

Do The Arts Have A Purpose? Discuss This Question In Relation To A Personal Experience In The Arts

Earlier this year, I attended a concert at Newcastle City Hall featuring a two hour performance by The Herbie Hancock Quartet. The quartet comprised of a drummer, a double bassist, a xylophonist and Hancock himself on piano. I enjoy listening to a wide range of musical styles and find jazz particularly pleasurable and interesting as it often avoids the predictable and repetitious nature of many other types of music. Before going to the concert I was not overly familiar with Hancock's music; only one of the tunes he performed that night was one I had heard before. The set consisted of a selection of music spanning Hancock's 40 year career, although, as he himself explained, some of the works had been 'twisted' to give them a more modern perspective. There was a sense of anticipation building in the air as the hall filled with people of all ages. The music began slowly and gently before gradually mounting in pace and intensity. I remember a feeling of weightlessness, as if I was floating, carried along by the music. As the intensity of the music grew so did the feelings of anticipation, sometimes becoming a kind of anxiety, my breathing slowing down, waiting for what will come next. I was naturally expecting the music to reach some kind of crescendo, that it was building up toward some kind of spectacular conclusion. I was quite disorientated when instead the music suddenly broke off into a gentle, flowing melody. Rather than the huge conclusion and fall back to earth I had expected, I found myself exhilarated and floating again, but higher this time, as if lifted up by the music. It wasn't until the music was winding down and the people in the hall began to applaud that I began to remember where I was. I had been so drawn into the music that I had largely forgotten my surroundings and that was only the first tune. By the end of the concert I was feeling quite giddy and worn out. It is without doubt that the music played that night evoked quite powerful feelings in me. Each tune was like a journey of sensations and emotions directed by the music. How had Hancock managed this? Did he just sit down at his piano and plonk away until something he liked came out? Unlikely, the music and its effects were too intricate and explicit to put down to luck and random chance. Hancock had obviously taken great care in writing and arranging his music in order to achieve this effect. Why? Music is obviously his livelihood but this was not the music of someone making a living, he was almost certainly pursuing something other, perhaps something more, than financial gain. As I have discussed above, Hancock didn't find these feelings in the music, it seems more likely that he already had these feelings. Perhaps they were feelings he was experiencing at the time of writing the tunes, or something from his past. Either way he was using the music to externalise the feelings, to express them in a way that he knew how, shaping the music to convey his internal experiences. Listening to the music that night sometimes took a fair amount of concentration on my part. From time to time I would find myself drifting away with the feelings evoked by the music, going off on my own little journey of sensations. How does this fit in with the notion of Hancock trying to convey his feelings with the music? It could just be lack of attention on my part or it could be a failure by Hancock to provide sufficiently gripping music that demands our attention. It is equally possible that he intended certain passages of his music to stimulate our own imaginations and act as a background as we explore our own feeling and emotions.

Another interesting question arises from the fact that Hancock had changed some of his music from its original composition. He said that he had 'twisted' some of his older tunes in order to modernise them. If his aim is to express the same feelings as in the original music, then why change it? Perhaps he does want to express a different feeling from the original. It is more likely however, that in order to convey the same meaning or feelings to a modern audience he has to

use a more modern, or at least different, style of expression. The music that he wrote thirty or forty years ago has been much imitated and borrowed from by other artists. These other artists have used it to convey their own message and some of the musical styles have become clichéd and so the original meaning of the music is confused, diluted or lost altogether.

I believe it is the purpose of most (if not all) art to evoke sensations or emotions in the audience. More often than not, these feelings will stem from an experience of the artist which he or she then tries to communicate to the audience. Verbal communication is usually the first and foremost means of interaction for people trying to exchange ideas or feelings but this can be a very restricted way of trying to articulate our experiences, especially in the emotional realm. The use of music or other art forms can give the artist a much wider range of methods and tools with which to express themselves, free from grammatical rules and dictionary definitions. The only limit to self-expression in the arts is the artist's imagination. The drawback to this freedom is that these methods of communication are more open to interpretation and this can often lead to the artist being misunderstood, losing out on the very clarity they seek. I am certain however that my descriptions of Hancock's performance cannot hope to come close to conveying the feelings evoked by his music that night; he is obviously a man who has mastered his chosen method of communication and so is able to fulfil his purpose.