

Make mine (live) music

By Tony Pearson

“MUSIC GIVES SOUL to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and enjoyment to life.” So said the great Greek philosopher Plato, and he wasn't just whistling Dixie.

Last week, I attended the “Festival of Stars” evening presented by the North Hastings Music Festival, from start to finish. Then on the weekend, I listened to the full performance of the spring concert of the North Hastings Community Choir. Afterward, three thoughts kept swirling in my mind.

The first was that playing music makes a tremendous contribution to the development of young people. Study after study underlines how learning to play music helps with language skills, physical coordination, and spatial-temporal perception. It also helps develop social skills, like confidence and expressiveness.

Watching so many other young people – including some very tiny ones – run through their numbers showed that music can bring real joy to the performers. Listening to NHHS grad Adam Holmberg, who had a decade-long career as a performer on Disney Cruise Lines, showed that this joy can stay with you. Unfortunately, music programs are disappearing from schools all over Ontario.

The whole evening became a reminder that if we try to turn education into simply fact-absorbing in order to pass standardized tests, we drain most of the character out of our schools. The old idea was to produce a “well-rounded” individual – to foster what we now term “multiple intelligences”: academics, arts, and athletics blending into a balanced life. Schools need music.

The second thought was how good it is to get exposed to pieces that you'll never hear on most radio. Most people fall easily into listening to major pop hits or golden oldies. But too many people rarely listen to jazz, or swing, or traditional folk, or Broadway tunes, let alone (shudder) classical compositions. Yet variety is the hallmark of the music festival. And at the choral concert, only one or two selections were familiar to the audience.

The third thought was akin to one I had at the local hockey play-offs – namely, that there is nothing like being at a live performance to appreciate both the performers and the music.

Just like minor hockey, local music isn't perfect. But it's right there. The singer(s) sing to you and for you; the pianist/guitar player/flutist is bringing a composition to life in front of you. And sometimes, the issue is just hearing the beauty of the notes and ignoring the technique.

Thus for me, the most entrancing Festival performance was Angela Henry playing the short piano classic by Claude Debussy, “Claire de Lune.” Henry's performance wasn't flawless, but it was moving.

Why? Because this simple piece, almost picked out key by key, with numerous intervals between notes, absolutely shimmers. You close your eyes and imagine a moonlit lake or glade. You find yourself walking in the silver night. Then you leave the envisioned scene and focus just on the notes, rolling gently into each other, putting your spirit at rest, at peace. You find yourself listening to pure beauty, right in front of you.

In Spanish, the word “duende” means the instinctive, authentic emotional response to a work of art that goes beyond the ability of the brain to describe in language. For me, “Claire de lune” is one such work.

Sometimes we let music turn into mental wallpaper. We sing along to familiar tunes on the car radio, but they aren't front of mind. Often we put on an album just to provide hooks to remember parts of our lives.

But sometimes we get caught up in the moment and hear more deeply. Rarely, it can happen at a distance. For example, I will never forget k.d. Lang's unforgettable performance of Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah” during the opening ceremony for the Vancouver Winter Olympics. It came over a broadcast – but you knew it was a live, electric performance.

And I think most of us can recall memorable concerts we've attended. For example, I heard Joni Mitchell in a small intimate club in Ottawa before she became huge. The impression left was truly indelible – not something you could ever experience on a recording. Hearing music performed live gives it a dimension that you can't get just listening to a CD, no matter how well engineered. It's just like with a local hockey game, where you can get a sense of the game itself, in a way that you can't from a Stanley Cup broadcast. It's the same with live theatre compared to movies. If there's a real person there in front of you, putting out the effort, there's a special magic, a connection, that you can't get remotely.

We've all heard the expression “Stop and smell the roses.” It's true. A live performance allows us to stop and hear the music. We can give it a chance to reach out and touch not just our ears, but parts of our soul.