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Tedtalks

Musique et passion - 2008

Probably a lot of you know the story of the two salesmen who went down to Africa in the 1900s. They were sent down to find if there was any opportunity for selling shoes, and they wrote telegrams back to Manchester. And one of them wrote, "Situation hopeless. Stop. They don't wear shoes. » And the other one wrote, "Glorious opportunity. They don't have any shoes yet."

Now, there's a similar situation in the classical music world, because there are some people who think that classical music is dying. And there are some of us who think you ain't seen nothing yet. And rather than go into statistics and trends, and tell you about all the orchestras that are closing, and the record companies that are folding, I thought we should do an experiment tonight -- an experiment. Actually, it's not really an experiment, because I know the outcome. But it's like an experiment. Now, before we — -- before we start, I need to do two things.

One is I want to remind you of what a seven-year-old child sounds like when he plays the piano. Maybe you have this child at home. He sounds something like this.

I see some of you recognize this child. Now, if he practices for a year and takes lessons, he's now eight and he sounds like this.

Then he practices for another year and takes lessons -- now he's nine.

Then he practices for another and takes lessons -- now he's 10.

At that point, they usually give up.

Now, if you'd waited, if you'd waited for one more year, you would have heard this.

Now, what happened was not maybe what you thought, which is, he suddenly became passionate, engaged, involved, got a new teacher, he hit puberty, or whatever it is. What actually happened was the impulses were reduced. You see, the first time, he was playing with an impulse on every note.

And the second, with an impulse every other note.

You can see it by looking at my head.

The nine-year-old put an impulse on every four notes.

And the 10-year-old, on every eight notes.

And the 11-year-old, one impulse on the whole phrase.

I know -- I don't know how we got into this position.

I didn't say, "I'm going to move my shoulder over, move my body. » No, the music pushed me over, which is why I call it one-buttock playing.

It can be the other buttock.

You know, a gentleman was once watching a presentation I was doing, when I was working with a young pianist. He was the president of a corporation in Ohio. And I was working with this young pianist and I said, "The trouble with you is you're a two-buttock player. You should be a one-buttock player. » And I moved his body like that, while he was playing. And suddenly, the music took off. It took flight. There was a gasp in the audience when they heard the difference. And then I got a letter from this gentleman. He said, "I was so moved. I went back and I transformed my entire company into a one-buttock company. »

Now, the other thing I wanted to do is to tell you about you. There are 1,600 people, I believe. My estimation is that probably 45 of you are absolutely passionate about classical music. You adore classical music. Your FM is always on that classical dial. And you have CDs in your car, and you go to the symphony. And your children are playing instruments. You can't imagine your life without classical music. That's the first group; it's quite a small group. Then there's another group, bigger group. These are the people who don't mind classical music.

You know, you've come home from a long day, and you take a glass of wine, and you put your feet up. A little Vivaldi in the background doesn't do any harm.

That's the second group. Now comes the third group. These are the people who never listen to classical music. It's just simply not part of your life. You might hear it like second-hand smoke at the airport, but —

-- and maybe a little bit of a march from « Aida" when you come into the hall. But otherwise, you never hear it. That's probably the largest group of all. And then there's a very small group. These are the people who think they're tone-deaf. Amazing number of people think they're tone-deaf. Actually, I hear a lot, "My husband is tone-deaf. »

Actually, you cannot be tone-deaf. Nobody is tone-deaf. If you were tone-deaf, you couldn't change the gears on your car, in a stick shift car. You couldn't tell the difference between somebody from Texas and somebody from Rome. And the telephone. The telephone. If your mother calls on the miserable telephone, she calls and says, « Hello," you not only know who it is, you know what mood she's in. You have a fantastic ear. Everybody has a fantastic ear. So nobody is tone-deaf. But I tell you what. It doesn't work for me to go on with this thing, with such a wide gulf between those who understand, love and [are] passionate about classical music, and those who have no relationship to it at all. The tone-deaf people, they're no longer here. But even between those three categories, it's too wide a gulf. So I'm not going to go on until every single person in this room, downstairs and in Aspen, and everybody else looking, will come to love and understand classical music. So that's what we're going to do. Now, you notice that there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that this is going to work if you look at my face, right? It's one of the characteristics of a leader that he not doubt for one moment the capacity of the people he's leading to realize whatever he's dreaming. Imagine if Martin Luther King had said, "I have a dream. Of course, I'm not sure they'll be up to it. »

All right. So I'm going to take a piece of Chopin. This is a beautiful prelude by Chopin. Some of you will know it.

Do you know what I think probably happened in this room? When I started, you thought, "How beautiful that sounds. »

"I don't think we should go to the same place for our summer holidays next year. »

It's funny, isn't it? It's funny how those thoughts kind of waft into your head. And of course —

-- and of course, if the piece is long and you've had a long day, you might actually drift off. Then your companion will dig you in the ribs and say, "Wake up! It's culture!" And then you feel even worse. But has it ever occurred to you that the reason you feel sleepy in classical music is not because of you, but because of us? Did anybody think while I was playing, "Why is he using so many impulses? » f I'd done this with my head you certainly would have thought it.

And for the rest of your life, every time you hear classical music, you'll always be able to know if you hear those impulses. So let's see what's really going on here. We have a B. This is a B. The next note is a C. And the job of the C is to make the B sad. And it does, doesn't it?

Composers know that. If they want sad music, they just play those two notes.

But basically, it's just a B, with four sads.

Now, it goes down to A. Now to G. And then to F. So we have B, A, G, F. And if we have B, A, G, F, what do we expect next? Oh, that might have been a fluke. Let's try it again. Ooh, the TED choir.

And you notice nobody is tone-deaf, right? Nobody is. You know, every village in Bangladesh and every hamlet in China -- everybody knows: da, da, da, da -- da. Everybody knows, who's expecting that E. Now, Chopin didn't want to reach the E there, because what will have happened? It will be over, like Hamlet. Do you remember Hamlet? Act one, scene three, he finds out that his uncle killed his father. You remember, he keeps on going up to his uncle and almost killing him. And then he backs away, and he goes up to him again and almost kills him. And the critics, all of whom are sitting in the back row there, they have to have an opinion, so they say, "Hamlet is a procrastinator. »

Or they say, "Hamlet has an Oedipus complex. » No, otherwise the play would be over, stupid. That's why Shakespeare puts all that stuff in Hamlet — you know, Ophelia going mad and the play within the play, and Yorick's skull, and the gravediggers. That's in order to delay -- until act five, he can kill him. It's the same with the Chopin. He's just about to reach the E, and he says, "Oops, better go back up and do it again. » So he does it again. Now, he gets excited. (Piano) That's excitement, you don't have to worry about it. Now, he gets to F-sharp, and finally he goes down to E, but it's the wrong chord -- because the chord he's looking for is this one, (Piano) and instead he does ... (Piano) Now, we call that a deceptive cadence, because it deceives us.

I always tell my students, "If you have a deceptive cadence, be sure to raise your eyebrows. Then everybody will know. »

Right. So, he gets to E, but it's the wrong chord. Now, he tries E again. That chord doesn't work. Now, he tries the E again. That chord doesn't work. Now, he tries E again, and that doesn't work. And then finally ... (Piano) There was a gentleman in the front row who went, « Mmm." It's the same gesture he makes when he comes home after a long day, turns off the key in his car and says, "Aah, I'm home." Because we all know where home is. So this is a piece which goes from away to home. And I'm going to play it all the way through and you're going to follow. B, C, B, C, B, C, B — down to A, down to G, down to F. Almost goes to E, but otherwise the play would be over. He goes back up to B. He gets very excited. Goes to F-sharp. Goes to E. It's the wrong chord. It's the wrong chord. It's the wrong chord. And finally goes to E, and it's home. And what you're going to see is one-buttock playing.

Because for me, to join the B to the E, I have to stop thinking about every single note along the way, and start thinking about the long, long line from B to E. You know, we were just in South Africa, and you can't go to South Africa without thinking of Mandela in jail for 27 years. What was he thinking about? Lunch? No, he was thinking about the vision for South Africa and for human beings. That's what kept — this is about vision. This is about the long line. Like the bird who flies over the field and doesn't care about the fences underneath, all right? So now, you're going to follow the line all the way from B to E. And I've one last request before I play this piece all the way through. Would you think of somebody who you adore, who's no longer there? A beloved grandmother, a lover — somebody in your life who you love with all your heart, but that person is no longer with you. Bring that person into your mind, and at the same time follow the line all the way from B to E, and you'll hear everything that Chopin had to say.

Now, you may be wondering, you may be wondering why I'm clapping. Well, I did this at a school in Boston with about 70 seventh graders, 12-year-olds. And I did exactly what I did with you, and I told them and explained them and the whole thing. And at the end, they went crazy, clapping. They were clapping. I was clapping. They were clapping. Finally, I said, "Why am I clapping? » And one of the little kids said, "Because we were listening. »

Think of it. 1,600 people, busy people, involved in all sorts of different things, listening, understanding and being moved by a piece by Chopin. Now that is something.

Now, am I sure that every single person followed that, understood it, was moved by it? Of course, I can't be sure. But I tell you what happened to me. I was in Ireland during the Troubles, 10 years ago, and I was working with some Catholic and Protestant kids on conflict resolution. And I did this with them — a risky thing to do, because they were street kids. And one of them came to me the next morning and he said, "You know, I've never listened to classical music in my life, but when you played that shopping piece ... «

He said, "My brother was shot last year and I didn't cry for him. But last night, when you played that piece, he was the one I was thinking about. And I felt the tears streaming down my face. And you know, it felt really good to cry for my brother. » So I made up my mind at that moment that classical music is for everybody. Everybody. Now, how would you walk -- because you know, my profession, the music profession doesn't see it that way. They say three percent of the population likes classical music. If only we could move it to four percent, our problems would be over. I say, "How would you walk? How would you talk? How would you be? If you thought, three percent of the population likes classical music, if only we could move it to four percent. How would you walk? How would you talk? How would you be? If you thought, everybody loves classical music — they just haven't found out about it yet. »

See, these are totally different worlds. Now, I had an amazing experience. I was 45 years old, I'd been conducting for 20 years, and I suddenly had a realization. The conductor of an orchestra doesn't make a sound. My picture appears on the front of the CD —

-- but the conductor doesn't make a sound. He depends, for his power, on his ability to make other people powerful. And that changed everything for me. It was totally life changing. People in my orchestra came up to me and said, "Ben, what happened?" That's what happened. I realized my job was to awaken possibility in other people. And of course, I wanted to know whether I was doing that. And you know how you find out? You look at their eyes. If their eyes are shining, you know you're doing it. You could light up a village with this guy's eyes.

Right. So if the eyes are shining, you know you're doing it. If the eyes are not shining, you get to ask a question. And this is the question: who am I being, that my players' eyes are not shining? We can do that with our children, too. Who am I being, that my children's eyes are not shining? That's a totally different world. Now, we're all about to end this magical, on-the-mountain week, and we're going back into the world.

And I say, it's appropriate for us to ask the question, who are we being as we go back out into the world? And you know, I have a definition of success. For me, it's very simple. It's not about wealth and fame and power. It's about how many shining eyes I have around me. So now, I have one last thought, which is that it really makes a difference what we say — the words that come out of our mouth. I learned this from a woman who survived Auschwitz, one of the rare survivors. She went to Auschwitz when she was 15 years old, and her brother was eight, and the parents were lost. And she told me this, she said, "We were in the train going to Auschwitz, and I looked down and saw my brother's shoes were missing. And I said, 'Why are you so stupid, can't you keep your things together for goodness' sake?' " The way an elder sister might speak to a younger brother. Unfortunately, it was the last thing she ever said to him, because she never saw him again. He did not survive. And so when she came out of Auschwitz, she made a vow. She told me this. She said, "I walked out of Auschwitz into life and I made a vow. And the vow was, I will never say anything that couldn't stand as the last thing I ever say. » Now, can we do that? No. And we'll make ourselves wrong and others wrong. But it is a possibility to live into. Thank you.

Shining eyes, shining eyes. Thank you, thank you.