

The Question of Disabled Art

Recent times have been fascinating to observe. Classical music has finally had to face its historic problems when it comes to support of Women, LGBTQIA+, and BAME with previously ignored or repressed composers like Dame Ethel Smyth, Julius Eastman, Claude Vivier, or Grace Williams getting more recognition and celebration. The centre of this celebration has focused on the amazing pluralism that is produced when a broad spectrum of demographics gains the opportunity to interact with a powerful and historic artform.

Can the same be said of celebration of the disabled? Now we must acknowledge, that the disabled experience of reality is very different to the experience of Women, BAME and LGBTQIA+ communities. It has been historically recognised that these people have existed but through expansion of empire, evolution of industry, and religious influences these groups have been systematically crushed, and the echoes of this still exist within insidious internal oppression and microaggressions.

The disabled experience is a different one. Firstly, most of our understanding of various mental disabilities has only developed within the 20th Century. Secondly, especially within music, the disabled are simply not represented. There is documentation of blind performers, or composers who became deaf, like Beethoven, but are never discussed as 'disabled' more that is almost seen as an element of aging. The 20th Century has brought a seismic change, with the success of figures like Freud and Hans Asperger, leading to an increased understanding of the human condition. The first World War also forced a seismic change toward acceptance, after so many people returned from the frontlines broken by the horrors of war. The existence of concerti for the left hand is testament to this.

But what efforts are being exerted now? What is the focus of disabled art? As we have seen by the wonderful demonstrations and talks throughout the conference, education is such a powerful tool. As we have seen from the wonderful potential of breaking down barriers in learning to create and perform music, the creation of new instruments, new notational methods, and simply a greater dispersion of these schemes to increase the number of people who gain access to this is greatly improving the musical landscape; specifically, one a pedagogical level.

But what about higher levels of education? This level is a much greater maze to traverse; while trying to compete with the higher levels of academia the insidious problems come to the fore. If academic institutions do not see the merit in the art by disabled creators, they will not discuss it. This issue is then mirrored within the elite institutions such as leading orchestras, opera houses, and theatres; if disabled creators are not drawing credible support, these institutions are unlikely to gamble on unknown names. So even though, these sources are not overtly repressing disabled voices, the barriers to access are still powerfully present.

The academic and professional worlds are not the only ones with major barriers. Disabled people do not have to venture far to come across everyday discrimination, but the most toxic is the desire to cure us. Now we are long past the days of '*Kill the Indian, save the soul*' racist tropes trying to stamp out the 'inherent' wrongs of the natural race. We are even close to seeing

the complete demise of *'Pray the Gay away'* and other attempts to squash the 'temptations' of a homosexual lifestyle. However, the desire to cure the disabled is extremely prevalent. Either through films like *Me Before You* that demonstrate how no one would want to live in a wheelchair, or Anti-Vaxxers and Aspie Mummies seeing Autism as an evil parasite which is stealing their child away from them, or even more recently people like Toby Young being uncovered as an advocate for 'Progressing Eugenics' to cure the human race all together. Now, this conference is not the place to necessarily discuss human rights abuses against the disabled, and we do not have the time to pick apart all of these ideologies; but this desire to 'cure the disabled' ultimately highlights one simple thing: we are not deemed human enough.

With regards to the themes of this conference, what does this damning statement do; except maybe ruffle a few feathers or brush people the wrong way? The answer essentially is this: despite the many conflicting opinions of the purpose of art, what qualifies as art, or what is the greatest piece of art, the only unifying opinion is that to create art *is* to be human. Art is one of the few things that humans have created that truly separate us from flora and fauna. Therefore, we can only deduce that until society as a whole truly sees us as humans, whose 'disabilities are actually an element of our identity and very existence, our art will never truly be seen as completely equal. This statement can easily be seen in the two following videos: Firstly, the 2012 Paralympics Advert, which spouted the motto of 'meet the superhumans', and secondly, *The Musical Genius* a Real Stories documentary about Derek, a pianist who is blind and Autistic. In the former, these fantastic athletes – who are simply fantastic athletes – have to be sold as 'inspiring' because their journey to being able to exist is more interesting than their athleticism. In the latter, the documentary purports that its subject is a genius despite his disability, not because of his mastery of his instrument and knowledge of his art. In both of these cases we see the subject portrayed as inspiring because of their struggle not because of their talents.

So, to return to the question of education, an important consideration has to be made; who is educating everyone else? The valiant efforts to make music education available to the disabled is truly astounding, but if the wider world is not educated on the grandeur and finely nuanced creations the disabled communities contribute to the zeitgeist, our efforts are not enough. Without converting people to the understanding that disabled people exist, and exist happily, and in turn can create beautiful art, we are only patting ourselves on the back, or at least working in an echo chamber. As the social model of disability shows, the elements of life that inhibit our functioning are social constructs which can be undone; but we must remember that this comes through social change, not just tweaking parts of society like disabled parking badges. Yes, these victories are vital, but are not the end of the battle.

When I initially proposed this talk, in my head I had considered producing a manifesto of aesthetics for disabled artists to strive for. But in reality, is unnecessary. Regardless of my own ego and what I hope we can all realise is regardless of societal problems, disabled people have been making art for centuries. The question is simply: how visible were they? We can also see that this invisibility is the problem, and through concerted efforts across the board - making arts education more accessible, making academia for accessible and encouraging, building platforms to support professional artists who are disabled, and ultimately educating the populace at large - we will see the artistic world shine. A whole new collection of ideas that can

interact with other figures from different backgrounds on truly equal grounds will make the artistic landscape truly fertile. This image is a really pleasing one and I look forward to seeing it and the journey we are going to take to get there.

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