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Dear Mr. Rilke: An arts-informed contemplation

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Abstract

This writing—a contemplation of the poem, *An die Musik*, by Rainer Maria Rilke—emerged during analysis of a qualitative inquiry about the meaning of a music therapy support group for adult cancer patients. It is literary writing intended to be accessible to a wide readership. The convention of discursive research representation is disrupted for the purpose of expanding the realm of searching, re-searching, asking, telling, knowing and showing. More than an artistic product, this process of creative writing serves as a way of uncovering meaning and a means through which knowing evolves during research analysis. Research results, however, are not fully detailed here. Reported here are memories, reflections, speculations and reflexive insights posed to Mr. Rilke about poetry and phenomenological writing, translation, phenomenological engagement, embodiment, theorizing about musicology, music therapy, relationships to music and the lived experience of music, cancer, death and existentialism. He doesn't answer. We are left to draw our own conclusions.

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An Die Musik (To Music)

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
silence of paintings. You language where all language
ends. You time
standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.

Feelings for whom? O you the transformation
of feelings into what? —: into audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grown out of us. The deepest space *in* us,
which, rising above us, forces its way out,—
holy departure:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
boundless,
no longer habitable.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1995, p. 143)

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Re: *An die Musik* (To Music)

Dear Mr. Rilke,

I really like the poem you wrote in January of 1918. I am at the mercy of your translators here because I do not speak German. I am forced to read your poem through what Woods (1996) refers to as the “tarnished mirror” of translation; and I am consoled that Robert Frost defines poetry itself as what gets lost in translation, as Woods explains:

A poem is . . . unique and can never really be translated, for it is not just on the page, it is played out in the reader’s mind with all the benefit of gathered experience and responsiveness, of empathy, of sorrow and, ultimately, of joy at participating in the creative act. (p. 230)

Sometimes the rhythms, rhymes or colloquialisms of the original language may get lost, but what makes it to the target language is the very essence of the poem’s soul that addresses the universal human condition. You say something similar to this in your letter of November 17, 1912, to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe:

What is decisive for me, in all the arts, is not their outward appearance, not what is called the “beautiful”; but rather their deepest, most inner origin, the buried reality that calls forth their appearance. (Rilke, 1995, p. 578)

So it seems like you win some and you lose some in translation. Be that as it may, I was very moved by the metaphors and analogies you use. You certainly have a way with words—even translated words. No wonder Wittgenstein was one of your patrons (Rilke, 1981) because you both have those language games (Wittgenstein, 1953/1967) in common.

You capture the ineffableness of music when you refer to music as being the “breathing of statues,” then the “stillness in pictures” and “speech where speech ends.” You also remind me of what Bergson (1959) refers to as *durée*—the interior, subjective sensation of the passage of time (vs. exterior, objective “clock” time) when you say music is “standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.” That’s how it feels for me, too. When I play or listen to music, somehow time just seems to stand up and stand still.

You see, Mr. Rilke, I am musical by birthright and expectation. My father worked his way through university while playing violin in the symphony in Prague. Music is my connection to him. I, however, fell in love with the piano, not the violin, and was smitten by its sound when I was a young child. I practised on a cardboard keyboard because we did not have a piano. I taught myself to sight-sing just to get feedback. I practised long hours while the neighbourhood children played outdoors without me. Practising music, like writing, is a lonely business, Mr. Rilke.

I adored Rachel, my piano teacher. We were kindred music souls. She was my second mother in many ways. I loved scales, technique, and even theory exercises. I practised with enthusiasm. My pet budgie would fly to my head, hop down to my shoulder and then perch on my shirt collar, pull up one leg and roost with his head tucked behind my ear. I taught myself how to meditate as a child—single-pointed awareness of my fingers on the keys, all the while cuddling this dear little bird asleep behind my ear.

When I practise music I isolate any passage that gives me trouble, working it over and over again until it flows more easily. I imagine you do the same with your writing. My mother remarked that I was “just doing it over and over again.” Perhaps she thought I engaged in seemingly endless repetition just to annoy her. She didn’t understand the deep wellspring of music within me that keeps me “doing it over and over again,” and always.

So yours is not the only legacy of a miserable childhood, Mr. Rilke. But you sure win hands down in the miserable childhood department:

The poet entered the world without moorings that allowed him no place to rest. Rene Karl Wilhelm Johann Joseph Maria Rilke, born prematurely on December 4, 1875, was at first so weak that his parents had to wait a fortnight before they dared take him . . . for his christening. The previous year a daughter had died a week after birth, and Phia now watched over this newborn with excessive care. In fact, during Rilke’s early years she acted as if she sought to recover the lost girl through the boy. Two of his names—Rene and Maria—make plain the mother’s attempt to lend him a female identity. For five years, until he went to school, she dressed him like a girl against his father’s ineffectual opposition. “I had to wear beautiful long dresses,” Rilke recalled many years later, “and until I started school I went about like a little girl. I think my mother played with me as though I were a big doll.” (Freedman, 1996, pg. 9)

You changed your first name from Rene to Rainer and, indeed, spent the rest of your life trying to overcome this.

I was tortured as a schoolgirl, educationally and socially. But I was only teased because my father had died and we had little money. The only thing I loved about school was music. I loved to sing and I loved to sing—to blend—in choir. But I was frequently given the choir solos and my schoolmates resented this. Even this joy was mitigated by their taunts.

Music is in me in a way that I can no more deny or stop than I can deny or stop breathing. It's so hard to explain the experience of music in words, Mr. Rilke. And your poem does this so well. Priestly (1975), a pioneering music therapist, talks about music therapy as a way of being and relating at “both non-verbal ends of the speech scale: sub-vocal relationship at the fumbling pre-ego depth of being and supra-vocal communication at altitudes where words no longer suffice” (p. 15). We need music and the arts to negotiate meaning where words leave off. Gaston (1968), also a music therapy pioneer, refers to music as nonverbal communication that communicates emotional information.

I, too, am a music therapist. Music therapists are so very aware of the power of music to elicit images and memories and to affect our feelings. We work with this all the time. Langer (1942) says music sounds the way emotions feel. You capture this, too, when you talk about feelings and say music is the “transformation of feelings . . . to audible landscape.” Yes, it is!

But you really outdo yourself when you say music is “a stranger” and then immediately in the next line you talk about its intimacy and immediacy, that music pours forth from the depths of our being as the “heart-space grown out of us.” And this paradox is just so like music being a container for such opposites, holding it all and holding it all together. And it is also a vehicle through which we express these rich depths of our inner being.

Music therapist Henk Smeijsters extrapolates from Stern's (2000/1985) arts-based conception of developmental psychology—that interactions between infant and caregiver (vitality affects) are analogous to musical processes. Smeijsters (2005) theorizes that within the client's clinical improvisation exists an analogy for his or her intrapersonal and interpersonal experience, that music sounds our inner being and our connection to the world. You say so yourself—that music is the “innermost point in us [that] stands outside . . .”

And I so appreciate your ending that hints at the other-worldly, spiritual dimensions of music when you say music is the “other side of the air: pure, boundless, no longer habitable.” That, for me, is sensational because the poem ends and you leave me wanting more. Brilliant!

So, Mr. Rilke, like I say, I really enjoy this poem. Your language and images are truly beautiful. I was surprised to learn that this is not one of your better known pieces nor did you sit down intentionally to write this poem. Rather, it is a spontaneous response to music you experienced—a comment written in Frau Hanna Wolff's guestbook on January 11th or 12th following a private concert in her Munich home (Drees, 2001; Gass, 1999). It is an uncollected poem that you never selected for publication, written during a time in your life when you had lost faith in yourself and your writing abilities (Rilke, 1995). Mind you, when you wrote this poem World War I hadn't yet ended and the childhood trauma you endured from being in a military academy during the break-up of your parents' marriage was being triggered. Or maybe your leukemia was flaring up insidiously and you just weren't feeling well?

You were a sickly one, Mr. Rilke. Anxiety and illness were synonymous in your childhood and you experienced episodes of ill health throughout your life. This suffering also heightened your awareness of your own functioning, perhaps forcing self-awareness on you. Like when you told the young poet, Mr. Kappus, in one of your letters how unwell you felt: “not exactly ill, but oppressed by an influenza-like lassitude that makes me incapable of anything . . . [W]riting comes hard to me . . .” (Rilke, 1934, p. 21). They didn't know as much about cancer in your days as we do now, nor were appropriate diagnostic tests available. Even today some cancers stubbornly elude detection. Your doctors didn't understand just how sick you really were.

You experienced bouts of illness as your leukemia waxed and waned for years before leading to your death. You likely suffered from a form of Chronic Myelocytic Leukemia (CML) which is caused by a non-inherited, acquired genetic DNA anomaly that affects the maturation of blood stem cells in the bone marrow and leads to an uncontrolled concentration of white blood cells. The early phase of this disease, known as the chronic phase, can develop slowly and lasts an indeterminate period of time. Some patients during this phase are asymptomatic. Others experience a gradual loss of well-being that—consistent with your symptoms—can include fatigue, lack of appetite, malaise and weight loss (CCS, 2006; NCI, 2006). For all we know, some of your earlier illnesses and depressions may be attributed to a flare-up of your leukemia and not just your narcissistic angst—not that such labelling is helpful for you, me or the reader.

Kleinbard (1996), for example, assesses you posthumously as having a borderline personality disorder that stops short of psychotic schizophrenic proportions. Similarly, Heep (2000) describes your relationship with your mother as

having inflicted permanent damage. But the traditional adjustment and adaptation model of psychosocial treatment—an individualistic deficit model that blames the victim for emotional responses—has long been criticized by psychiatric survivors (Burstow & Weitz, 1988). Opposition from within the ranks of psychiatry and psychology is now being voiced (for example, Bracken, 2003; Bracken & Thomas, 2001; Gergen & Warhus, 2001; Hopton, 2006; Maracek, 2002; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Sloan, 2000).

This radical therapy critique contends that psychiatric diagnoses “medicalize problems in living” and are “insensitive to the complexities of human existence” (Burstow, 2005, p. 444). Rather, symptoms are creative coping responses that warrant exploration, not amelioration (Burstow, 2004). The reason we fail to make progress in ameliorating chronic, persistent mental illness (Magaro, Gripp, McDowell, & Miller, 1978) is that psychiatric diagnoses are not really naturally occurring categories of diseases at all. Rather, they are definitions decided upon and assigned by committee (Woolfolk, 2001). Burstow (2003) further criticizes otherwise progressive therapists for perpetuating such diagnostic labelling for the purpose of third-party insurance payments.

Sadly, it was not until shortly before your death that your doctor was even aware you were dying of leukemia at all. Surely you knew how sickly you were feeling. At some level of your consciousness you must have known you had a life-threatening illness.

But in those days, bathing in the after-glow of Enlightenment science, Nature was a force to be tamed and Death was a foe to be conquered, not integrated, reckoned with or reconciled. As was the custom until quite recently, your physician did not give you a true picture of your condition, but insisted on protecting you from the knowledge you were dying (Freedman, 1996). You did not have conscious awareness of your cancer. All you knew was the suffering of great pain. Pain is not uncommon during the accelerated final blast phase (also known as blast crisis) of CML due to anemia, abnormal bleeding and infection. You did not know your illness was incurable. You never fully lived this shock—this blessing, some say—nor did you have the opportunity to say goodbye that having a lingering, incurable illness affords. You were spared the physical, financial and existential challenge of living with cancer (Spiegel & Classen, 2000).

And this is so counter to your very own philosophy. You were an expert in death. Influenced by the philosopher-historian Alfred Schuler, you saw death as a primary reality that is part of the totality of life. You so beautifully articulated this to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy in 1923:

We should not be afraid that our strength is insufficient to endure any experience of death, even the closest and most terrifying. Death is not *beyond* our strength; it is the measuring-line at the vessel's brim: we are *full* whenever we reach it. . . . I am not saying that we should *love* death; but we should love life so generously, so without calculation and selection, that we involuntarily come to include, and to love, death too (life's averted half) Only because we exclude death, when it suddenly enters our thoughts, has it become more and more of a stranger to us; and because we have kept it a stranger, it has become our enemy (Rilke, 1995, p. 569)

Similarly, a cancer patient in one of my music therapy support groups says:

I am not focused on dying. I want to live, but I also know dying is our human end. We all come to it at some point. So I think cancer has given me an opportunity to really get to feel it on a day-to-day basis. We have moments and glimmers of it, but on a day-to-day basis, it's [having a life-threatening illness] pretty profound. (Rykov, 2006)

You know, Mr. Rilke, this is such a quintessential existential position. One of the defining characteristics of existentialism asserts that death anxiety—the real or imagined threat of annihilation—is the ultimate fear that we can know. This is because human beings are conscious of their own deaths, whereas animal and plant beings are assumed not to have this awareness. Heidegger (1971) refers to this as being mortal when he says that “only man dies. The animal perishes” (pp. 178–179). But you, so rooted as you are in time and space to the European continental philosophical tradition, surely must be aware of this.

And while you may not have been given the opportunity to live your own dying, you did vicariously live the dying of Wera Knoop, your daughter's friend who died of leukemia at the tender age of nineteen. Her mother gave you her journal to read and you were very moved by it. It was your inspiration for both the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Rilke, 1945).

But what inspired you to write *An die Musik*? I can't help but wonder what music you heard that day in Frau Wolff's salon. Was it a Mozart concerto? A Beethoven sonata, perhaps? Or was Chopin thrilling you? Ravel? Debussy?

I suppose we'll never know. Whatever it was, I imagine it moving you to rapture, kindling the spark of the poem's essence until it tumbled fully formed through the pen in your hand onto the page in her guestbook.

This poem signifies a transition in your experience of music (Kovach, 1986). You used to be fearful of music, as you say in *Brigge*:

I, who even as a child was so mistrustful of music (not because it lifted me more powerfully than anything else out of myself, but rather because I had noticed that it did not place me down again where it had found me, but instead deeper, somewhere entirely into the unfinished). (Rilke in Kovach, 1986, p. 26)

Yes, music certainly does lift us up and can put us down, changed, and in a different place. The first known instrument-maker was Jubal, mentioned in *Genesis*. Etymologically, the Hebrew, *Yuval*, means “to transport.” Staiman (1994) says the “whole idea of music is to transport the person's soul” (p. 21). Again, we music therapists work daily with this knowledge. So you moved from a place of fear in *Brigge* to finally exalting music in *Sonnets to Orpheus. An die Musik* serves as a marker for this transformation.

You never considered yourself to be musical, nor did you attend concerts (Seelig, 1995). The change in your musical understanding is attributed to your romantic liason with the concert pianist, Magda von Graedener-Hattingberg in 1914 (Kovach, 1986). Some of the cancer patients in my music therapy support group say they listen to music differently since having cancer (Rykov, in press). Might you, also a cancer patient, have come to listen to music differently, too? But then, you never knew you were a cancer patient so how are we to really know?

I can't help wonder what you might say if you actually had the experience of making music yourself. Yes, Mr. Rilke, you—you making music. Yes, Mr. Rilke, yes you can, too. Everyone, by virtue of being human, can make music. We are all musical by virtue of our being human (Merriam, 1964). Indeed, perhaps we may be even more humane through our experiences with music?

All music, Mr. Rilke, is the succession of pitch tones sounding individually and collectively in time. There's nothing to be afraid of. Let me reframe that: the only thing to fear is not the music itself, but the meanings we (individually and collectively, as a culture) project onto it. Music operates as an agent of meaning because it is deeply embedded in culture. Cook (1998) says that music “doesn't just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make of it. People *think* through music, decide who they are through it, express themselves through it” (p. vi). Rather than the metaphor of music-as-object (i.e., a something, a product), it is a way (a process) of knowing the world, a way of being ourselves. In other words, music is a cultural system that is imbued with the meaning we give it.

This, admittedly, can be daunting. We imbue music with all kinds of qualities that say more about us than the music itself. Blacking says that musical ideas, like all ideas, are “human constructs that are related to other ideas in cultural systems” (Blacking, 1987). For example, as Cook (1998) says, music is linked with the idea that it gives access to the world beyond and makes the voice of Nature audible. He points out that as “conventional religion succumbed to the onslaught of science, music provided an alternative route to spiritual consolation” (p. 36). Music may not be essentially spiritual in and of itself but provides a container for our spiritual strivings, sentiments and projections.

Aside from saying they listen to music differently, participants in my music therapy cancer support group were profoundly changed by their active participation in music (Rykov, in press). Indeed, it was the actual music-making—vocal and instrumental—that had the greatest meaning for them. This was particularly interesting for those who had no formal music training and for those who initially believed they would not enjoy making music. One participant experienced a change in her relationship to music—a change in her perception of herself as being musical versus unmusical – as a result of playing music in the music therapy support groups. This changed her musical self-concept, her musical sense-of-self:

I came with this lovely, strong voice. I brought creativity and energy to the group . . . I realize I have many gifts. I am blessed with these gifts. I cannot ignore them. (Rykov, 2006)

So you really fool me here, Mr. Rilke, because your poem *sounds* so musical, just to listen to it, even not understanding a word of German.¹ And for someone who doesn't consider himself to be musical, this poem is such an articulate and experientially embodied exploration of music. It reflects how you actually *live* the experience of music—what music is *really* like for you. Furthermore, you support and affirm my personal and professional experience of music—what music is *really* like for me.

¹ Professor Gregory Johnston graciously recorded *An die Musik* in the original German, allowing opportunities for repeated listening.

This is why I am so excited by your poem, Mr. Rilke. And I must thank you for riveting my attention to it and really making me think. In the process I have come to understand how poetry is a truer medium for phenomenological writing than discursive text. This is hardly an original insight. Max van Manen (1990/1997), Laurel Richardson (2003, 2005), Corrine Glesne (1997), Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997) are among those who support this contention.

And I wasn't going to tell you this, Mr. Rilke, but I, too, write poetry sometimes. I don't really consider myself a poet—certainly not anywhere near a poet of your proportions. I mostly write songs, which are poems set to music. Song-writing is just one of the things most music therapists do (Baker & Wigram, 2005; Jones, 2006). I also actively aspire to poetic qualities in my own writing and reflections. You see, I love to play with words: alliteration, assonance, rhyme, metre and rhythm, syntax, grammar and semantics. And I love to play with words to get closer to the heart, the essence, the soul of an experience. And this, after all, is what a poem is: a created experience.

Our word, *poem*, is derived from the Latin, *poema*, which in turn is derived from the Greek *poiema/poema*—from *poiein*, to make, do, create, compose (Webster, 1993). Essentially, then, a poem is a creation designed as a unit to communicate to the reader the sense of a complete experience. And that's why poetry is so akin to phenomenology because it is a direct description of the experienced lifeworld.

Woods (1996) explains how poetic language is more effective than discursive writing to directly describe embodied, lived experience and not just a concept about experience:

[T]he poet constantly utilizes language to convey life instead of mere hollow ideas about it, and he often succeeds in this by making language's very artificiality defeat itself By drawing attention to patterns in language—those of rhythm, syntax and sound in particular—the poet may succeed in creating a complex interlaced pattern which *stimulates* the interweave of real phenomena rather than attempting to convey them in discursive terms. (p. 11)

Your major task, Woods tells us, was to experience the interrelationship of all phenomena and to “experience it directly” (p. 31). Pointing out that meaning in poetry is but a small part of its total effect, Woods stresses the importance of embodiment by quoting from Yeats (1996):

God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone,
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow bone. (p. 282)

The disembodied thought, it seems, is not worth thinking.

And describing embodied experience is what you do with such power and beauty. I truly enjoy the images your writing evokes, Mr. Rilke. One of your translators, J.B. Leishman, says that the secret of your poetry, however, is not in your imagery but in your syntax and rhythms. Through your long, winding sentences you communicate your attempt to analyze as accurately and fully as possible how particular “things feel” and how they came to be what they are for you in particular moments (Leishman in Woods, 1996, pp. 18–19). This is the goal, too, of good qualitative research—that it strive for description that accurately captures and communicates the context and meaning of the experience being explored. The distinguished anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973), refers to this as thick, rich description.

You also write yourself in. You are present in your poems in a way that indelibly leaves your mark. Woods (1996) says we feel your “presence in the originality and intensity of the *expression* of reality” (p. 42). The uniqueness of the experience comes from the magical way you manage to transform language.

And speaking of transforming language, one thing puzzles me, Mr. Rilke. It's about the title. And I wonder if you can give me some clarification here?

I understand you intend your title for this poem, *An die Musik* (To Music), as an ode (Kovach, 2005) or salutation, i.e., “Cheers, here's to you, music.” Would you entertain the possibility of it being a present tense, infinitive verb—I music, you music, he musics, she musics, we music, they music? This notion of Western tonal music being a verb is a contentious issue in some music circles. Small (1998) addresses this, pointing to what is called the “new” postmodern musicology. On the other hand, modern, or traditional, musicology is an essentialist conception of music as pure

sound, divorced from any social situatedness, as in the work of Adorno (2003) or Dahlhaus (1989). This notion of music-as-verb (a performed action) is in opposition to the notion of music-as-noun (a piece, an object), the “old,” modernist musicology.

You see, historically, music prior to the 1700s was a more active process. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites precedents for the word, *music*, being used as a verb (OED, 2003). So back then music was performed and improvised more often than it was pinned down to the page. Then it began to be written down more fully and became longer and much more complex. And then it got taken up by the same notion of aesthetics as in the visual “fine” arts and, before long, beauty and value in music became judged by those same standards.

But music isn’t a stationary physical object in the same way that art is. And this mistaken notion of aesthetics is what Goehr (1992) implies when she says there is an “imaginary museum of musical works.” (Then, of course, there’s the whole issue of what gets picked to be in the museum and what gets left out, but we won’t go there now.) Certainly music-as-verb is more the norm in traditional societies where there is a more equal music participation—everyone participates in some manner to a greater extent – and where music often plays a more functional role in ritual and life, generally (Dowling & Harwood, 1986). For example, in traditional African societies art is in the making—the process—rather than in the finished product; when the musical performance is over there is nothing left except the memory and the retention of feelings (Blacking, 1987).

So, which is it, Mr. Rilke: noun only, or verb? Or perhaps, maybe—could it be both? This ambiguity, again, is so very akin to the phenomenon of music. And this, I think, is music’s true power and *raison d’être*: It helps us achieve a greater tolerance for ambiguity.

I would really appreciate knowing what you think. And I hope I hear from you soon because I have a deadline for this writing. No pressure. Thanks, Mr. Rilke.

Yours truly,



P.S. Please know I also sincerely enjoyed your *Sonnets to Orpheus* and *Duino Elegies* (Rilke, 1945).²

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² Rilke’s writing, first translated to English in the 1930s, maintains tremendous popular appeal today. Komar (2001) describes him as a cultural icon whose popularity is similar to Herman Hesse’s popularity in the 1960s. I understand Rainer Maria Rilke as a troubled man living in troubled times whose search for meaning—and its eloquent articulation—leaves a legacy that informs us now in these troubled times of our own. Much of his philosophy, informed by the continental philosophical tradition in which he was steeped, is part of the bedrock of current social science thought. Rilke’s exquisite use of language affirms that poetry is a valid means of hermeneutic-phenomenological understanding that is nothing short of inspirational. Mr. Rilke lived his cancer and his dying unawares. I wonder what he might have said had he known? And I wonder *how* he might have said it?

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