

OPINION

For life's big events we turn to art, music, poetry and beautiful buildings – where would we be without all of these things?

Just because not everybody consciously acknowledges art's benefits to the society around them should not mean we leave aside the conversation about its intrinsic value



Nicki Kennedy



For every Island musician

It was 1985, and I was 18 years old. I was working the season at the Island Cruising Club in Salcombe. If I hear 'Blueberry Hill', the song we sang, I'm triggered. I am there, singing, sailing, sunbathing. I can literally smell it and hear it.

Another old song that we revived was Don Mclean's American Pie. When that plays I am taken straight back to a life-changing journey I undertook at 18 in an old 1952 Routemaster double-decker bus, from London to Khatmandu (yes, really). That song was our soundtrack right up until Gallipoli, in Turkey, where, having finally had enough of poor Don, the cassette tape was ejected from a window and that was that. I can't hear that song without it evoking the sounds, smells, people and landscape of that extraordinary journey.

Nowadays I'm as likely to be transported by Bach or Mozart, who return me to the sounds, smells and emotions of performances that, as a professional musician, I recall and relive in cold, damp and wonderful churches and theatres around Europe and beyond.

The power of music to bind a group of wedding guests or mourners at a funeral is indescribable.

Sporting events bring out a primal urge to sing. We share elation and disappointment. On the terraces, singing seems a tribal response: innate, necessary. Studies suggest that we sang before we spoke – that singing is indeed an essential 'primal' activity.

During the pandemic the Jersey Music Association took a forensic look at the science behind the 'essential' nature of music. We needed to do this to persuade the government that singing and music should be considered with care in terms of imposing restrictions.

We realised we would get nowhere with individual voices. We needed one coherent strategy for music to be afforded the attention it needed from swamped politicians and an embattled Public Health Department feeling its way through difficult and unknown territory.

We developed a productive relationship with Public Health, working to keep music going and walking the tightrope between risk and essential music-making.

We made our arguments using science. We countered the evidence about aerosol and viral load with arguments of our own in favour of balance and mitigation, speaking of the importance of singing and music for mental health, wellbeing and vital cognitive development, language, memory and social bonding, especially in children.

The pandemic shone a light on the way that we discuss the arts with politicians and funders. In this emergency it was right to quantify the measurable benefits of music. The 'instrumental' value of music.

However, in 'normal' times, does this approach alone serve us? This is not a new debate, and has been chewed around a good deal in recent years. When lobbying to keep music on the map for pupils in schools, music educators commonly argue that 'music is really good for you. It makes you better at maths and English'. This is true, and well-documented. Introducing 'singing schools' has been found to turn establishments in the UK from failing institutions to raging success stories, with academic results and social cohesion rising for both staff and pupils.

Another common argument is that music is essential for mental health and wellbeing. This has also been proven.

Music concerns self-expression, identity and social bonding. Perhaps here we come closer to looking at a different way of valuing music, and by that I mean valuing the intrinsic value of the arts. What of 'art for art's sake'? Must the value of art only be measured by maths scores?

In 1936, the economist John Maynard Keynes said: 'We are capable of shutting off the sun and the stars because they do not pay a dividend. London is one of the

richest cities in the history of civilisation, but it cannot "afford" the highest standards of achievement of which its own living citizens are capable, because they do not "pay".'

'If I had the power today I should surely set out to endow our capital cities with all the appurtenances of art and civilisation on the highest standards of which the citizens of each were individually capable, convinced that what I could create, I could afford – and believing that the money thus spent would not only be better than any dole, but would make unnecessary any dole.'

This economist also founded the Arts Council in the UK.

In 2004, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell called time on the instrumental approach. She said: 'Too often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas... In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself.'

Artists know the intrinsic value of their pursuit, but rarely dare to use those arguments when approaching funders or politicians.

They drop the 'intrinsic value' discourse in favour of the 'instrumental'. They know that quantifiable and measurable outcomes will speak.

Support our industry and you will create X number of jobs. More music and dance in schools will benefit the maths scores. Reduce the health bill by giving patients more access to music.

However, keeping the intrinsic value of art and culture to ourselves, and failing to discuss it, like a 'dirty little secret' kept among those in the know, may not serve us well.

Just because not everybody consciously acknowledges art's benefits to the

society around them – I mean social cohesion, a sense of identity, the story of a common history, inspiration from a beautiful building, a fabulous painting, or a thought-provoking poem that hits a spot of recognition of common values – should not mean that we leave aside the conversation about the intrinsic value of art.

Next time you join with friends and strangers at a concert or event, and you experience shared goosebumps, that emotional rollercoaster, or the buzz and elation of a great musical performance, and next time you feel your heart soar as you gaze on a beautiful, uplifting piece of architecture, why not give a thought to what your life would be without the building, the art, the music?

Cast your thoughts to the people who devote their lives to helping us to understand the world around us and to building a richer one, to helping us find our sense of identity and, by expressing themselves, help us to express our own selves.

For the big events of life we turn to art, poetry, music, beautiful buildings. In times of pandemic, threat of war and steeply rising costs of living it is not an easy conversation to have, but perhaps these are the very times that we most need to value and appreciate not just music and its role in our lives, but all beauty and artistic endeavour – for its own sake as well as for its measurable outcomes.

■ Nicki Kennedy moved to Jersey in the summer of 2019. She is a singer who has performed as a classical soloist all over the world and is also a respected international voice coach and singing teacher with her own business, Nicki Kennedy Voiceworks. She has a particular specialist training in vocal rehabilitation for performers and in the psychology of performance, whether public speaking or singing. She teaches at the Jersey Academy of Music and in Oxford, where she trains choral scholars at the university. She is a founder member of the Jersey Music Association and was a part of the team that worked with Public Health to find a pathway for music through the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

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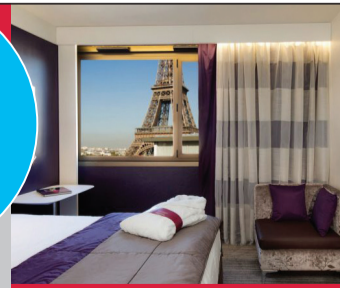
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