

Right-Hemisphere Conducting, Nr. 2

How to write a love letter

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For reasons reviewed in the first little essay in this series, here you are—the real you, trapped in the right-hemisphere of the brain which is mute, with respect to language,¹ and victim of an educational system which primarily failed to educate the real you. Traditional education addressed itself to educating the left-hemisphere, assembling a mountain of data you can consult if you need to and all of it outside your own experience. Traditional education ignored, or perhaps we should say was not allowed, any educational steps for you to discover your own emotional template. Here, of course, is the perfect role for music education, but so far music educators are afraid to take on this vital role. And so society leaves it to you to discover this for yourself, even though the feelings you possess as an individual will determine all important choices in your life.

In the previous essay in this series I wrote of a personal experience which made a very clear distinction between the emotions experienced in the right-hemisphere and the left-hemisphere words spoken by a student, “Is there a pencil sharpener in this room?” This example, I think, makes the distinction between our linear rational left-hemisphere and the non-rational, experiential right-hemisphere very clear.

However, these two hemispheres are connected by the *corpus callosum*, a bundle of nerves, which allows the right-hemisphere to contribute emotional emphasis to the left-hemisphere dictionary of words when we speak. In fact it is this contribution by the right-hemisphere which makes sentences correctly understood, as is clear whether you mean to emphasize the first or the third word in the sentence, “I love you.”

But this is only true if the listener hears your voice. The great problem comes with writing, for not only is your right-hemisphere then not able to contribute the emotional emphasis which defines meaning, but one is also helpless in face of the fact that you have no way of knowing how the reader will interpret the emotional meaning of the words.

You might write, for example, “What is this thing called love?” but the reader might read:

What? Is this thing called love?,

or:

What is this thing called, Love?

Which brings us to the title of this essay, how do you then enter the dangerous waters of writing a love letter? Dangerous because how the reader of the letter interprets the words means everything.

¹The right-hemisphere contains vocabulary known before the age of 6 or 7, but it cannot make a sentence with these words. In the case of left-hemisphere injury, however, the right-hemisphere can *sing* these words.

One solution, of course, is not to write the letter but to speak to the recipient in person. But how will the recipient know if you are truthful? What if you are lying? This brings us to the interesting fact that only the left-hemisphere can lie. The right-hemisphere cannot lie and neither can music. It was because of this fact that we have a large literature of love songs beginning in the 14th century. A noble man would hire a musician to take the love letter to the lady and sing it to her to make sure the proper understanding was communicated. It was because music cannot lie that Machaut (b. 1300) wrote to a lady,

And if it please you, my dear lady, to consider the last little song I sang, of which I composed both words and music, you can easily tell whether I'm lying or speaking the truth.²

On the other hand, or perhaps we should say going the other direction, due to the *corpus callosum* we do have some ability to speak about our emotions. In terms of the rehearsal I like to think of a metaphor of a "music room," such as was found in the Elizabethan theater, centered over the stage, a place in the center of my head where the feelings enter from the right and the necessary vocabulary from the left. I imagine them finding some common purpose in this "music room" to come to my aid in rehearsal.

In this respect I do find one thing very clear from my own experience. Speaking to an ensemble in rehearsal should be language directed toward the spiritual or emotional nature of the music. One thinks of Bruno Walter, his hands together, pleading for the orchestra to do justice to Mozart's music. I have personally never felt that discussing the grammar of music in rehearsal, chords, form, technique, etc., found any interest among the players nor made any important audible difference in the performance.

²*Remede de Fortune*, line 374.