me. And it's not been about listening to music, but about writing it.

After finishing up about a year's worth of music I'd committed to write before my ear quit on me, I began thinking about how to address my current situation musically. One of my thoughts was that I needed to take the focus off myself, and to try to write something which would be somehow narrative, and would expand to address the experiences of others in similar situations. So, I sent out a note to people on my email list explaining my current situation and asking them to send me any similar or related stories from their own lives. What I got back was an overwhelming wealth of stories from people describing a variety of losses, and how they dealt with them. I heard from a cook who lost his sense of smell, from a sculptor who lost an eye, from people dealing with color blindness, inability to taste, deafening tinnitus, loss of function of an ear or an eye ... the list goes on.

But what was fascinating was that none of the responses were complaints. They were just stories about how something crucial in a person's life had changed, and they'd made an adjustment and continued on. Sometimes with lots of pain, and sometimes with major life changes. But they were all writing about how they continued, not mourning what they'd lost.

For the last few months, much of my effort has gone into working on MONO, the piece which will grow out of this effort, and which will incorporate many of the responses I received from that and subsequent outreach to collect stories about sensory loss or diminishment. But more important, these stories have been an inspiration to me to keep going ... to keep writing, and performing and recording my work, regardless of the changes in my hearing. One of the things I learned from these stories, since I actually know many of the people who responded, is that many works of music, poetry, sculpture and painting that I love were made by people who were similarly dealing with changes and diminishments of their senses.

I probably became a composer because I was moved by what I heard, I listened, my ears were sharp. That was easy, as much youthful accomplishment is. As we get older our bodies fail us in a variety of ways, and eventually they fail us altogether. But on the way we gain new perspective, new depth in our understanding of ourselves and what we do. The struggle to make what you do more meaningful despite what life throws at you is really what heals the soul. When things are easy, it's great. When they're more difficult, their value and meaning increase, and the accomplishment can be even more joyful.

I was particularly amused (and pleased) at the end of 2009 when, for the first time in my career, my most recent CD was listed as one of the outstanding recordings of the year by the NY Times classical music critics. Amused, because there's a lot on the CD I can't hear. I can't hear the stereo, I can't really hear the quality of the sound. But I can hear them in my head, and evidently I was able to communicate what I heard well enough to the talented folks I was working with to get it on to the disk. For me, that's healing.