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Music Making as a Picture of Human Flourishing | Mia Chung-Yee

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The Veritas Forum

Octet Collaborative's founder and board chair Mia Chung-Yee, an accomplished concert pianist and professor of musical studies, spoke to students at Cal Poly about the holistic human engagement involved in making music. Mia spoke about what we have lost as our culture has adopted a consumerist, technical, and accomplishment-driven attitude to music, and about how we might recover the flourishing music can bring to our lives and our society. • Please like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one have the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in history, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. Today we hear from world-class pianist and professor of interpretive analysis, Mia Chunnyi.

In a discussion about the holistic human engagement involved in making music. She speaks about what we have lost as our culture has adopted a consumerist, technical, and accomplishment-driven attitude to music, and about how we might recover. The flourishing music can bring to our lives and our society.

A lecture titled "Music Making" as a picture of human flourishing, presented by the Veritas Forum at Cal Poly. Great. Well, it's such a pleasure to be here with everybody.

Thank you for taking this time out to hear my talk. You might be curious to know why I chose this topic of music in human flourishing. It happens that the last two years, I and a few other colleagues have worked very hard to establish a Christian study center

alongside MIT.

It's called the Octet Collaborative and the Mission of Octet is to create a community of MIT faculty, staff, and students. We're committed to human flourishing as formed by the historic Christian faith. Now, you might be wondering why human flourishing is part of this mission statement and even an area of interest for me.

It so happens that the topic is very hot right now in our culture. And it provides an opportunity for us to engage all people in the conversation about something we all hope to experience, whether one believes in God or not. By engaging the topic of human flourishing, you actually open the doors to new and other conversations about who we are, what we value, and why we are the way we are, and to do so in an inviting way.

So I'd like to call up slide number one, just to give you a sense, a summary of my talk so you'll know sort of where I'm going with this. It's basically four points. The first is I will describe music making as a picture of human flourishing.

And the second is to share some of the psychological and neurological research that supports this concept of flourishing. The third is to talk about how our weird society, that's an acronym for Western educated industrialized rich and democratic society approaches music. And then the final point, I'll share about what we can do about this situation we've gotten ourselves into.

Okay, so I'll start with this concept of human flourishing. How is music making a picture of this abstract concept and what is flourishing to begin with. To my thinking, music making is a form of worship.

I am a Christian, and I'm defining human flourishing as the full integration of self. In the Jewish prayer of the Shema, which is in the ultimate Deuteronomy 6:4, it says, I'm hereo Israel, the Lord is one love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength. That is the picture of an integrated self where all the faculties are united as one.

And in Matthew 22 verse 37. The first says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. This is the number one commandment.

So loving and worshiping God requires the fullest devotion and integration of self, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual. So it's a beautiful picture. These verses capture beautifully this idea of complete integration.

Now, as those created in God's image, music making with its integration of self is an act of worship for those who believe and even for those who don't, because everyone is created in the image of God, and has this desire, longing and ability to create. So why have I chosen music making as an optimal or ideal picture or metaphor of this kind of flourishing. Let me demonstrate this by pulling up my second slide.

This is Leonid Kavakos Greek violinist, Immanuel Axe American pianist, Yo-Yo Ma American cellist, and they're playing in a piano trio, a Beethoven piano trio and you actually see this lady sitting next to Emmanuel Axe she's the page turner. And then you see the folks on the stage is sort of close this proximal presence of the listeners near these performers. And there's this vicarious enjoyment of what's going on.

They appreciate what I would describe as this this experience that's immersive. Okay, that is transcending the realities of life, basically being caught up in a new reality. When anyone looks at this image, they're most people are in agreement universally understood that this is a picture of flourishing.

People are in community in relationship. They're creating beautiful music which requires rhythm, harmony, melody, and these three aspects of rhythm are completely united. They are playing together in time.

They're completely in sync with one another and the people who are listening are wrapped in attention. You know, they are they're very present in that moment. It's like they're creating a new world, a new reality.

Now, this image of complete immersion or transcendence doesn't come from nothing. There are some practical elements to music making that lead to this kind of experience. First is establishing a goal.

That is to study music to be a pianist to be a violinist, whatever it might be. And then the second is getting a teacher, having someone who can mentor you and guide you, disciple you, if you will, provide feedback that helps you understand your strengths and your weaknesses. And most importantly, holds you accountable.

And then the third area is practicing every day so that you can gain mastery and improvement. Notice that I didn't mention talent. I did not make this experience of transcendence conditional upon talent and ability.

Now, what does the psychology research reveal about this act of music making? Well, back in the late 1990s, 1998 to be exact, there was a psychologist by the name of Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, who started the School of Positive Psychology. And positive psychology studies positive things about human experience, positive emotions like love and peace and joy, positive elements or virtues that we strive for in our character, such as humility, perseverance, kindness. They also study institutions and organizations that bring positive qualities to our society, such as religious institutions, schools, community ventures, etc, etc.

And the School of Positive Psychology really took off in the late 90s and, of course, into the 21st century. One of the members of the School of Positive Psychology is a professor by the name of Mihai Chixet Mihai. And he is a Hungarian American psychologist,

positive psychologist.

And what he has done, contributed to this conversation on positive psychology, is described what it means to be happy. What's going on in our psychology or a psyche when we experience something called flow, this ecstatic state of happiness. Okay, well, you're actually creating a new reality, you're immersed.

Okay, so he did a lot of research, researched, you know, nuns, blind nuns, monks in a monastery, you know, athletes on teams, musicians, artists, composers, etc, etc. And he shares this quote, the composer describes this anonymous composer describes the state of flow for himself as the following. You're in an ecstatic state, such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist.

I have experienced this time and again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what's happening. I just sit there, watching my hand in a state of all and wonderment, and the music just flows out of itself.

There's several things that you'll notice about this state that the composer is in, you know, the state of flow. First, there's no self consciousness, self consciousness is completely lost. It turns out that the human brain can only process about 110 bits of information per second.

So when one is absorbed in some craft, creating or activity that's immersive, your brain can actually not focus on any more information that it's receiving. In other words, it doesn't, it stops paying attention to the fact that the tummy is growling, or that the right hand is a little sore from grabbing the pen too hard, or the checklist that's on the table of things that need to be accomplished. And also, lose track, loses track of time.

So this state includes a sense of timelessness. The third element to this is that you feel like this complete sense of love for what you're doing, that you're intrinsically motivated to keep being involved in this activity because you enjoy it and love it so much. And the fourth quality is this ability to surrender to the moment.

But so happens that positive psychologists have also demonstrated that flow is enhanced when this state is experienced with others, which is really interesting. So now let me show you and describe a little bit more about the components of flow or this ecstatic state. Now in this chart, you'll see it says challenge versus skill in the flow state.

The changes is marked by the y axis and skills is marked by the x axis. This ideal state of flow happens when there is great mastery that meets great challenge. So you notice if we are low on the x axis value, which is, you know, close to the intersection of the challenges and skills axes.

But we're high in challenge, then we actually experience anxiety. On the other hand, if we're high on the x axis value, but we're low on the challenge axis, we begin to

experience boredom, because our mastery is greater than the challenge that we're presented with. The maximal flow happens when you optimize skill with challenge.

You rise to the challenge and you are equipped for that challenge. Now what's going on in the brain as we do this. It so happens that in music making, we actually draw upon more regions of the brain than any other human activity known.

The hypothalamus actually releases endorphins, which gives us a sense of joy, right? And endorphin release can happen when you run as well. I mean, all sorts of other activities can also stimulate the release of endorphins. In the frontal lobe of the brain is what we call the executive function, the ability to organize to think to order, stimulate as they're coming in to our brains.

It so happens that there are many, many other parts of the brain that are activated. The amygdala stimulates emotions. We're able to receive understand others emotions.

We're able to respond in kind in the music making. The auditory portion of the brain, imagine is listening. The visual portion of the brain is processing notes.

Never mind the motor parts of the brain that are controlling our motion. I don't know if you know this, but when one is playing an instrument like the piano and engrossed in that act of performing and playing, there are some 2000 neural firings that pass from the brain through the nervous system to the hands and back per second. It's pretty astounding.

So when I look at all of this, the way in which the bodies involved, the emotions are involved, all of our faculties are intellect. All I can think of is Matthew 22 37. This is the picture of loving God as creatures who were created in his image, producing music that is drawing upon our soul, our strength, our mind, our emotions.

This is the fullest picture of the integration of our faculties, the fullest picture of worship. Now, I've spoken about music making from an individual's perspective or experience, and I want to pan out now and take a look at our culture is understanding our history and our context are really important for understanding why music making is in the place that it is in society right now. We are a weird nation, as I mentioned before, Western educated industrialized rich democratic nation.

And this has had a very serious impact, you know, the what's emerged in the economy in our societal values and our culture. It's had a serious impact on music making. So how so? I think what will be helpful as if we go back in time and look at American history, maybe back in the 1920s to get a sense of what music making was like in our country during this, a different phase of our economy.

So it so happens that we are a weird nation because we're one of the earliest countries along with Western Europe or, you know, earliest regions in the world in Japan to actually

experience an industrial revolution. But this industrial revolution, which was primarily focused on manufacturing established a creation or making based economy. We made things, we produced things, raw materials, items.

And in 1929, there was a national survey that was done on music making in America. And this was actually done by the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music. There actually was a National Bureau that advanced music.

679 companies were surveyed. These are manufacturing companies, right, or department stores retailers. And what they found was among the 679 company surveyed, there were 911 active music groups.

Can you even picture that? I mean, it's astounding. 182 orchestras, 176 choruses, 133 plants, factories with mixed singing groups. And now if you're wondering what industries, these were railroad industries, department stores, steel manufacturers, electric companies, textile companies, oil refineries, etc, etc.

The list goes on. And these are not the only kind of groups that were going on. There were all sorts of quartets, saxophone quartets, ukulele groups, marching bands, etc.

And so music was a central part of American culture and life. A vibrant part of it. It defined the way in which we engaged one another.

It was a part, central part of our workplace, our community. It was the nexus of work and community. And people, of course, were not as transient back then.

So where are we now? I mean, this was the picture way up until the end of World War II. We are now in what we call a post industrial economy, which is a service based economy. Manufacturing has moved out of the country like we manufacture things all over the world.

But we've moved on from this sort of manufacturing based economy on to a service based economy. And that's why we call it a post industrial economy. We're service oriented, which means we are focused on a certain kind of skill base that is no longer about making things.

All right, tangible material things. And this post industrial economy has ushered in great prosperity in the United States and affluence for many, not for all, but for many. And in this economy, we actually value monetizable skills.

Okay, we prioritize abilities in humans that can be converted into money and results productivity. Okay. So now our priorities are about getting into college, having the skills to get into college, but also then to graduate from college and to get a job.

And while doing this, we've created a hierarchy of skills that are more valued or more

important than others for this economy. And sadly, people are judged as people who are worthy of skill development and those who are not based on aptitudes, strengths, on and on. Now, in this economy, the gap between those who have and those who don't has grown very wide.

And really the marker of this gap is the college education, those who can access that education, and those who are not able to. Because our values are aligned towards results and monetization, music making has gradually diminished in our society. Our public education has spent less and less progressively less and less money and resources towards educating people in how to make music.

And it's in part because we can't reduce music making down to a concrete set of skills that has a one to one match with some job opportunity. Now, more recently, we have defined the necessary skills in terms of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. And why? Because we realized as Americans that we would not stay competitive with the global economy unless we trained our students to acquire skills in these four areas.

And the intention, of course, is to keep us as the leader in technology innovation and research. Now, this is an important development. More recently, you'll see that that acronym of science, technology, engineering and math is including the letter A. So it's become steam science, technology, engineering, arts and math.

So you might say, so why are you complaining, Mia? This is great. You know, now the arts are getting integrated back into education. That's true.

However, there is an extrinsic reason for this. It's very result driven. In other words, the arts are in there to promote imagination and creativity.

Promote creativity and imagination that will help the science, technology, engineering and math brain, which will then help them keep us America in the lead in these areas of technology and innovation. So the arts are used as a means to something else and not intrinsically valued in and of themselves. So now that music is not a central part or an important part of our societal life or even the public schools, much of music making in the US has been relegated to recreation.

And you might say, well, that's great. But here's the rub. In this recreation, music making is more about the professionalization of music skills that is gaining mastery so you can attain access to something else, be it college entrance, you know, the winning of competitions, gaining fame and money.

It's about some extrinsic reward. And in this process, we are actually weeding out talent based on aptitude. We are judging through this process of selection.

Who is worthy of music making as a recreational endeavor. So we're actually keeping

people out of the joy of music making because of the way that our economic and societal values are aligned. The saddest part of all of this, as I mentioned this great divide in the between the haves and the have nots is that the folks who are left behind are those who are most underserved.

The poor, the disenfranchised and marginalized are the ones who cannot afford to make music. They don't have access to teachers to instruments. The children of affluent families actually do.

Now I wanted to just as an aside say, you know, there's perhaps a similar phenomenon going on in sports as well with soccer training camps for kids that start at the age of four. And it's all about getting recruited to college. And this joy of just playing soccer on the field for the sake of enjoyment is something you don't see very often.

The idea of play and recreation for pure joy. So this is not just about music. But there's something very different as well between sports and music.

Everyone somehow recognizes that exercise is good for everyone. So we would tell a student who has no athletic prowess. You should still exercise, even if you're not going to go, you know, play on the soccer team, right? But we don't actually do that when it comes to music.

Music is somehow talent and music aptitude based, which is a fallacy. Music making should be for all. So I mentioned recreation.

I wanted to just add this other subset of information regarding the way that we use our time and leisure. Because we become affluent. And because we are no longer making much music.

Guess how we enjoy music. We buy it. We don't make it.

We buy it. We have a consumer mindset that has taken over our culture. Because consumption is passive.

It's something that we do without thinking. It's in the background all the time. You know, there are more people who are subscribing to streaming services and have access to MP3s and 4s.

YouTube music is everywhere. It's ubiquitous. The challenge is that it's keeping people from actually making music themselves.

And as a psychologist, you talk about leisure activities. And this idea of flow. It happens not when you're passively recreating.

Actually, you don't enjoy your off time, your leisure time as much. When you're just relaxing or sitting there passively taking it in. You actually are more restored and enjoy

your free time more.

And this growth trajectory that is making music challenged gaining mastery and entering that state of sort of ecstasy or flow. We all understand this intrinsically. The playing music or making music is better than listening.

If I had a penny for every time backstage after concert, someone came up to me and said, Mia, I really enjoyed the concert. I played piano till I was 12. And then I quit because I couldn't stand practicing.

And my parents let me. And that is one of the great regrets of my life. Well, the regret is understandable, right? But what this is highlighting is that the person, although they enjoyed the concert, they knew intrinsically that they would have enjoyed it even more if they had made the music themselves.

Technology and increasing affluence have gone alongside these developments and have had a significant impact on music making. We are the victims, if you will, of our own technological success. In 1877, Thomas Edison invented the phonograph.

And it had a serious impact on music making. The height of American music making was in the 19th century. And I found this beautiful quote by these American sociologists, Robert and Helen Lind, comparing music making in 1925 to music making in 1890.

And this is what they said. They found that working class and business class kids, so these were, you know, kids from blue collar families versus kids from, you know, upper class families. These children were increasingly taking more music lessons between 1890 and 1925.

Isn't that interesting? More and more of them were engaged in music making. But for the adults, it was the inverse. And this is what they say.

Music for adults has almost ceased to be a matter of spontaneous and active participation has largely become a passive matter of listening to others. And they conclude, "When great artists or dance orchestras are in the cabinet in the corner of one's living room," okay, the phonograph. "The ability to play may be increasingly in less demand." So what do we have now? Now we have musicians who are mega stars, idols, and their music making is disseminated through technology far and wide.

So we've actually substituted the real thing with a lesser experience, that of listening to the music of the stars. And in classical music, we've also done this. We idolize the musicians who can play technically perfect, right? Because of the recording age.

All we hear are recorded perfect performances. Even though there's no meaning in the playing, we champion and idolized the player. So this is how far we've come.

We used to be a very different America. We as a society understood the intrinsic value and benefit of making music up until about 1950. But the changes in our economy and consequently our values have altered the way that we view the things that bring us flourishing.

And that can be said of many other activities. So I'm going to close by asking this. How can we change this? How might we view music making in a way that benefits everyone? Why would you call up the last slide, please? The first step to democratizing the experience of music making actually happens, like it happens one person at a time.

But it begins by having music making available to everyone, no matter what their age, class, ability, location, demographic, maybe. A significant step to achieving that is actually just having people watch someone who's playing music for sheer enjoyment. Just observe their body movement, the concentration in their eyes, the enjoyment of the music music for music's sake.

And then next, I challenge all of you, especially if you're not music majors, to pick up the guitar that's in your closet and start to explore the sounds that it can make, to experiment, make note of the amazing things that it can do, and then create a goal for yourself. I want to play this favorite piece of mind by the end of the year, for example. And find a great teacher, someone who can motivate you and hold you accountable to learning, and then practice every day, just a little bit to gain some mastery.

Seek others that you can play with and enjoy the experience together. And lastly, spread the word. Form groups.

Make music together in your backyard, your library, your school, your place of employment. And for those of you who are musicians or are in training, I encourage you to bring others along for the experience. Play with those who are not as far along as you.

Keep an eye out for a child or an older person who could benefit from playing an instrument and raise the idea with them. And if the resources are limited, just sing. The barrier is very low.

So the possibilities are endless. What if our culture produced or valued music making for the sheer joy that it produces? What if music making, as in the 1920s, was part of your work life, your social and communal life, a central piece of education? Imagine, for example, music making in the Amazon warehouses. And that's a funny idea, right? Funny image.

Or in the offices of Facebook. Or in the lobby of a law firm. Or music making at your local hospital.

Or the back room of a post office where people are sorting mail. Or in prisons. And the list goes on.

The joy of music making is for everybody. But it comes with a price. Nothing short of a reordering of our priorities can actually make this happen.

Championing the intrinsic value of music making over the something that it will get you. Is what it takes. And by experiencing and sharing the thrill of music making, you will introduce a new way of living.

A new way of thinking of being. That paves the way to even deeper conversations about life. About the things that matter.

About man's purpose. And ultimately. About man's design.

Thank you. Well, now we can go into a Q and A, if you have any questions for Dr. Chen. So this is part of your work.

With the collaborative. I was just wondering. Is the octet collaborative as a whole addressing the addressing human flourishing? Like how is that? How do these two relate? Yes.

So at MIT, of course, and I actually see one of the alums here. I'd love for her to chime in. There are people of all range of very different talents.

Scientific artistic, you know, in the humanities and social sciences. And it's about gathering the Christian community together to say, you know, what marks and defines flourishing. How do we bring our Christian faith into the things that we do as chemists, as physicists, as English professors, as musicians, right, as creators.

Instead of creating these siloed areas of our lives, you know, I'm a chemist, but I also go to church on Sunday. But the two worlds actually never meet. So it's about this idea of investing our faith in the context in which we live.

And actually June Crisco is a friend of mine here. I met through the octet's activities. She and I'd love for you to share some of the work that you're doing June is an MIT graduate.

And I think she has her bachelor's and her PhD from MIT. And she's a musician. And so it's we've had many wonderful conversations about the intersectionality of music and faith.

And do you mind sharing some of what you're doing as an example of a conversation we've been having at octet? Actually, via this has been amazing talk. So, I so just briefly, I, my training is an electrical engineering. And I worked for 20 years in the semiconductor space.

Actually, my first job was in Palo Alto with HP back when it was just HP. They had an orchestra. And I remember thinking this is so weird.

Yeah, it did. Back when I came to New Jersey, I mean New Jersey now, and I started working for Lucin, Lucin also had an orchestra. But that went away within within years.

Yeah. Yeah. So there's a kind of overlap natural affinity between the sciences and the art.

Mm hmm. So, um, I actually, so I kind of ended up in the arts in a kind of backdoor way. Like Mia said, my family had a very kind of traditional view of, you know, you go to college so you can make money type you.

So, so I became an engineer. And even though I played piano all my life, it was just considered like, you do do that as a hobby. Literally, that's what they would say you do that as a hobby.

It's no, it's got nothing to do with your life really. But then, and then I actually quit piano. I quit piano when my son was born and I stopped it.

Didn't really understand the value of it. During that time, I, we, we live in a suburb of New Jersey. And I don't know if any of you are from the east coast, but it's out here is very segregated.

If you're in the suburb, then, you know, you live in a little affluent bubble. And even though Newark is like five miles, 10 miles down the road, you, you never see it. And there's like practically no people of color around here.

So, but I knew I didn't want my kids to grow up in that kind of bubble. And I, my husband and I decided to attend church in Newark, which is today is about 50% black and 50% brown. Various types of immigrants.

And we, when we got involved in Newark, I started to learn. I started to see that kids really are the same. But they are deprived of a lot of opportunities in Newark.

And one thing I just noticed right away was music, because for whatever reason I insisted on my own kids learning piano as a hobby. And I did know that all that brain development science, I didn't, I've never read up on it, but I did see it in my own kids, like that little, little synapses connecting. And I saw that the skill development was very, it diverged very quickly between my kids and the kids growing up in Newark, not because of an inherent talent, but because of opportunity.

And they were in kindergarten, I couldn't see a difference by saw the divergence happening very quickly as they grew older. And I noticed they had no music in school. There was no chance of taking extracurricular music, because it was so expensive.

So, there's more to the story, but long and short of it, I decided to start a program in Newark teaching piano, which is what I know to kids growing up in public housing. And

everything that Mia said is true. I never did like the studies behind it.

But it does the act of like doing something so challenging. But it just, the kids will say it themselves, they say, I love coming to piano. And you never hear suburban kids saying that you have to like drag them the piano class right, but these kids who are so deprived of other distractions in their lives.

When faced with this like ability to grow their skill along with things faced with growing challenges, they love it. They addicted to it. I mean, I have to kick them out of a Zoom class every day.

Bye see you guys later. It's amazing. This one, Mia said is all true.

It's a, it's such a gift. It's such a gift. And through the kids eyes, I started to realize the value of music.

So now, I mean, just to who is an example, she was an electrical engineer and she actually said goodbye to that former life after being one for 20 years, having a PhD in electrical engineering. And she's devoted her life now to sharing music, making with the most underserved children. And so it's this sort of idea of bringing these conversations together, how we as Christians bring flourishing through our disciplines, our abilities to the various contexts that God brings us into.

So maybe I hope I've answered your question. Yeah, you did. Thank you.

And also answered my other question of how we can help underserved communities learn music because I know you mentioned that earlier. And I was like, Oh, well, what's some, what are some practical ways and. Yeah, I've had to do that.

Even singing is an amazing art. If you gather people together and sing, you know, your heart rates actually synchronized. And the reason is because you are breathing at the same rate, you're singing the same rhythms, right.

And you're bound to the same meter and time. And what happens, you instantly feel a sense of connection. I sometimes wonder what would happen if our Republicans and Democrats in Congress actually made music together.

I actually think there would be change. That's probably one of the few ways we could break down this, this wall is to develop some affective resonance between them. So the power of this possibility is really under, you know, underutilized, I would say, in all manner and context of life.

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