

COMMENTARY

Composing a Community: Collaborative Performance of a New Democracy

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Imagine a quintet at the front of a hall. It performs together, though not always in tune or in sync. Sometimes it is even in several different keys and rhythms at once. Nonetheless, the quintet continues, with moments of harmony and dissonance. When one solos, others support and listen, preparing for their own turns.

The performance widens. All of those gathered in the hall are invited to participate, to contribute their own ideas and expressions. Some do, and now the quintet is silent while it listens.

Then the quintet joins back in, in response to what it has heard. And so it goes, back and forth—there is free-flowing improvisation and collaboration in the room.

Now perhaps you imagined a string quintet, a jazz combo or a jam band—or maybe even a punk rock group. However, what I just described was not a musical concert, but a town meeting. There was no band at the front of the hall, but a town council, and I was the mayor—conducting a public hearing.

But it was still a concert of sorts, for we were “acting in concert”¹ with each other, with a flow—back and forth—of communication, discussion and debate.

During my two terms as mayor I played a part in hundreds of meetings like that. I heard community dialogue as an ongoing collaborative composition, and I wondered:

What if we listened to issues with the same level of attention we bring to music?

What if we participated in our democratic forums and processes like practiced musicians?

Using music as a model, are there ways we could improve the quality of discourse in our communities and our country?

Could we—with practice—*compose* our communities and *perform* our democracy?

As a composer and former mayor, these are the questions that intrigue me.

From 1994 to 2001 I was mayor of Springdale, Utah, a charming small town beside the towering red cliffs of Zion National Park. When I moved there from Chicago in 1988, Springdale was beset with political and civil hostilities. The mayor and council sued each other and developers sued the town, piling up a deficit from all

Research on this subject was supported by the Utah Humanities Council’s 2009 Delmont R. Oswald Fellowship.

¹See Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community and Political Action* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), especially p. 36.

the litigation; a county sheriff was needed to keep order at town meetings, which were sometimes followed by fistfights and fires; a dead chicken was thrown onto the mayor's lawn.

In the midst of this (or perhaps because of this) I was elected mayor. As a Chicago punk rocker and electro-acoustic classical composer, a city-slicker newcomer to a rural old-timer town, one might think I was a curious choice, more likely to lead to a mashup or a mosh pit than a model of democracy.

But with the help of a community-initiated humanities project designed to address our discord, during the next few years we healed our politics and restored civility to our town. Musical concepts, practices, and skills played key roles in Springdale's evolution in ways that are discussed in this commentary.

Music as a Model for Democracy

There is an emerging body of thought considering music as a model for democracy. Political theorists employ musical metaphors² and explore music's democratic capacity for civic skills and dispositions.³ Mayors note the similar skills of musicians and politicians;⁴ musicologists analyze performances in terms of dialogue, negotiation, and debate.⁵

A *musical-political* theory illuminates a repertoire of *sociomusical* skills and dispositions that are available to all citizens. When we engage our issues and interact with our communities sociomusically, we are composing and performing democracy.

For example, jazz improvisers often build longer melodies from smaller units.⁶ In a similar manner, citizens build larger theories, policies, constitutions, and laws from smaller elements such as customs and values.

Sociomusical skills are not difficult. They are natural, resident within us. They simply need to be practiced. Then we can perform them. Following a brief survey of Springdale's political evolution I illustrate how, as mayor and musician, I incorporated these skills into my practice of politics.

But first, here are three underlying dispositions which I find especially useful for a well-performing democracy: Listening, Comparing Notes, and Playing Off the Melody.

Listening

It begins with listening—but what kind of listening? We may first be struck by the surface sound, melody or beat. But as we listen, we begin to notice additional facets and layers in the music: harmonies, counterpoints, rhythms, textures, dynamics, and patterns. We become more and more engaged in the process that is

²Nancy S. Love, *Musical Democracy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 1.

³Mattern, *Acting in Concert*, p. 13.

⁴Daniel Kemmis, *The Good City and the Good Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 149–150.

⁵Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 216.

⁶Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 183.

unfolding. Listening is our doorway, our access to the inner workings of the process.

And not just for an audience. For a participant in the process, listening is even more important. A basic music lesson is: "You've got to listen to the whole band if you ever expect to say something."⁷ That could be said to citizens filing into a public hearing. Because "saying something"—as a musician and as a citizen—is ultimately what it is all about.

But too often we say something without first listening. As a mayor observes, "At a public hearing . . . the one element that is almost totally lacking is anything that might be characterized as 'public hearing.'"⁸ The participants just expect the decision-makers to choose between them, and they therefore abdicate "any responsibility for hearing each other, for responding to each other, for coming to an agreement."⁹ To mutually solve our problems we need to turn to each other and listen. That was my first goal in Springdale.

So I listened. One listener begets another. The council listened. We paid attention—our comments and questions demonstrated that whoever spoke was heard. It spread. The attending citizens listened, commented, asked questions. You would think we were making music together. It is amazing how a bunch of open ears and listening minds can affect a concert, a town meeting—and a democracy.

Active listening not only increases our understanding of the process, it can even shape the very thing being heard. "Listeners are as much a part of the process of music-making as composers and performers,"¹⁰ notes a musicologist, adding, "Listening . . . is a kind of performance, insofar as listeners must actively recreate and make sense of [what] they hear."¹¹ When "the existence of Bach and Beethoven depends on discriminating audiences as much as on performers,"¹² might not the existence of democracy depend on discriminating citizens as much as on politicians? Strong democratic citizens nourish "the art of mutualistic listening."¹³

An active mode of listening began to take root in Beethoven's time, accompanying similar progressions in political and social thought: "The act of listening came to be equated with the act of thinking . . . the quest for truth"¹⁴ where "musical meaning . . . arises out of the act of listening and is thus shaped as much by the listener as by the musical work being heard."¹⁵

This new kind of listening was not "idle reception" but a "constructive power" that takes work: "The listener was obliged to take an active role in constructing

⁷ Ibid., p. 215.

⁸ Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), p. 53.

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ John Blacking, *Music, Culture, and Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 228.

¹¹ Ibid., 231.

¹² John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 47.

¹³ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California, 1984, 2003), p. 175.

¹⁴ Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. xiv–xv.

¹⁵ Ibid., xviii.

[the musical work's] essence through the application of the powers of imagination,"¹⁶ "an active rather than a passive process" in which "listening is something he *does* to the music."¹⁷

Comparing Notes

A listening this profound—a deeply discerning, thinking, seeking, constructing listening—requires a framework which can situate, process and make sense of what is heard. A place to compare all those notes, to put them into perspective, to find patterns which integrate and help us understand them.

That place is all set and ready to go, thanks to

the three cognitive abilities that characterize the musical brain. The first is *perspective-taking*: the ability to think about our own thoughts and to realize that other people may have thoughts or beliefs that differ from our own. The second is *representation*: the ability to think about things that aren't right-there-in-front-of-us. The third is *rearrangement*: the ability to combine, recombine, and impose hierarchical order on elements in the world.¹⁸

A very fertile place indeed, where notes (the listened-to elements in the world) can be not only compared but given a useful context:

It has frequently been observed that we tend to comprehend the world in terms of relatively stable and enduring schemata. ... In music, formal schemata such as theme and variations, rondo, da capo arias, and sonata form are very familiar.¹⁹

This perspectival, rearranging, interpretive disposition, or "'intersubjectivity'—how people come to know what others have in mind and how they adjust accordingly,"²⁰ is quintessentially musical. It is *comparing notes*. While it can be honed by practice, it is a skill available to us all, and applicable to any situation where multiple views are voiced and considered.

Playing Off the Melody

Fitting these multiple views into frameworks, comparing them to previous and alternative ideas, allows listeners to explore and elaborate upon them. This enables us to articulate our own ideas in response—in ways that are better understood by others within the evolving framework—like jazz musicians who "must learn to maintain different musical perspectives simultaneously, conceiving patterns for their own evolving part while ... engaging in a 'conversation' with the piece."²¹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Dutton, 2008) p. 15.

¹⁹ Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 50–51.

²⁰ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 161.

²¹ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 178.

When we evolve our own part in reference to an already stated one we are “playing off the melody.”²² Developing our parts like musical themes generates “a wealth of derivative ideas for consideration and pursuit . . . creating new models for larger chains of ideas.”²³ Then we are digging deep into deliberative democracy—not only practicing it, but performing it well enough to take it on the road.

When musicians improvise together the interaction between them is as collaborative and communicative as it gets. Improvisation brings out not only individual expressions, but collective efforts to build something together. Therefore it has “profound ramifications for thinking about one’s relation to the social sphere.”²⁴

Improvisation is less about original acts of individual self-creation . . . than about an ongoing process of community building, about reinvigorating public life with the spirit of dialogue and difference that improvisatory practices consistently gesture toward.²⁵

Springdale’s Political Evolution—From Workshop to Performance

At the time I moved to Springdale in 1988 we were not governing and performing very well:

Tensions ran high between developers and conservationists. Developers argued for the right of property owners to do what they wanted with their land. Others thought the local government should step in to preserve what they saw as the quality of life. “People took sides on an issue, and lines got drawn,” says Mavis Madsen, a librarian. “They took things very personally. There were many battles and many scars.”²⁶

The town was a riot of sharp dissonances, violent discord, a cacophony of voices, shocking changes, fist fights, raucous crowds—I felt as if I had stepped right into the middle of “The Rite of Springdale.”

There are indeed similarities to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Its 1913 premiere caused riots, and a sheriff had to keep order at explosive Springdale town meetings. Tomatoes were hurled at the concert; a dead chicken was thrown onto the mayor’s lawn. Both *The Rite of Spring* and the “The Rite of Springdale” had notable asymmetries and tensions, constantly shifting tempos, overlapping rhythms, broken fragments, and clashing themes.

Not that there is anything wrong with that. I love the irregularities of *The Rite of Spring*, and it is the nature of democracy to throw off sparks of dissonance and disharmony. Both are vibrant and alive. When we listen to the music—or to what is going on in the community—we can learn something and respond. Politically, we get signs about what is needed. The trouble was not the music or the issues;

²² *Ibid.*, 172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185–186.

²⁴ Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ Michael Ryan, “The Man Who Brought Civility Back to Town,” *Parade Magazine*, November 2, 1997, p. 14.

it was that, in our “Rite of Springdale,” we were performing badly. And the trouble began because amid that cacophony of voices nobody was listening.

But Springdale heard itself well enough to know we needed to work on our performance. Two concerned residents designed a public humanities program to specifically address our community breakdown. Titled “Embracing Opposites: In Search of the Common Good,” it presented five scholars²⁷ (focusing on philosophy, history and literature) and open-ended roundtable discussions where we workshopped and developed our repertoire of civic skills and dispositions.

This started a process of healing which continued for several years. It helped us tune in to our “referential harmony,”²⁸ a shared sense of our social context, to which we could refer to get our bearings. We began to hear our own resonant public sphere. We began to listen, and from there we could proceed to reasoned civil debate.

Still, for two more years the current administration, litigation, and political dysfunction continued. In the midst of this I was elected mayor. As a musician I knew how important it is to practice before you go on stage. We needed to rehearse our sociomusical skills if we were to perform well.

So I adopted a “band-leading style [that] requires great flexibility and responsiveness from the other musicians,”²⁹ where “the role of soloist is one that every member ... is expected to fulfill”³⁰—not just with virtuosity but also with “the enabling function of the accompanists.”³¹

I love this concept of soloists and accompanists supporting each other and switching roles. I felt that if the citizens of Springdale could assume those roles skillfully, I could be mayor of a community that was “collectively orchestrated without ... a conductor.”³²

Here are a few examples of how we applied musical skills and dispositions in Springdale.

When the new council was sworn in, the most urgent problem we faced was all the overhanging litigation, which was in danger of bankrupting the town. How did we solve it? By amping up our *listening*. As in Beethoven’s time, our listening was an act of discovery, of finding pathways through what had been previously impenetrable. Our listening also influenced the performance of our adversaries who, noting our careful attention to their concerns, were more willing to make critical concessions. While both sides still bargained hard, we shaped the negotiations and settled the law suits through the active listening of a concert-ready quintet.

Springdale citizens sharpened their listening skills too. When a community center and new town hall were first proposed, we quickly divided into camps—or orchestral sections, with separate instrumental parts. The woodwinds were in favor, with the oboes most interested in the function of the buildings while the

²⁷ The five scholars were Daniel Kemmis, William Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams, Thomas Lyon, and Jordan Paul.

²⁸ Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 16.

²⁹ Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 72.

flutes were focused on their aesthetics. The brass were opposed, with the trombones concerned about cost and the trumpets alarmed about rumors the school would be appropriated and moved.

Naturally, at first we mostly heard our own sections. Their parts, being close to us, drowned out others, throwing the music of our dialogue out of balance. It was as if the stereo was adjusted all the way to the right or the left, leaving out the true dimension. The council too had trouble hearing some concerns (such as some parents' fears that the school building would be converted to a community center) until their volume was raised through petitions. So we formed a citizen committee (a smaller ensemble) to explore and workshop the various building options. We opened up the full process to clear view and communication. Eventually each player began to "listen to the whole band" and took responsibility for their part in coming up with a good plan. Springdale citizens recognized they were not just a passive audience, but discriminating performers. It took several years, but our listening ultimately constructed a beautiful new town hall and a community center.

The highly public process of updating Springdale's general plan was a perfect place to *compare notes*. We rolled out the old plan (the score) and asked ourselves what did we want to keep, what did we want to change—as I have done many times with my classical scores. At workshops, citizens compared the notes of the past with the notes of the future, as heard in our imaginations—a composer's skill for sure. Widely attended, these sessions provided a framework for sharing, understanding and integrating the multiple voices of Springdale into our new general plan.

Perhaps our finest music came when citizens *played off each others' melodies*—expressing, exploring, elaborating upon them, and developing sequences of new ideas—like we did when we created Youth Activities of Zion (YAZ). Springdale is a remote community, so our children lacked opportunities for arts activities, sports, field trips, and community service. For several months, in more than a dozen jam sessions, we grouped and regrouped into different ensembles to develop a brand new volunteer organization to address this need. Students from the local elementary school sent representatives to add their voices. Ideas were bounced like jazz riffs; we all picked up on them, tried them out in variations, played off the melodies, and by that summer YAZ provided a full slate of activities for our children. It continues today.

So we listened, compared notes and played off each others' melodies. We collaborated, we jammed together, we performed democracy well. Springdale earned praise for preserving its small-town character in the face of enormous growth demands. We won awards for creating a partnership with Zion to enhance the visitor experience while protecting area resources, mostly through the development of a green shuttle system. We settled the existing lawsuits and safeguarded against future ones. We moved our budget from deficit to surplus and built a new town hall. And in so doing, we restored our faith in our ability to perform.

Developing an Ear for the Music of Democracy

Last year I was a guest speaker for the Utah Democracy Project, which cultivates political literacy as a precondition for responsible democracy.³³ My spin on that is

³³ Utah Democracy Project, <<http://www.uvu.edu/ethics/utahdemocracyproject/>>.

to cultivate our political ear—for the *music* of democracy. Here are some of the ways I used my experience as a musician and composer, with an ear for the music of democracy, to move politics in a more productive manner.

The Governing Harmony of the Public Sphere

A common political debate is the right of the individual versus societal constraints, or individual desire versus the good of the community. Music was helpful to me in understanding these sorts of issues because in music we deal with them all the time.

In music, melody is the self, the individual, expressing itself. But where is it heard? Melody is heard within and against a governing harmony—the social context, the public sphere, the community. It is only within such a harmony that melody has meaning and can be understood.

We all exist within society that reverberates around us. We try to figure out our place within it. Sometimes it is a comfortable place and we fit right in; at other times it is alien, and we are at odds with it.

For example, there is a quiet sustained harmony in Charles Ives's *The Unanswered Question* into which a solitary trumpet enters. It seems to ask a plaintive question, but the harmony ignores it and simply continues. Society marches on. The lonely trumpet is not even in the same key. It asks—but receives no answer from the harmony, from society.

Whether we are in tune with it or not, there is a society out there. It has rules and customs, and we generally live according to them. It is the “referential harmony, the *sensus communis*,”³⁴ the public sphere, where we can test our laws’ and policies’ legitimacy by checking them against the public good.

It is within the referential harmony of the public sphere that we speak our word, play our melody. And it is against that referential harmony that our melody is heard, where our notes are compared and evaluated by our fellow melody-makers, our collaborating democracy-makers, with whom we all create and sustain the governing harmony.

Uncommon Common Tones

There is a spine along the top of the Rockies called the Continental Divide. When rain falls, each drop must flow down one side or the other. In Springdale, like most western communities, our upthrust spine is formed by the issues of planning and growth—our own continental divide—from which we tend to flow to opposite sides. There, seemingly separated by a mountain, our opposite sides cannot hear each other. Unless there is a voice which speaks on both sides of that mountain—a common tone.

Thank goodness for the common tones in community—the tones whose stabilizing qualities can be heard in radically different surroundings and through rapidly changing circumstances. In music a common tone is a note that holds steady while a chord or tune changes, sometimes back and forth. The first accompanying notes are replaced by new accompanying notes, but the common tone remains the same—a momentary reference point from which the new chord

³⁴ Redfield, *Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 16.

can be heard and understood. The common tone allows the music to shift seamlessly from chord to chord, or gracefully modulate from one key to another, while keeping the connection between them “direct and unmistakable.”³⁵

Like music, there are many possible tone combinations in any community, but they tend to aggregate into certain “chords” where the individual tones harmonize with each other. When the constituent parts are sounded together—and repeated or sustained—the chord has a cumulative strength that shapes and governs.

Some of the community chords which shaped and governed Springdale were an old-timer chord, an artist chord, an environmentalist chord, a business chord, and a developer chord. Not that these chords were entirely separate or monolithic. As in music, many tones were shared by different chords, but they sounded a bit different in each chord they joined.

Common tones in community are uncommonly valuable, especially in polarized times. During our turbulent “Rite of Springdale,” when voices clashed and differences were accentuated, Stephen Roth was a very valuable common tone.

As a respected member of the local church, Roth had solid ties with the old-timers and played a strong note in that chord. But he was also an artist and craftsman who held a comfortable note in that chord. And he was a home designer/builder who knew the notes in the developer chord.

So when something needed to be done in Springdale, when politics mixed and meshed, Stephen Roth could be a common tone who shared a place in the chords sounded by different—and sometimes opposing—groups of people. He served admirably on the planning commission and the town council, using his chordal relationships and knowledge to help modulate the community dialogue.

Grounding Pedal Points

In music a pedal point is an underlying tone, above which the melodies revolve and relate. But unlike a common tone, which has a constituent position in otherwise differing chords, a pedal point can be peripheral to the chords and melodies which dance and shift above it. Yet it still provides home ground where they can meet. Also, while a common tone may stay in place for only a moment or two, a pedal point holds still for an extended period of time, providing a more secure anchor for the proceedings.

Usually a pedal point is in the bass, and it can be a sustained note or a repeated one. In either case its continuation allows for flexibility and variation around it, and it provides an ongoing reference point from which to hear and interpret the other voices. It can also open up a performance: “When a bass player initiates a pedal point, he or she signals a range of musical possibilities to the rest of the ensemble.”³⁶

When Springdale was divided and stuck, we needed a bass player to initiate a pedal point, to signal a whole new range of political possibilities. Fortunately our bass player arrived in the form of “Embracing Opposites: In Search of the Common Good.” In its open roundtables and reflective discussions, we gradually

³⁵ Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 299.

³⁶ Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 34.

began to hear the one tone we all had in our political-musical vocabularies, an underlying tone that—no matter what music we made in our reverberant public sphere—each of us could tap into and hear. It was a long, continuing tone that had always been there and would certainly sustain into the future.

This tone had deep roots—in the actual ground beneath our feet: It was the land we lived on, the landscape that embraced us, and the community we all called home. A spectacularly beautiful place, but so remote that it takes real commitment to live there. And committed we were.

So by grounding ourselves in our beloved place, and hearing our mutual commitment, we tuned into our true pedal point. Above it we could rip through contrasting melodies as much as we liked but still hear the tone that united us. We deliberately increased its volume until we could always hear it. From that time on it served as our constant pedal point. It grounded us in our fundamental attachment to our place, and shaped our understanding of everything else we said or heard. “People were able to talk about their allegiances and values in reference to a larger accepted thing: the place itself.”³⁷

In music, it is exciting to hear the transformations that can emerge and develop over a pedal point. In Springdale, it was gratifying to witness the transformations that emerged and developed over common ground.

The Vibrant Clash of Close Seconds

In a race or a contest a close second just misses the ribbon while the winner gets all the attention. But in music a close second shares the stage and sometimes steals the attention. It influences and colors the sound so strongly that it cannot be ignored. Sometimes it is annoying, and sometimes it causes interesting things to happen.

A second is the closest of intervals in music. Intervals are the distances between pitches, the notes of the chords and melodies. Notes can be in perfect unison, but their intervals normally range from seconds to sevenths (and higher variations). Thirds, fourths and fifths are generally harmonious, but too much of them can make the music bland and boring—all sweet, no spice. It is the notes that cause the tension which create the movement and interest in music. Sometimes this tension is called a dissonance. Dissonances are as valuable to music as consonances. And they are just as valuable in democracy.

A second is the closest of dissonances, in music or democracy. Often our biggest tensions are with those closest to us. We may harmonize with them most of the time, but the times when we do not can be especially grating. And sometimes we do not harmonize much at all. Some of us just get along better with our postman than with our own sister.

Politically, it happens all the time. In the 1960s, liberal protest groups who were normally on the same side often had sharp disagreements with one another. Today we witness that on both the right and the left.

As mayor I felt the uncomfortable closeness of seconds. I am an environmentalist. I moved to Utah because I fell in love with the sandstone canyons, and I wanted to preserve that landscape. All of my friends were environmentalists too. They were close to me. So when we disagreed, I experienced

³⁷ From the Utah Humanities Council’s nomination of “Embracing Opposites” for the 1992 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs (which it won).

the dissonance of a close second, vibrating directly in my ear and my heart. Other dissonances came and went, resolving to harmony or fading away, but they were more distant. The dissonance with my friends was close.

Several times a week I walked my dogs over a piece of open land that adjoined the national park. Most of my friends did too. We had done it for years. Then out of the blue a developer came forward with a plan to develop that land. We were all taken by surprise.

But it turned out the land had been privately owned by a distant investor for many years, and the land was zoned for the kind of housing development he planned. As long as the developer went through our design/development review and our planning board, and did everything we legitimately asked of him, our boards and council had to approve the plans.

Well, my friends were in an uproar. And if I had not been mayor with the responsibility of adhering to our codes, I would have been too. We tried our best to encourage the landowner to sell the land to a conservation trust, and negotiations were pursued for a year, but in the end he decided to proceed with the housing development. The planning board and council, honoring his private property rights and observing the law, approved.

By that time years had passed and my friends saw the writing on the wall. So they accepted the decision, though not without sounding a sad note. But all along I heard their arguments, their passions, their beliefs—and I knew them well because I shared them. We were close seconds.

However, I have learned from music and politics that dissonance can be both beautiful and valuable. In the vocal music of Bosnia and Herzegovina, “what some ears hear as tense discords are to the singers thoroughly concordant and the source of transcendental experience.”³⁸ And in an agonistic model of democracy:

the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs. . . . A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions.³⁹

The vibrant clash of close seconds can be both passionate and good for democracy.

The Fruitfulness of Ambiguity

Only in music can two such disparate messages travel simultaneously, and not only be distinctly perceived as counterpoint, but actually reinforce each other.

—Leonard Bernstein⁴⁰

As mayor of a contentious community, where disparate messages threatened to divide the town, I was keenly interested in anything that could reinforce us.

³⁸ Blacking, *Music, Culture, and Experience*, p. 224.

³⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2005), pp. 103–104.

⁴⁰ Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 225.

A lot of locals are river rafters and kayakers. So whenever possible I floated us down a river of ambiguity. It was oddly clarifying.

In our current era of soundbites and slogans it is seductively simple to make a point and painfully reductive to understand it. Western society once enjoyed a great historical revolution which drew us from “the expectation and desire of fixity into the desire and expectation of change.”⁴¹ But today nobody seems to like unhooking from fixed and easy reference points.

However, democracy depends on dialogue, and real dialogue needs unrehearsed lines to enrich and renew itself. Constantly repeating the same old arguments chokes off the discovery of new and useful reasoning, which are more available to us when we open our minds and ears to ambiguity.

The fruits of ambiguity are perspective, possibility and the production of ideas—“a more plastic and mature stage of consciousness”⁴² epitomized by the “open-ended state of interpretation and reinterpretation” of our musical brain.⁴³ The ability to tolerate ambiguity enables us “to take time to invent and consider more alternatives, and in doing so to find more satisfactory ones than might otherwise have been chosen.”⁴⁴

Music provides a training ground for negotiating the “delights and dangers of ambiguity.”⁴⁵ In town council meetings, when differing opinions were expressed I heard them as different musical keys (for example, the keys of G and E, which share half their notes, but each note has different tendencies, weights, and positions in either key). When two or more keys are sounded at once, in music it is called polytonality, analogous to pluralism in society. I trained my ear to not immediately resolve differing opinions to one “key” or the other, but rather to let the plural keys coexist, and even co-create, for a fruitful period of time. Indeed, many issues never completely resolve, and instead create their finest “music” from their coexistence in opposition. Witness, for example, the constant dances between freedom and equality, and between individual rights and popular sovereignty.

Pluralism implies the permanence of conflict and antagonism. ... Democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. ... In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism.⁴⁶

Still, while we may never resolve the big philosophical issues, we do have to decide most of the smaller ones—especially if you are on the Springdale town council. As much as I may personally enjoy unresolved tension, we could not float on a river of ambiguity forever. “To produce convincing closure and clear

⁴¹ Jacques Barzun, *Critical Questions: On Music and Letters, Culture and Biography, 1940–1980* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 159.

⁴² Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Jeremy T. Parcher/Penguin, 2009), p. 573.

⁴³ Daniel J. Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume, 2006), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 139.

⁴⁵ Bernstein, *Unanswered Question*, p. 193.

⁴⁶ Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, pp. 33–34.

articulation” we must have a process “in which ambiguities are resolved and unstable relationships are replaced by stable, well-shaped patterns.”⁴⁷

It is to that process and those patterns that I now turn.

The Usefulness of Form: A Springdale Sonata

I cannot tell you the number of times I sat for a town meeting and heard a sonata unfold. Classical sonata form is a dialectical or rhetorical framework in three sections. Simply put, after an opening statement of two or three contrasting themes (*exposition*), the themes are then compared, argued, tested, elaborated, and sometimes transformed (*development*), followed by a summary or resolution of the opening themes (*recapitulation*).

That is exactly what takes place in town meetings, where opposing views are debated and developed just like the contrasting themes of a classical sonata. Here is how sonata form shaped the debate on a pivotal issue in Springdale.

A developer asked the town to up-zone a residential property in order to build a large commercial building. To do so would abandon the well-established zoning of our master plan—a bold proposal that would change Springdale dramatically, as similar projects would surely follow. We scheduled an agenda item where his plan could be presented and considered.

When the developer took the floor to speak, while he may not have known it, he presented the first theme of a sonata. And, appropriately enough, it sounded to me like the famous first theme of Beethoven’s 5th *Symphony*: “da-da-da-dum!”

But, sitting on one side of him, his wife said, “Calm down, dear—lower your voice!” and, sitting on his other side, his lawyer said, “Don’t come on so strong!”

So he continued more softly for a moment. But he could not help himself, and—just like Beethoven’s theme—he stated it again even louder than before, “Up-zone-my-land!” (In a classical sonata, first themes are bold and assertive—just like our developer.)

Then another citizen rose to say, “Please don’t change the zoning. Let’s preserve our residential charm. It’s beautiful the way it is.” Just like this citizen’s comment, a sonata’s second theme is usually lyrical and melodious, contrasting with the first theme, and sure enough, Beethoven’s second theme is too.

These two themes constituted our sonata’s *exposition*, to be followed by the *development* section that for a town council is the meat of the meeting. It is where most of the debate and discussion happens—the least stable part of the meeting because a wider range of things could be said and anything might happen. But it is also where the fruitfulness of ambiguity reigns. Departing from the fixed positions of the opening statements, a musical-political ensemble can try out ideas in different permutations, employing ambiguity to find solutions.

It also is when the public most actively weighs in, generally harmonizing with one of the exposition’s themes or the other. They may extend the themes into new arguments, or they may parse them into smaller fragments and repeat them in cascading sequences. Often they take the themes into very different territory, or they depart from the themes entirely and invoke new ones.

In our Springdale Sonata’s *development* section, the bold and direct “up-zone-my-land” first theme became entwined with sweeter strains about financial

⁴⁷ Meyer, *Style and Music*, p. 304.

benefits for a well-loved old-timer. The lyrical “preserve our small-town charm” second theme was strongly reinforced by official state planning guidelines, which specifically caution councils against making zoning changes based on sweet reasons such as financial benefits for a well-loved old-timer.

These and other thematic variations filled the air, affecting and altering each other as they faded in and out. Finally, after every argument had been articulated and explored, we resolved the ambiguities back into a restatement of the opening themes: the *recapitulation*. Here once again we had clarity. After all had been said and done, again we had the initial proposal (our first theme) and its counter-proposal (our second theme) before us. Our sonata form had brought us to this point, and now the town council had to decide.

In this particular sonata, after much rehearing and deliberation, the second theme prevailed. We turned down the proposal to rezone. But what we really voted on was much larger than that. In harmony with the second theme, we voted to ensure the integrity of our master plan and preserve the small-town residential character of our community. It was a pivotal issue, debated and decided in the form of a sonata.

Taking a Turn at the Podium: The Baton

When I wrestled with my question of whether to run for mayor, a big concern was whether—if elected—there would be a constant battle within myself, with one hand reaching for the gavel and the other for my guitar. In many ways my guitar won out (as well as my piano, my computer-based digital sampler and my pencil, eraser, and notation paper) as I was able to compose music throughout my two terms, even serving a concurrent three-year Meet The Composer residency. In contrast, I rarely wielded the gavel. The only time I actually gaveled anyone down was late in my second term, when the former mayor (he of the front lawn onto which, many years before, the dead chicken was thrown) got aggressive during a public hearing.

Rather than pound a gavel, I mostly waved a baton. Not all the time, as Springdale residents accomplished many great things when we collectively orchestrated ourselves without a conductor. However, when the services of a conductor were required I stepped up to the podium—with a baton figuratively but firmly in my grasp. The best example of this was when, at the last minute, rumors and gossip threatened to sabotage our long-planned, long-discussed shuttle system:

The air fairly bristled with suspicion as about a fifth of the town’s population gathered in a meeting hall in Springdale, Utah, one evening in 1995. Some came to express concerns about town leaders collaborating with managers at nearby Zion National Park to build a bus shuttle system that might—rumor had it—raise their taxes, create traffic jams, parking nightmares, or worse. Others who didn’t care much about the shuttle plan just came to see the fur fly. After all, it had been a few years since the town’s public meetings might be described as full-contact sport. They’d gotten so civil and boring of late that attendance had lagged. But not tonight.

For park superintendent Don Falvey, the atmosphere brought back memories of his first public meeting in Springdale, soon after his arrival in 1991. He was advised to sit near the deputy sheriff, who was there to break up the fights. Falvey thought he was being ribbed, but soon learned otherwise: “They needed a deputy sheriff at

every meeting," he recalled later. Now he sat quietly at the front of the room, letting Springdale's mayor, Phillip Bimstein, run the show.⁴⁸

To "run the show" I needed to wear my conductor's hat (though I briefly donned a park ranger hat to humorously meet the rumors—that we were being taken over by the park—head-on). I stood alone at the podium and conducted the gathering like we were an orchestra. Sitting before me were various sections, like winds, strings and brass, only these sections were pro-shuttle, anti-shuttle, and "there to see the fur fly."

And there were soloists—not violinists or pianists, but virtuosos in their own right: the various folks who had the information, the answers the public was seeking. One by one they stood and performed—admirably—by clearly articulating their part. Sometimes, like a *concertino* ensemble in a Baroque concerto, they formed themselves into duets and trios. And like good improvising musicians, they responded to each other and to all in attendance.

But the performance was not limited to the soloists. The orchestra included every citizen in the room. We all performed—some vocally, some silently, but actively. My role as conductor was to indicate whose turn it was to speak, to give time to each section, to manage the tempo, dynamics, and balance—and to keep the music flowing.

But a conductor is nothing without a good orchestra. And like a great orchestra, that night the citizens of Springdale performed a superb symphony. It culminated in an extended coda which continues today: we proceeded with our plans for the shuttle system (with full, reinvigorated public support), and today, eleven years later, it has had more than twenty-eight million happy riders.

Composing and Performing a New Democracy

Reprising the quixotic quintet that opened this essay, I believe citizenship is like musicianship, especially when it employs the skills of a good jazz ensemble or jam band: listening, enabling each other, comparing notes, taking turns at solo, playing off the melody, elaborating on others' ideas, improvising within a collaborative framework—that is participatory democracy in action. Using music as a model, we can indeed improve the quality of discourse in our communities, our country, and around the globe.

In the Navajo "songdog" myth, a coyote came out of a hole in the ground and sang the world into existence. We all have that power and capability. Accompanied by our natural harmonies, we can sing "a politics of possibility"⁴⁹ where we "will into being a world that the community must experience in common ... [and] create a common future."⁵⁰ We can "create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. That is what composing is."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Sarah B. Van de Wetering, "A Seamless Canyon: Zion National Park and Springdale, Utah, Discover the Powers of Partnership," *Chronicle of Community* 3:2 (Winter, 1999), pp. 5–6.

⁴⁹ Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place*, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Barber, *Strong Democracy*, p. 200.

⁵¹ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 134.

I believe we are all not only citizens, but citizen/composers. I am fascinated by how we compose our lives and our communities. When we listen to each others' songs, when we attune our ears to them, interpret and understand them, orchestrate them together skillfully—and sing our own—then we are collaboratively performing a new democracy.