

A Conductor, His Art, and the Truth

Dear Epoch VIP,

Years ago, I fell into covering classical music and art.

“Oh,” people would say with sympathy, as if I’d gotten stuck with the worst job in the world, “but no one is interested in classical things anymore.”

Occasionally I’d wonder whether there had really been some major change in the last half century, from the time when Leonard Bernstein popularized classical music for Americans and George Balanchine classical ballet.

Then I interviewed a wonderful conductor in the days approaching his 70th birthday. He just so happened to be a serious educator and also had a great interest in history, a natural area of study if you work in classical music.

When he lamented over the fact that many schools lack a music program, I nodded sympathetically to this common refrain. But then when he sighed and said it was a shame they didn’t teach history in schools anymore, I first thought I misheard him. Then I thought perhaps he was greatly exaggerating.

Unfortunately I didn’t mishear, and he didn’t misspeak. **Apparently only a third of American high school students today can list just one of our First Amendment rights.** So it may not be a stretch to assume then that they would know little about the impassioned debate over the rights of the individual during the Enlightenment era when Beethoven worked. And I would see more and more the results of our not understanding history in the years to come.

In their formative years, these students might not be able to see the natural outcome of not understanding what Churchill meant when he said victory at all costs or Lincoln when he said we owed it to the dead to find a better way forward. But years later, I spent several months interviewing inspirational speakers—people from all walks of life whose stories had brought hope to millions of listeners—and realized that the truth and wisdom they were sharing were hard-won. Because it was only after years, sometimes decades, of suffering and

struggle that many of them had stumbled upon what was true and universal and eternal.

Because that was really what they’d discovered, the answer to the oldest question known to civilization: how to live well. **It’s capital-T Truth, one of those pesky transcendentals.** This was what their audiences were craving, and what is passed down in much of the history we know.

Perhaps it’s why this conductor, for all his professional success, was most passionately focused on bringing music to the people. He had seen firsthand how music education could transform a troubled child or floundering corporation and how it could inspire people to seek out these truths, seek out their history.

We hear often from readers whose children or grandchildren stumble through life without objective truth, without this sense of where they came from or a vision of what future they should craft for themselves, and they don’t really know where to begin. Well, I think that conductor was onto something.

The traditional view of the arts is a quest for the truth of the human condition, and here I agree with the conductor that art was perhaps history’s best medium. **You get to mine all of lived experience for the good and the true through the lens of the beautiful.**

Maybe like the conductor seeing an office full of apathetic tech workers inspired to innovation after a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth or young students developing a renewed interest in reading and self-responsibility once they pick up an instrument, you’ll also find in the Life & Tradition section something to inspire you in your own life.

In Truth and Tradition,

Catherine Yang
The Epoch Times



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