

Excellence in the Age of Ratings

Michael Klinghoffer

**Abstract**

This paper will attempt to discuss the differences between excellence and professionalism while trying to reframe the goals of the projects run by the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance in the peripheral areas of Israel. (These projects have been awarded the Israeli Council of Higher Education prize for community involvement). At the same time the paper will also attempt to make a connection between the festival of young rock groups in the south of Israel and the theories of Abraham Maslow.

**Excellence in the Age of Ratings**

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It all started at the end of the summer, on a pleasant evening, in the south of Israel. It was a festival for young rock bands. A number of young artists who began their career in this festival have gone on to win fame and recognition. Among the players there were a few that I knew from a project of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. ( One of the projects which won the Israeli Council of Higher Education Award for community involvement). Since I wasn't "on duty" that evening but was rather playing the role of father (my eldest son, who was volunteering at that time in one of the towns had joined one of the groups), I kept a demeanor of anonymity and listened with much interest and, for much of the time, with pleasure as well. At one point my younger children, who had come to watch their older brother and the guest stars perform, whispered to me: "Dad! There's Mr. Mitelman! "Mr. who? I asked naively. "Mitelman you know, the keyboard player from TV... he's on the jury..."

From that moment on, dozens of questions kept forming in my mind: I thought, for example, about the excitement that the presence of a celebrity causes in young people. I thought about how these young artists, blessed with talent, who were performing in the south that night, but had their eyes set on the moment that people would recognize them on the street. I thought about their dreams of money and the glamorous life that went with the megastar status and I thought about how, unfortunately, for some of them, reality might not be as glamorous as the dream and for some the dream might shatter completely.

As time went by, these thoughts were replaced by new ones: "Wow, what a talent... a convincing performance... great talent... true musician... authentic... suitable for The Academy... oops! No, not for the Academy... why does she need it ... straight to the television... she can swim in her own water... rock needs to grow on the street not in the university...but wasn't this one of our measurable goals to have as many young people come to our academy? Wasn't it a goal to bring in as many first generation higher education students as possible?"

I asked myself if there was a similar phenomenon in other fields; let's imagine a young man with excellent accomplishments in the fields of math and science. He is just about to make a choice between a quick and glamorous position in high-tech, and the possibility of doing scientific research. Despite the fact that this young man has all the traits assuring him great success in scientific research, his chances, especially in our country, of earning a respectable living from research are much smaller than his chances of providing for a family working in high-tech. Even if he is successful in the field of research, the academic path has fewer opportunities, is less financially rewarding, and is much longer. If our young man's field is in humanities, his situation is even worse.

Just a few weeks ago the tragically small number of Hebrew literature students was published. What is the likely career path for an articulate student with excellent verbal skills if he chooses to study communications as opposed to the career he should expect if he finished a PhD in literature or history?

Having said all this, who are we to claim that the work in literature research is more important than that of advertising? Or that it is better to be involved in classical music than in commercial music? Who am I to use the power that I was given as an educator, in order to influence the future occupation and lives of young people? Can I even promise them that they'll be better off in research than in economics? Or In history research rather than in communications? Can I guarantee more self- fulfillment as musicians and as people who are graduates of The Academy? And what is the most sublime goal of education if not to maximize the potential in each student as a professional and as a person?

Self- actualization is much talked about these days. The psychologist Abraham Maslow drew a straight and obvious connection between self- actualization and excellence. Unlike Freud

who focused on studies of extreme mental disorders and unlike the behaviorists who studied the average person, Abraham Maslow believed that we should study instead that group of elite people who excel in their field- those he calls "Self Actualized".

In his research, Maslow found that creativity is the most distinguishable common denominator among all the subjects he ascribed to the category of being "self-actualized". This creativity is characterized, among other things, with spontaneity, courage, the willingness to make mistakes and humility. Maslow claims that in some senses this creativity is similar to the creativity of children who haven't yet learned to be afraid of the ridicule of others. "Almost any child" says Maslow, "can compose a song or a poem or dance or a painting or a play or a game on the spur of the moment, without planning or previous intent".<sup>1</sup> If we go back for a moment to that festival in the south, I can say for certain that the adjectives mentioned above aptly describe most of the participants, especially those who preformed original material. The material itself was simple without etiquette or sophistry and the performance was spontaneous, expressive, natural and honest. "For this reason" says Maslow, "these people waste little time or energy protecting themselves from themselves. They are not afraid of their own desires; their appetites agree with their judgments."<sup>2</sup>

From the performances it was clear to me that the participants had worked very hard. One could not help but notice that they enjoyed the process at least as much as they enjoyed the results. Maslow also mentions hard work "Inspirations are a dime a dozen. The difference between inspiration and the final product is an awful lot of hard work."<sup>3</sup> With that Maslow also mentions that these people's love for games merges with their diligence and thus work and hobby, or game, converge with one another.

Everything seemed perfect on that lovely summer night, maybe too perfect ... but I wasn't convinced... Something was missing... my head, once again, filled with disturbing questions; does that "childlike" creativity necessarily lead to scientific discovery or groundbreaking artistic creations? Does hard work guarantee we achieve results that hold meaning for us or other people?

I return to Maslow and discover that there are several other traits ascribed to the special people he had researched: for example openness to new ideas and experiences and a deep

understanding of themselves, of other people and of learning processes. Many times they are people with inner paradoxes. From those seemingly self paradoxes, Maslow found that these people have the ability to penetrate deep into latent and cluttered realities more efficiently than other people. He calls this trait “dichotomy transcendence”- the ability to transform opposites into unities.<sup>4</sup> in other words, the outcome of our educational work should be a person who asks questions, casts doubt, and from his own self unity tries to find principals of world unity from elements which have been considered unrelated to each other.<sup>5</sup>

**Let me repeat that last sentence which for me is the essence of education at every level and in every age: to ask questions, to cast doubt, and to find new and interesting connections.**

If that is the case then education has to defend itself against three main fallacies:

**A. A child can't be creative if he doesn't have tools.**

Well, maybe a child can't write a story if he doesn't know how to write, but he can make up a story or tell a story. There is no connection between the child's writing skills and his ability to create a story and express himself with the tools available to him. At least from my experience with the festival in the south, I feel that natural creativity exists in everyone and as educators we have to nurture it and keep it safe. As Maslow says, we have to help children overcome the fear of other people's reaction. Those teenagers from the festival in the south, had no academic training in music, and I think most of them learned by themselves or studied with a teacher for very few years. This fact didn't stop them from expressing what was in their hearts and to achieve a degree of professionalism that wouldn't shame any television show of that kind. But the road from here to the masterpieces of rock and pop is still long. The greatest danger in the above assumption is that if indeed we shouldn't touch the “things that are beyond” until the students have mastered enough skills, we might find the students have grown old before we have engaged them. This assertion “helps” teachers and students to avoid dealing with the real issues which are probably more complex for both.

**B. We should strive for professionalism.**

With the help of correct methods, practice, determination and diligence, we can arrive at results of the highest degree of professionalism in every field. An orchestra that plays perfectly together and which creates a beautiful sound, in perfect intonation and with all the right notes is certainly a great accomplishment, but not always a great pleasure to hear if the music has no soul. We must remember that all the above are mandatory conditions, but they are not sufficient for a musical experience to occur - neither for the performer nor for the listener. Unfortunately, we are so blinded by professionalism, that in most cases we stop at that stage.

**C. If it cannot be measured, it is not.**

In the age of ratings, where success is a measurable thing, there's no place for excellence. Professionalism is measurable: how much this or that group has played together, how many mistakes were made, how clear the text was (what percentage of the text did we understand correctly) - all of these are measurable. On the other hand, how much a song challenges convention is immeasurable, how many musical and non-musical connotations does it stimulate for the listener is immeasurable, even how original and how soulful the performance was, is immeasurable. We can check how many correct answers a student had on his mathematics exam, but we cannot quantify just how original or elegant a particular solution was. When we stumble upon a brilliant solution or a brilliant creation, we identify them immediately, but we are afraid to approach the subject because of the questions how will we measure success? How will we be able to grade it? And maybe, in the end, it all boils down to subjectivity.

As we are part of an academic institution, we evaluated and assessed our project in the community. In order for the evaluation to be even more objective, we hired ZOFNAT, a company that is known for its work with educational institutions, to create a survey for us. The results were surprising to all of us- students and faculty, as well as, to the people from the communities we worked in.

The highest ranking statements in all three locations were, in the first place: "I have learned that in order to improve, I have to work hard and put in much soul", (Average 4.91 out of

maximum 5), and in the second place was the statement: "I like working with my student instructors", (Average 4.78). These two statements were rated far ahead of all the other statements, including the ones that dealt with the various musical experiences and with the individual musical progress.

Had we failed in the field of music, I asked myself? Shouldn't we be teaching music? Shouldn't we instill musical skills? Shouldn't we make them better young professionals? What about all the measurable outcomes?

But then I tried to think about what I felt were the most cherished moments that I had experienced during this project. The first one was quite frightening: one afternoon bus was late, and when we approached we saw the children waiting in the parking lot. When they noticed us coming, they started running towards the bus. I can't forget how I panicked at that moment. Nor will I forget the excitement and happiness on the children's faces.

The other event was when two drummers came to the Academy in Jerusalem for the first time and we took them into the percussion room. Just looking in their eyes said everything. A new and exciting world of mystery and possibilities had just opened up for them and for us. Those were strong experiences, but like the statements that we discovered in our survey, they had nothing to do with measurable musical success. Rather, they had to do with the vague term "values".

If education is indeed about actualizing the potential of everyone, as a person and as a professional, we must acknowledge the fact that instilling knowledge and skills, important as they may be, will forever remain only within the bounds of the necessary conditions and we must therefore always strive to go beyond the measurable into the real world of values.

It was late, the young musicians were saying their last goodbyes ... we went back stage to congratulate my son on his performance.... A few of them came to me and said: "the project is going to continue next year, right?" and one of them added: "and by the way, what do I need to do if I want to study at The Academy?"

## Notes

1. Goble Frank, G., *The Third Force: The Psychology of Abraham Maslow* (Maurice Bassett Publishing). P. 39
2. Ibid p.41
3. Ibid p.40
4. Ibid p. 113
5. Ibid p.42

## The Author

Michael Klinghoffer, Double Bass teacher and performer studied under Gary Karr at Yale University, where he received a Master of Music and at the Hartt School- University of Hartford, where he received his Doctor of Musical Arts. He was assistant principal bass player in the Israel Symphony Orchestra and in the Israel Sinfonietta.

Currently, he performs solo concerts, recitals and chamber music and conducts master classes in Israel and abroad. His repertoire ranges from contemporary Israeli music, (much of it composed for him), to his own arrangements for the double bass, which have been published in the U.S and in Europe and recorded on two compact discs.

He has published articles on Music Education and on Pedagogy in Israeli professional periodicals as well as in the US. "*Music Education in Institutions of Non Formal Education*" was published by MATAN in collaboration with the Israeli Ministry of Education.

Since 1987, he has been on the faculty of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, conducting orchestras, teaching the double bass and other subjects. He was the Head of the String Department and currently serves as the Dean of Students and leads the prestigious Chais Program for Excellence in Music.

Along with his academic commitments and performing engagements, and after being Music Director for seven years at MATAN, (Arts and Culture Project for Youth), Michael still devotes much time and energy to working with young musicians from diverse backgrounds all over Israel.