Striking a Chord

By Theodore Dalrymple

The poet A.E. Housman once wrote a poem about the impossibility of ignoring reality by means of permanent intoxication. The short poem ends:

> *But men at whiles are sober*
> *And think by fits and starts,*
> *And if they think, they fasten*
> *Their hands upon their hearts.*

In other words, everyone is aware of the tragic dimension of life.

Everyday or banal situations give us reason to think about questions of political philosophy and psychology that might strike us at first as abstruse or distant; but we are never in actuality very far from them.

Last week, I was waiting for a train in a large modern station in France. The covered space was light and airy, the very opposite of cozy. About a hundred people were sitting in this space waiting for their trains, and there was a quiet susurration of human conversation. Those who were talking did so *sotto voce*, so as not to disturb others.

As is now the fashion in many stations, the train company had installed an upright piano for people—passengers or passersby—to play upon if they were so inclined. I have been surprised by how many people play Chopin or Schubert reasonably well, sometimes even very well; but also, unfortunately, by the number of people who do not mind exposing their bad playing to the public, apparently indifferent to (or perhaps deluded about) their abilities and effect on the public.

The pleasant quasi-silence in the station was broken suddenly by a young man who sat at the piano and began to bang out some chords while intoning words (singing would be too generous a word for it) at a high volume and out of tune. It was truly horrible, but when he paused at the end of what he no doubt would have called a song, one or two people applauded slightly—whether from lack of musical taste or pity for him, I do not know. I was appalled that he should be encouraged in this way, but it was the last time. When he paused again, no

one applauded, but lack of applause did not discourage him.
He gave every indication of being very moved by his own performance, of giving vent to his deepest feelings. I began to feel a little sorry for him. Perhaps his dearest ambition was to be a performer, and perhaps no other occupation would interest or satisfy him. There are people who have utterly mistaken their vocation and have set their heart on being what nature never gave them the ability to be. I have known such cases (Somerset Maugham has a short story, "The Alien Corn," on this subject). It is tragic. I remember my first acquaintance with the worst poet in the English language, William McGonagall, when I lay on the grass and howled with laughter until I was too weak to stand; but when I learned of his biography—the son of illiterate and impoverished Irish immigrant factory workers to Scotland—I ceased to laugh, and if I had been the tearful type, I would have cried. His background notwithstanding, he somehow conceived the ambition to be a Shakespearean actor and poet, which brought him nothing but the ridicule of the educated and deep impoverishment; but it was a remarkable and noble ambition all the same.
Perhaps the young man was in the same case. I had a natural reluctance to hurt his feelings by telling him how bad he was and by asking him to stop. It is cruel sometimes to deprive a man of his illusions (though also sometimes necessary).
But there was another question that came to my mind. I was far from the only person who found his performance not merely bad, but painful. I tried earplugs that I happened to have with me, but they were as much use as tissue paper in a monsoon; his noise would have escaped a soundproofed room. It was impossible to ignore and was destructive of all attempts to read.

Many of those present would have wished him to stop. Did they have the right to tell him to stop? Suppose six out of ten wanted him to stop. Or six out of ten wanted him to continue. Who would have the right to carry the say? How could they enforce their right in either direction?

He was doing nothing illegal. The piano had printed on it in

large letters the words “For you to play on.” But who was this “you”? No qualification appeared to be necessary. If I had complained to the station authorities, no doubt they would have replied that it was all a matter of taste, why should my opinion have prevailed? Besides, most people who play this piano do so quite well, and we (the station authorities) have had compliments about our generosity in providing a piano for them to play on. It is surely worth having an occasional duffer for all the pleasure that others have given…

Of course, I did not complain to the station authorities (it would have been almost like informing), and no one else asked the young man to stop either. In any case, if someone had complained, what would the man have replied? He might have slunk away hurt, but more likely he would have referred to his perfect right to play the piano that had been put there precisely for such as he to play.

This very simple scene raised several interesting questions, none of them easily answerable:

(1) What was going through the mind of this young man as he played and sung or intoned his heart out?

(2) Was he in the grip of self-deception, and if so, what exactly is self-deception, which after all is a slippery concept, the deceived and the deceiver being one and the same?

(3) What prevented any of the hundred people present from saying anything?

(4) Who had the right to tell him to stop? A majority of those present, and if so, how large a majority? What if only a single person found his playing painful and abominable and wanted him to stop? Does such a person’s wish for silence trump other people’s desire for noise? Should we use the logic for noise that we use for tobacco smoke?

(5) How far should legality and illegality determine our

conduct?

It has been said that, in any large city, we are never very far from a rat. In life, we are never very far from a psychological puzzle or a philosophical question.

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