



## Musical Homes

Benjamin Bolden

A little while ago I was listening to *This is My Music* on CBC Radio 2, hosted by Canadian bass baritone Daniel Okulitch. He talked about life on the road: the necessarily nomadic existence of a world-class musical performer, travelling constantly between countries and continents to sing. Okulitch described his need to create a moveable sense of home amidst the generic setting of impersonal hotel rooms. He travels with two suitcases, so that he may keep creature comforts close – a favourite pillow, framed photographs of loved ones, a journal, a laptop where he stores music. Okulitch explained he has certain tracks that he calls up to evoke a sense of home. He gave an example: Eric Whitacre's ubiquitous *Sleep*, for unaccompanied choir. Well can I imagine how a weary traveller might find a sense of home crawling into that bed of lush harmonic language, snuggling into those silky vocal sonorities.

Is music a means of coming home for you?

Home...what a concept. The very word draws me in, the 'h' a soft and intimate whisper of welcome, the 'o' round and full of peace and promise, 'm' the sound of contentment. And beyond the sound, all those connotations...

What is home for you? Is it peace, safety, comfort, familiarity, love? A place where you belong? A place where you fit? Something you sink into and don't want to leave? The place to which, no matter how magnificent the journey, you long to return.

Can music help to construct this place? Or at least a *sense* of it? It certainly can for me. Sometimes I can listen to a piece of music and feel as though I am entirely at home in a place I have never even been...

What are the pieces of music that bring you home? And which homes do they bring you to?

Beyond home-evoking musical works there are musical places, situations, and actions. I can find home by listening to music, certainly, but also by playing or singing. I can reach a musical home through improvising and composing – seeking and knitting together the sounds that feel *right* and that I can love. And musical events, too, can bring me home.

I sat recently in a packed church on a cold November

evening, watching singing faces flush as the sanctuary warmed. I felt the warmth of the room and of my neighbours bring colour to my own cheeks and heart as this community communed. Performers from fifteen to well beyond fifty-five sang, played, danced, and broke musical bread together. The audience collectively grinned and revelled in the presence of so much local talent bubbling up and bursting forth. These sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, grandparents, neighbours and loved ones were so good! I had never even been to the town before, but at that moment, charmed and drawn in by the generosity of community arts sharing and celebration, it was my town, too. The final flourish of the performance, the ecstatic cadential chords, brought us to our feet as surely as if those hard wooden pews had burst into flame.

Where are your musical homes? How do you find them, and return to them? What carries you there?

Playing and singing in an ensemble can feel like home. The familiar patterns of sitting with those who sound like you, warming up together, handing round scores and parts, locking into shared time, and finally sinking into music. That satisfying comfort of nestling your voice in amongst the others, sliding into place, finding the fit as you come to cadence and rest. There can be great security making music in an ensemble; director and fellow musicians looking out for you, keeping you safe as you play. There is excitement, too: the fantastic liberation of relinquishing control and decisions to the musicians around you. This freeing brings a sense of peace, as you put yourself in the hands of others. As you invite them in to construct and share your musical home.

How do you enable your students to not only visit, but to feel at home in your musical homes? How do you visit theirs? Do you feel at home? How do you help students to build new musical homes?

When I was very young I sang in a boys' choir. Twenty-five years later I tracked down my director. (This consummate musician was foundational to my musical life. I think of him raising his arms, spreading wide his hands, and not just inviting me and my fellow ragamuffins to sing, but to embark on the first

stretch of a lifelong musical journey – like the curtains of an old-fashioned movie theatre parting to reveal the first panoramic vista of some epic adventure film.) I travelled across the Atlantic to take up a temporary teaching position at the school where my old choirmaster had landed as head of the music program. One evening, not long before Christmas, we went together to hear evensong in a neighbouring cathedral town. Heavy coats, buttoned up tight. A dusting of snow on the cobbled streets, drifting in the wind and sparkling softly when the flakes caught the light of the dim street lamps. Almost as cold inside the ancient church as out; we kept our coats on. The boys who sang the service attended the cathedral choir school, engaged daily with singing and music lessons alongside the academic curriculum. Their singing was ethereal. Joubert's *There is no Rose* – simple, elegant, poignant harmony and form – was given life by the inimitable timbre of boys' voices, shimmering in the cathedral acoustic, and reverberating through the echo of centuries. I was connected to my childhood, my ancestors known and unknown, my ghosts of Christmas past.

I once received the gift of a guitar, from my aunt. We spent an evening passing her old Yamaha back and forth, sharing our favourite songs with one another. I was far from home and travelling light. The next day, when I set off, she told me I should take the guitar. So I took it with me, across the channel and back to France.

Instruments can be musical homes. The smell as you open the case. Tucking a guitar up against your rib cage, squeezing it in with your elbow. Resting thumb and three fingers softly against the strings. Not just guitars, of course: the pleasant pain where fingers meet palm as you give a sharp satisfying thwack

on the edge of a djembe. The weight of the sax or clarinet reed squeezing your lip against your bottom teeth. The pursing of the lips and anticipation of pressure as you pull a brass mouthpiece towards you. Resting a violin on your shoulder, nestling it into place beneath your chin. A piano – sinking into a C minor seventh chord with the right hand, then leaning into an octave root in the left, and arpeggiating down the Bb, G...it just feels so *comfortable*.

I am clumping with a crocodile of teacher candidates into the music room of a small, rural high school. A field trip to see and feel music education in the flesh, far from the theory, in all its wonder, joy, and grit. We wade between the black metal stands, find seats in the back by the drum kit and vibes. We recognize the faint musty spit valve aroma. The walls are festooned with posters of musicians (Gordon Lightfoot), concert posters, fingering charts, festival plaques, set-up procedures, practice tips. Home made instruments hang from the ceiling.

Grade nines tumble in, enthusiastically pulling instruments and folders from cubbies. They glance at us curiously, blissfully unaware and un-remembering of the announcement that sailed right overhead the day before, warning of our imminent visit. What does it matter who we are? Bright eyes latch on to the teacher, the young musicians never more attentive than when they have the chance to show what they know. Eager to perform for this captive audience, they find number 64 in the method book. On cue they raise instruments, hook into the count-in, and blow on one.

The sound is gorgeous, ravishing.  
It carries us home.



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