

# “Toward a Full Fledged Action Theory from a Perspective of Musical Transcendence”

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## ABSTRACT

### “Toward a Full Fledged Action Theory from a Perspective of Musical Transcendence”

*Practical theology as a discipline has struggled historically in the gaps between theory and practice, academy and church. A recognized scholar recently urged pursuit of “a full-fledged action theory” with a “perspective of transcendence” to move the discussion forward. Additionally, global conditions are such that we need practical reflection and action that reconciles communities and cultures. Accordingly, a neo-Parsonian action theory is sketched and music as a practical bridge between theory/practice is argued. Music offers a lens into the empirical faith life of a religious community even as it transcends and pulls that community into new ways of critically experiencing God in an intimate and possibly intercultural relationship of embodied song.*

The crux of practical theology as a discipline rests in the human fashioning of formative underpinnings and faithful practices for the celebration of God, for the Godly care of persons and this world, and for the participation in God’s promised reign. Said another way, preparing self and community for God’s mission, and engaging God’s mission are interdependent and necessary functions of a Christian worshipping community (Kritzinger 2000:1). Practical theological reflection, in addition, must be practical and reach those struggling to live lives of integrity in our global community. One direction that has been suggested recently for further discourse comes from Johannes van der Ven. He suggests an analysis of *praxis* in terms of a full-fledged action theory (Van der Ven 2001:1). Practical theologians have devoted much effort to the clarification of the term, *praxis*—tracing its Aristotelian heritage and nuances amidst *theoria-praxis-poiesis* – yet an action theory would provide a scaffolding, of sorts, for new directions.

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An action theory able to shed light on biological behaviors of homo sapiens and on symbolic similarities between cultures in global perspective would undergird interdisciplinary discourse in some provocative ways. On the one hand, particular aspects of human behavior may be interpreted as particulars in light of a whole constellation of human factors; on the other hand, such a holistic perspective witnesses to a thread of humanity that binds all peoples into one before the living God.

This essay identifies a viable, accessible vehicle through which to bridge ecclesia and academia, practice and theory: the life of music in religious communities. Music offers a lens into the empirical faith life of a religious community even as it transcends and pulls that community into new ways of critically experiencing God in a relationship of embodied song. We'll only have space for a sketch, but my hope is to ferment further reflection for faith and reconciliation.

### **PROPOSAL OUTLINED**

My proposal has three basic parts. First, the action theory I propose is a neo-Parsonian model of the fields of human action. Talcott Parsons' work has informed much of twentieth century sociological thought (Milbank 1990:106ff) and, if critically engaged, suggests a breadth of perspective suitable to structure the depths of much contemporary, interdisciplinary exploration. Second, music will be defined in precise ethnomusicological terms that correspond with this neo-Parsonian model of human action. This second section opens the door to conceptualizing the lived life of faith in a religious community in a fashion that is irrepressibly practical or mundane even as it is potentially transcendent or revelatory. Nothing is quite so mundane as practice (for both directors and participants) and yet nothing is quite so transcendent as an experience of God in communal song. The final section of this proposal is to name some implications for the continuing conversation. My hope is twofold: 1) to move some practical theological discourse toward a discussion of action theories as per van der Ven's invitation, and 2) to nuance such discourse with a perspective of transcendence that music provides for any critical praxis in a communal life of faith.

# 1 THE FIELD OF HUMAN ACTION: A NEO-PARSONIAN MODEL

Social theory in disciplinary perspective has grown over the last two hundred years through wrestling with ‘what is the social?’ over and against nature or association or economics or culture, not to mention now the self and the body (Turner 2000:3-5). A neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action, developed in the teaching of James E Loder, provides a helpful scaffolding for relating all these previous categories, even as it begs some crucial questions yet to be explored (Loder 1989, 1998; Loder and Neidhardt 1992). mainly engage

## 1.1 A socialization-transformation system operative toward ‘pattern maintenance’ and ‘tension reduction’

A neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action, also known as a socialization-transformation system, describes fields of human activity in which pattern-maintenance and tension-reduction constitute the aims of the entire system. For any intentional act in any field of human activity, the system as a whole impinging implicitly upon that act will tend toward inertia and therefore work to incorporate what is done into the previous overall system. In other words, the patterns of human activity that have been established in social discourse over time will be the preferred manifestations of ‘appropriate social behavior’ and any intentional act will be interpreted within previous parameters or deemed ‘unsocial’ by those whom the act affects, however remotely. Tension-reduction is the biological-psychological description of this socializing operation of the system as a whole. Any new act outside previous parameters will create tension in the system and therefore the system—other human actors in whatever capacities are at their disposal—will work toward decreasing such tension to maintain those previous (inertial) parameters. The neo-Parsonian model has these dual aims of pattern-maintenance and tension-reduction. These aims also constitute the force of socialization to be felt in any human experience and behaviour.

The model of the field of human action also subsists with a counterforce to socialization. While the system as a whole operates toward inertia through tension-reduction and pattern-maintenance, transformation functions as a counterforce and ‘repair service’ to the force of socialization. As in any human group, organization or

institution, the existence of the socializing system over time results in cracks and ruptures as new actors and new combinations come into play. These cracks and ruptures create tension which must be reduced and therefore these cracks and ruptures must be repaired. Transformation is this repairing counterforce that takes place in all spheres of human activity and that exposes a deeper, hidden intelligibility that will undergird the system in the future, thereby repairing cracks and ruptures with new patterns of experience, behavior, and understanding. The neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action can be described, therefore, as a socialization-transformation system that ultimately works toward inertia even as that force is counteracted by new actors and new combinations within historical existence in time.

## **1.2 Four fields of human action within the systemic field of human action**

Consistent with Parson's mature work (Parsons 1977), this model identifies four analytical categories of human action: the biological, the psychological, the social, and the cultural. Each category flows in its own directed cycle of socialization, but each can also show the counterforce of transformation depicting action and/or feedback that opposes socialization toward inertia. The biological category of human action rests on the basic unit of the organism with its primarily physical connotations and with its primary need to adapt to the physical environment in order to survive. The bio-genetic work of Jean Piaget informed by Charles Darwin informs the description of the biological field of human action, articulating a force toward adaptive survival through assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, and eventually schemas or habits which insure the organism's survival. The psychological field of human action depends upon the unit of the psyche moving toward the goal of gratification, whether that be of internal or external interactions. Freud and the neo-Freudian work of Erik Erikson and Carl Jung inform the psyche's movement through id, ego, super-ego development via imitation, ego-idealization, and identification into conscientious identity.

The societal field of human action operates through the unit of the group as the socialization system operates as a whole to integrate individuals into human society(ies). Depending upon the work of Emil Durkheim, among others, regarding social and group dynamics, this field of human action relies upon the areas of economics, politics, religious institutions, law and education to integrate human

individuals into the appropriate social behaviors. The fourth field of human action, culture, operates around the units of symbol and value, terms which give meaning to behaviors and patterns of interaction in human society(ies). Described in terms of Max Weber's and Robert Bellah's work, the cycle of socialization in the cultural sphere begins with a cathectic re-creation of symbol or value through cognitive resolution and the acknowledgement of value toward a core or ultimate value over time.

### **1.3 Holistic cycle of movement toward 'pattern maintenance' and 'tension-reduction'**

This socialization-transformation model of the field of human action in biological, psychological, societal, and cultural fields also shows its Parsonian heritage in the descriptive dynamic of the whole system. The entire four-fold system operates toward pattern-maintenance and tension-reduction by means of continuous movement through externalization, objectification, internalization, and legitimation in each sphere of activity. The model suggests that human activity in any field - or combination of fields - requires, for example, the organism to externalize its focus or awareness, to objectify it in order to see it as 'an other,' to internalize it upon being understood as 'an other,' and finally to legitimate its place in the system's working as a whole. [Parsons argued for two axes of differentiation in his social systems theory - the internal/external and the instrumental/ consummatory - which these four terms articulate in the neo-Parsonian model. Each field of human action must relate internal mechanisms with external forces of the system as a whole - externalization and internalization - and each field must also relate the functional manner in which external forces/mechanisms are integrated into internal mechanisms. (Lechner 1999:121)]. The force of socialization toward inertia can be said to course through the holistic movement of externalization, objectification, internalization, and legitimation.

### **1.4 Critical assessment: strengths and weaknesses**

Having sketched a neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action, let us now examine its strengths for our practical theological task. First, a neo-Parsonian model articulates a conceptual framework that is accessible to religious professionals and laypeople alike who easily recognize the dynamics in their felt experiences. Nearly every audience that hears of the two dynamic forces of

pattern maintenance and tension-reduction operating in the fields of human action will smile and nod at even the slightest realistic description of human behavior to maintain current patterns and thereby reduce the tension induced by nonconformist activity. Any discussion about potential changes in communal life or church organization can bring to light both those who need the change in order to participate fully and those who form the loyal opposition making sure 'the way we've always done it' is honored in full. Secondly, the model is comprehensive enough to interrelate the various dimensions of human experience - biological, psychological, social, and cultural - and yet narrow enough to give meaning to individual 'constitutive interest' in human action. *Both* systemic interrelationship and individual motivation (conscious and unconscious) are given their due in critical assessment of the fields of human action.

Third, the potentially disadvantageous 'grand theory' standing of such a model yet provides an organizing structure through which to give the plethora of disciplines equal voice while insuring no one discipline dominates the human interpretive or communicative enterprise. Even the theological sciences, often proposed as the integrative, interdisciplinary vehicles of communicative rationality, cannot claim to have comprehensive oversight of biological, psychological, social, and cultural studies in this age of information overload. The neo-Parsonian model of the systemic and interrelated fields of human action allows, even requires, transformation of all forms of human action, critical interpretation included. A mutually critical correlation undergirds this methodological position that in addition speaks of transformation within the system and before/beyond the system through the presence of God attested in convicted witness and experience. As such, this model allows the full range of human experience to be given critical attention, from the imperceptibly physical to the inexplicably transcendent or religious. The 'human' is not dehumanized in order to satisfy any positivistically empirical norms because 'the system' as a whole operates beyond the reductionistic sum of its parts. Finally, such a neo-Parsonian model opens a door to the consideration of a powerful bridge between our theoretical articulations and our liturgical praxis in religious communities: the life of music in our global and particular society(ies).

That said, there are undeniable weaknesses. The definition of ‘action’ remains diffuse and undifferentiated for an ‘action theory’, as of yet. The model focuses upon a holistic field of human activity in four particular areas or ‘fields’, and declines to specify what would qualify as an action for an organism, psyche or group, let alone a human participation in cultural symbols and values. True to its Parsonian heritage, the model’s description of the relationship between the ‘macro’ world of socialization as a whole and the ‘micro’ world of the organism, psyche, and group remains unresolved. Second, the model’s heritage is historically far removed from the contemporary practical theological discussions of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas, among others, so a neo-Parsonian eruption into communal discourse may be experienced as little more than an interruption. Third, the interrelationship of ‘fields’ in this model of the field of human action may present unnecessary difficulties for theoretical precision. Informed by the thought of physicist James Clerk Maxwell and then Albert Einstein, the concept of ‘field’ offers an implicitly relational category that is simultaneously differentiated yet relational - a complexity accurate to human being in this world yet one difficult to define with precision. Finally, perhaps simply stated comprehensively, the ‘grand system theory’ standing of a neo-Parsonian model has an imperialistic character both in perception and in interpretive assessment. A ‘grand system theory’ can be largely impervious to critical discourse until it is first presumed and explored in detail, then engaged toward understanding one’s perceptions and organizing information into interpretations of human action. Ironically, many of these weaknesses may be fruitfully addressed with a powerfully conceptual and empirical bridge between theoretical articulations and liturgical praxis: the life of music in our global and particular society(ies). Toward that possibility, let us now turn.

## **2 MUSIC: HUMANLY ORGANIZED SOUND, PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSCENDENCE**

Music is simultaneously a most elemental, biological phenomenon of human experience and a most ethereal, potentially transcendent phenomenon of human culture, all in historical perspective. George Steiner places music at the center of his argument for our ‘wager on transcendence’—our wager that an encounter with an ‘other’ in any

human interaction with another, a text, or art will have meaning for us—because of this very reality of music. He writes,

Being most metaphysical in its intonations, reaching deepest into the lit night of the psyche, music is also the most carnal, the most somatically traceable of signifying acts...[it is] at once cerebral in the highest degree...and it is at the same time somatic, carnal and a searching out of resonances in our bodies at levels deeper than will or consciousness. Steiner 1989:217

Music in Steiner's estimation has a deeper than biological, broader than cultural impact in human interactions; and it is this quality of music that begs our study for understanding the intersection of the most practical with the potentially transcendent discourse of practical theology. Toward a conceptualization of music as an historical human practice, I will proceed first through a recognized ethnomusicological definition of music as humanly organized sound, second with correspondences to our neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action, and third with concluding implications for a critical-yet-transcendent assessment of practical theological thought.

## **2.1 Music as four-dimensional humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity**

The disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology have defined music as 'humanly organized sound'. The late John Blacking, a social anthropologist trained at King's College, Cambridge and ethnomusicologist trained at both the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and amidst the Venda people of South Africa, defines 'music' as "a product of the behavior of human groups, whether formal or informal: it is humanly organized sound. And, although different societies tend to have different ideas about what they regard as music, all definitions are based on some consensus of opinion about the principles on which the sounds of music should be organized" (Blacking 1973:17). This definition arose in his relatively early work in the Jessie and John Danz Lectures for the University of Washington, but Blacking refined his thought throughout the remainder of his career into the early 1990's. One of Blackings most substantial contributions was to recognize the historical and dialectical character of music as humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity (Blacking 1973:73ff).

Blacking summarizes this perspective on music as “a synthesis of cognitive processes which are present in culture and in the human body: the forms it takes, and the effects it has on people, are generated by the social experiences of human bodies in different culture environments” (Blacking 1973:17). As such, music maintains a simultaneously biological and cultural character that persists through historical time in culture and in generation upon generation of human bodies. This ‘synthesis’ takes on specific form in human culture through particular agency but maintains and evolves such form over time. Naturally, then, just as individuals participate in groups that somehow form consensus as to just what is considered music, music identified as such by previous generations and social groups also forms the individuals who will come to recognize it, too, as music. Humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity speaks the whole of musical reality to John Blacking: music is not simply the collection of pitches, patterns, and rhythms through which auditory form occurs, but it is the musicological and non-musicological elements of human living that form human experience and meaning with respect to the musicological. In Blacking’s own words, “Whether the emphasis is on humanly organized sound or on soundly organized humanity, on a tonal experience related to people or a shared experience related to tones, the function of music is to reinforce, or relate people more closely to, certain experiences which have come to have meaning in their social life” (Blacking 1973:99). Music not only has individualized character that speaks to the individual actor in human life, but it also has societal and cultural dimensions which transcend the human individual or group and effectively organize human behavior over time. Music therefore offers an experience and reality beyond linear time through which we may begin to assess human activity in a ‘perspective of transcendence’ which is yet elementally empirical.

Blacking identifies four dimensions to music as humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity: biological or physical, psychological, societal, and cultural. These four dimensions are articulated in his early work and extended throughout the rest of his authorship as constitutive of humanly organized sound. He argues that “many if not all of music’s essential processes may be found in the constitution of the human body and in patterns of interaction of human bodies in society” (Blacking, 1973:x). Music emerges from the most physical, biological constitution of the

human body and the patterns of interaction of human bodies in society, a biological-psychological phenomenon. These dimensions can be seen in more particularity in his later work, “The Biology of Music-Making” (Blacking 1992), “Ethnomusicology and Human Development” (Blacking 1986), and “Expressing Human Experience through Music” (Blacking 1995). Blacking also attributes a cultural dimension to humanly organized sound in his preliminary lectures when he wrote, “[m]usic can never be a thing in itself ... in the sense that music cannot be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people” (Blacking, 1973:xi). He explored this more explicitly in his later work, “Music, Culture, and Experience”, and “Reflections on the Effectiveness of Symbols” (Blacking 1995). Finally, a specifically societal dimension of humanly organized sound can be seen implicitly throughout Blacking’s work, but explicitly in those contributions right before his death, such as “The Music of Politics” (Blacking 1995). This dimension finds the least explicit reflection in his work, which is somewhat ironic considering that societal dynamics play a large role throughout his understanding of music in human society(ies). Regardless, all four dimensions of music as humanly organized sound find expression in the work of ethnomusicologist John Blacking.

## **2.2 Neo-Parsonian Model Correspondence and Critical Sensitivity**

Since John Blacking was trained as a social anthropologist at King’s College, Cambridge, during the height of Talcott Parsons’ career, a clear conceptual correspondence can be found between the fields of human action and music as humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity. The complete articulation of that correspondence is beyond the confines of this essay, but the essential connections can be stated. The biological field of human action corresponds to the explicitly somatic, carnal aspects of music as humanly organized sound. Overwhelmed by purely cultural or aesthetic assessments of music, the elemental physicality of music both in human experience and in production can no longer be overlooked. George Steiner speaks of the physical carnality of musical experience neglected by objectivist musicologists, but almost everyone - even those who are deaf - can speak to the felt experience of music in human community. (Darrow 1993:93-110). The psychological field of human activity manifests itself clearly in the conscious and unconsciously affective dimensions of human life

and therefore in music as humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity. Susanne Langer, for example, identifies two primary theories of musical meaning in her classic text, *Philosophy in a New Key*: ‘self-expression of emotion’ theory and the ‘logical expression of emotion’ theory of musical significance (Langer 1979:210ff). Additionally, her own perspective identifies music as the ‘logical form of human feeling’. Music in this sense affects human thought and/or behavior primarily through emotion or through the affective dimension of the human psyche or personality.

Music so understood resonates, perhaps most clearly, with the social field of human action in neo-Parsonian terms. The neo-Parsonian model identifies the basic unit of this dimension of human activity to be the group whose dynamics attempt to integrate the individual into appropriate social patterns of behavior. One only need to think of the classic forms of dance in which music takes on the embodied, recognized social norms of human behavior called ballet, tap, jazz, etc. Music also communicates the identity of a particular social group by its very form: Western European classical tradition, Latin or Mexican, Indian sitar music, various expressions of folk music, traditional church music, contemporary praise music, reggae, rap, etc. Music identifies a human social group and many groups identify themselves by the music specific to a recognized societal grouping. The cultural aspect of music as humanly organized sound blends with these societal groupings as social identities take on meaning, symbol and value in ultimate or core ways, giving both music and its symbols/values lasting and latent cultural significance within a particular society of people. The burgeoning interest in music with respect to culture and geography can be seen clearly in any bibliography of ethnomusicology as well, naming the cultural value and expression in various musics across the globe. Specific to religious communities, any compilation and publication of a new hymnal will bring out the value and symbolic meaning of all those hymns ‘left behind’ from the old one.

The implicit dialectical character of music as humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity further corresponds to the dialectical dynamic in the socialization-transformation neo-Parsonian model articulated above. Just as music is a biological, psychological, social, and cultural phenomenon organized and recognized by human groups, it also maintains a transcendent, historical character that forms new generations’ ideas

of ‘what music is’ and what appropriately socialized and socializing behavior is (to accept or to reject). Music can be and has been used (for both good and ill) as a socializing force for organizing human behavior in schools, churches, synagogues, and civil communities. In contrast, music may also serve the counterforce of transformation in the fields of human action as it finds new forms and challenges staid conceptions of musicality and musical expression. It may inspire and strengthen ‘non-musical’ movements simply by being integrally related to human passion and emotion. For instance, reform movements such as the Civil Rights movement in the United States, or the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa have been recognizable times/forces in which songs have given coherence to a social movement attempting to transform injustices in human society. Music has aided transformation in many realms of human perseverance through adversity. This inherent dialectical character of music in historical perspective - in addition to the shared correspondence between biological, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions - shows provocative correspondences with a neo-Parsonian model of the fields of human action, enough to explore music as a practical yet transcendent vehicle to guide practical theological discourse at the intersections of elemental practice and potential transcendence.

The remaining connection to be made before assessing any final implications is between music in neo-Parsonian perspective and the currently Aristotelian-informed practical theological discourse regarding the interrelationships of *theoria*, *praxis* and *poiesis*. Music as defined above offers a tremendous gift to current practical theological praxis: ‘humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity’ is conceptually complex, practically pervasive, and near infinite in its product forms. Aristotle’s ‘three ways of life’ toward knowledge in the pursuit of virtue (*theoria-praxis-poeisis*) find multitudinous expressions in human musical behaviours - from its contemplative dimensions of *theoria*, its practical character reminiscent of phronetic *praxis*, and its ultimately created forms or products. Speaking beyond any theoretical context here, music also finds near universal expression in human communities accessible to exploration for any religious thematic (Pannenberg 1985:515ff).

The hope of this second section was to provide an understanding of music correspondent to the neo-Parsonian model of the fields of human action and suggestive of a conceptual-practical-

productive ‘glue’ for continuing practical theological reflection at the intersection of the lived life of faith and academic discourse. Practical theological reflection has centered on praxis or practice as a vehicle to integrate or unify all three into a holistic activity meant to inform the work of people in their care of self, others, and world. The argument implicit to this constructive proposal is that choosing one of the three - *theoria*, *praxis*, or *poiesis* - actually maintains a theoretical structure constantly needing re-definition and precision. This proposal suggests instead that we investigate an actual empirical and theological phenomenon in the liturgical lives of most religious communities that is simultaneously practiced and potentially transcendent.

### **3 FINAL IMPLICATIONS**

My hope stated at the beginning of this essay was twofold: 1) to move practical theological discourse toward a discussion of an action theory and 2) to nuance such discourse with a ‘perspective of transcendence’ that music as ‘humanly organized sound that soundly organizes humanity’ is able to provide for any critical, empirical, theological reflection in a communal life of faith. The theological sciences have struggled to articulate a ‘perspective of transcendence’, concerned as they are about the reality of God’s presence, intention, and work in this world. Yet even the theological disciplines cannot transcend the limitations of historical critical thought in reflective discourse. As a result, one implication of this neo-Parsonian model of the field of human action and music as a vehicle or bridge between micro and macro dimensions of the model is that one discipline in particular will never claim such a ‘perspective of transcendence’. All critical disciplines are before God toward knowledge in pursuit of virtue. Even so, an empirical, critical, and theological investigation of the musical practices in a religious community over time will give entrance into all areas of interest - *theoria*, *praxis*, *poiesis* - and leave near infinite room for God’s presence and agency amidst that lived life of faith over time.

Music, so understood, also gives a unified objective-subjective perspective of transcendence. Music can be described in its objective forms, but not conclusively. The meaning or impact of music can be articulated again and again, but over time, this meaning will change as the wind changes. Music not only is an object with subjective impact, it is a subject with objective influence in generation upon generation of human community. Additionally, this phenomenon of

music will never be comprehensively assessed because of its near universality and multiplicity in form, though it in its multitudinous passions and forms might just guide our theological *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis* through its practiced evolution in religious community life over generations of existence. The context of a systems action theory such as the neo-Parsonian model not only gives theoretical substance to this empirical and yet potentially transcendent bridge, but it also comes at a time when a recognized thinker in the field of practical theology has called for ‘a full fledged action theory’ with ‘a perspective of transcendence’. Additionally, Jeremy Begbie ends his recent work, *Theology, Music, and Time*, with an invitation to allow music in its practiced forms, to challenge and transform theological thought (Begbie 2000:280). Ultimately, neo-Parsonian model of the fields of human action in a perspective of musical transcendence provides for an understanding of practical theological discourse via the critical correspondence between music and human behavior in religious communities.

This essay establishes some beginning rationale for the powerful impact - for good and ill - that music has in human experience. Music suggests the life of spirit in need of communal discernment and participation. Words may incite violence and prevent any reconciliation between warring peoples, but the experience of a culture’s music, truly indwelt and truly engaged, promises transformation from the inside out. Popular musician David Byrne names this facet of music, were all simply to be open to the spirit within: “Once you grow to love some aspect of a culture - its music, for instance - you can never again think of the people of that culture as less than yourself” (Bowie 1999:3). Honest and gentle exploration of musics between cultures may be the only road to peace left to warring nations. And true peace grows justice, as tall as the cedars of Lebanon. We all are in need of such peace, justice, and mercy.

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