

“Musethica Brings Us to the Core of our Vocation”

A Conversation with Djanay Tulenova, Avri Levitan, and Johannes Meissl

Axel Petri-Preis

In her book *Journeys of Lifelong Learning in Music*, Rineke Smilde describes how musicians who play in various, sometimes new and unfamiliar, social contexts reflect on their artistic identity and how experiences from these musical practices also influence performances in conventional concert settings (Smilde 2021, 200). According to Smilde, playing music in diverse social contexts, such as in hospitals, for vulnerable groups and individuals requires a special form of excellence that goes beyond artistic excellence, which she calls situational excellence (ibid., 107f.). Musicians need to develop a sensitivity to their social environment, understanding and being able to read the needs of their respective audiences and how to reach them.

The *Musethica* programme was founded by Avri Levitan in 2012 in Zaragoza to provide music students with the opportunity to develop their artistic practice through performances for people with limited access to live classical music. Participants in the programme, along with tutors, perform in places such as prisons, schools, and hospices. Levitan’s observation that aspiring musicians often lack performance opportunities to practice building a communicative relationship with their audience was the starting point for *Musethica*. The programme consists of week-long masterclasses that include instruction from renowned teachers and two to three concerts per day, which the participants perform together with their tutors. In these concerts, young musicians can develop not only their artistic skills but also the situational excellence that Rineke Smilde discusses in her book. They also experience that their artistic practice is not either *l’art pour l’art* or social work, but that it exists on a continuum where different “partnering values” (Gaunt et al. 2021, 4) mutually enrich each other.

At the *Turning Social* conference, Johannes Meissl, vice rector of the University of Music and Performing Arts, discussed the artistic and ethical principles and objectives of the *Musethica* programme, which has been in

partnership with the mdw since 2014. Mdw student and violinist Djanay Tulenova shared her own experiences as a participant in the *Musethica* programme and performed an excerpt from György Ligeti's 2nd *String Quartet* together with her Rubik Quartet. For this contribution, Axel Petri-Preis invited the founder and artistic director of *Musethica*, Avri Levitan, as well as Johannes Meissl and Djanay Tulenova, to a Zoom conversation on June 5, 2024. The discussion addressed the relationship between music and ethics, the potential redefinition of artistic excellence, the preparation of musicians for challenging performance situations within the programme, and the experiences of the discussants in their roles as tutors and participants in the programme.

Introduction of the conversation partners

Avri Levithan studied at the Rubin Academy of Music in Tel-Aviv and at the Conservatoire de Paris. He has performed at renowned music festivals worldwide. Beyond his role as a performer, Avri Levitan has devoted himself to nurturing the next generation of musicians. At the age of 25, he became a dedicated viola and chamber music teacher. In 2008, he assumed the position of Professor and Music Director of the string programme at CIEC La Rioja in Spain, and from 2010 to 2018, he held the position of Professor of Viola and Chamber Music at the Conservatorio Superior de Música de Aragón (CSMA). In 2012 he founded *Musethica* together with Carmen Marcuello.

Johannes Meissl is a professor of chamber music and has been vice-rector for international affairs and art at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna since October 2019. From 2010, until his appointment as vice-rector, he headed the Joseph Haydn Department of Chamber Music, Early Music and Contemporary Music and also served as president of the mdw senate from 2015 until September 2019. Furthermore, Meissl is artistic director of isa – the International Summer Academy of the mdw. Since 1982 he has been a member of Artis Quartett Wien, performing a concert series at the Vienna Musikverein. In 2014 he established a collaboration between mdw and *Musethica*.

Djanay Tulenova studies violin in the class of Christian Altenburger at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. The multiple award-winning violinist started her musical education at the age of 5 in Almaty / Kazakhstan. She then studied violin with Alexander Kirov at the Moscow State Conservatory P. I. Tschaikovsky and with Boris Belkin at the Maastricht Academy of Music.

She is a member of the Rubik Quartet which participated in the *Musethica* programme and concert master of the Vereinigte Bühnen Wien orchestra.

The Connection between Music and Ethics

Axel Petri-Preis: I would like to start our conversation by talking about the name of the programme first. *Musethica* is a combination of music and ethics, which is interesting, because at first glance it may not seem like the most obvious combination, if you view music purely as an aesthetic phenomenon. However, if you consider music as a social practice, ethical questions naturally arise. In their book *Artistic Citizenship. Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, David Elliott, Marissa Silverman, and Wayne Bowman use the verb "musicking" instead of the noun music and argue that music as a social practice contains an inherent ethical dimension. Based on this they also assert that musicians have a social responsibility and that they should contribute to human thriving through their art. My first two questions therefore are: Where do you see the connection between music and ethics? And what potential, and maybe also limit, do you see in the social responsibility of musicians?

Avri Levitan: I have a very close friend, a professor of philosophy, who said he did not like the name because he did not think it should be interpreted as a philosophical phenomenon. It is not about combining ethics in the philosophical sense, but because music is a social practice. And for many years, classical music has been mistakenly handled as a form of music that belongs to a certain part of society. It is about bringing music back to its origin as a part of basic social needs. This explains the combination of music and ethics.

Johannes Meissl: Music has always had a direct connection to societal needs. Especially now, classical music is becoming much more aware of this strong implication. As an institution, we at the university strongly pursue a combination of striving both for excellence and direct societal engagement. The experiences musicians gain from projects like *Musethica* show that this is not just an obligation, but that it brings us to the core of our vocation. It has a very immediate and burning relevance because it addresses the question of why we educate young musicians and what they should achieve.

Avri Levitan: It is interesting that we think of social responsibility as something separate for musicians. The education of young musicians is often not socially oriented, usually it is about individual achievement and competition. It is amaz-

ing that we suddenly realise we are doing something social. Music, possibly the first form of communication among humans, is deeply embedded in our DNA.

Djanay Tulenova: I have never really thought about it because, as a violinist, I was raised with exactly the mindset of egocentrism and competition. But because of *Musethica*, I first understood that when you perform, you are supposed to play for the public. However, you don't know your audience. You do not know their backgrounds or what they are feeling – maybe someone had a birthday or came from a funeral. You have to touch the souls of people who are in very different emotional and psychological states. When you play in a big, fancy hall and perform something like Brahms, you try to connect with the audience. But there is often a kind of barrier, a bubble that you cannot really penetrate. With *Musethica*, my experience was very different, because I was very close to the audience, which was mostly in mental institutions or hospices, dealing with people in various states of consciousness. It gave me an idea of the diverse emotions and states of mind of the people you are dealing with and how you can reach them. Now, when I play in concert halls for a typical classical audience, I remember these experiences. It gave me more insight into the psychology and nature of the audience I am serving.

Rethinking Artistic Excellence?

Axel Petri-Preis: Artistic excellence is a central buzzword in higher music education. Against the backdrop of what the three of you were just saying, is it not time to rethink or redefine the traditional notion of artistic excellence, beyond just being excellent on your instrument and towards including more dimensions of being an artist?

Djanay Tulenova: I was following the *Queen Elisabeth Competition*¹. Some participants were clearly playing for the public, trying to connect, rather than focusing solely on winning. Unfortunately, many of these musicians did not make it to the finals, which I found surprising and a bit disappointing. It showed that technical excellence is still heavily emphasised. But through programmes like *Musethica*, more musicians are starting to understand and approach their craft differently, aiming to reach and engage the public in a more artistic way.

1 The *Queen Elisabeth Competition* is one of the most prestigious competitions for violin, cello, piano and voice. For more information see <https://concoursreineeelisabeth.be/en/home/> (accessed April 15, 2025).

Avri Levitan: I understand the distinction people make between technical and musical excellence, but I do not personally and professionally see them as separate. They are one and the same. If you only play the notes cleanly without musicality, it is incomplete. If a jury focuses only on technical precision, that is their problem, not the audience's. In *Musethica*, excellence in playing – both technical and musical – plays a huge role, perhaps even more so than in big halls or competitions. What happened at the *Queen Elizabeth Competition* shows that the classical music world can be confusing and self-contained, with traditions and rules that do not necessarily serve the broader public. Sometimes people say that in *Musethica* you feel less judged and can allow yourself to make mistakes. I understand the philosophy behind it. When you play, you should not focus on potential mistakes but on the expression and the phrase. True artistry comes from striving for high quality and excellence. If you play flat or with poor phrasing, it will not resonate with the audience.

Djanay Tulenova: In the *Queen Elizabeth Competition*, everyone's technique is impeccable. What can be observed is that there are people who focus on traditions and others who strive for new ideas, new ways of expressing music and reaching the audience. The *Queen Elizabeth Competition* is a strong example of a traditional approach.

Johannes Meissl: There are still strong remnants of a system that has become quite self-referential. In my opinion, excellence requires a very high level of skill and craftsmanship. This is indispensable. However, it also needs to go beyond mere execution. Execution has dominated our educational system – you perform something correctly, and it is marked as acceptable, and audiences, trained to accept this, go along with it. When we consider the power of communication that music inherently carries, mere execution that meets certain parameters will not suffice because it does not communicate or resonate. True artistry involves looking for the personal touch, being aware of the audience, and adapting to different settings, whether intimate or large-scale. This new definition of excellence combines skill with an awareness of the audience, creating a circular interaction of giving and taking. This approach can engage even those unfamiliar with classical music, touching them deeply without needing explanations. In *Musethica*, we have seen that this strong interaction can feed back into traditional settings, making performances relevant for both the audience and the musicians. It is beyond just delivering a performance; it is about creating a meaningful connection.

The Foundation and Idea of *Musethica*

Axel Petri-Preis: Avri, you founded *Musethica* in 2012, in Zaragoza, to provide young musicians with the opportunity to perform for audiences with limited access to classical music. Can you tell us more about your ideas behind the foundation of this programme, its development and its goals?

Avri Levitan: It actually started from a somewhat egoistic idea I had as a teacher. Our job is to make young musicians better, simple as that. I realised that learning performance without regular performances is limited. No matter how good the teacher is, if the learning happens only in the studio, in front of colleagues and professors, many elements are missing. People from outside the classical music world do not care about technical difficulties; they just want the music to sound good. This realisation led me to think that regular performances outside the classroom could be beneficial. I developed this idea with Carmen Marcuello, a professor of social economy. She supported it, and we started with performances in special needs schools, prisons, and other venues. Initially, I aimed to improve the musicians' skills, but I quickly realised the significant social dimension. Each lesson learned was unplanned, but it showed that playing for diverse audiences requires a different motivation and engages the brain in unique ways. *Musethica's* approach of giving regular performances trains musicians to transfer this experience to traditional concert halls. Last week in Spain, people were still talking about a concert where a musician played Bach at a hospital. This lasting impact highlights the importance of our work.

Johannes Meissl: For me, it is crucial to combine the idea of playing for diverse audiences and taking every single one of these performances as seriously as we would regular classical concerts, like at Carnegie Hall. That makes it special for everyone. It is not about fame or praise. It is not about comparison. It is about doing it for the sake of doing it, for all of us, the best way we can.

Experiences from the *Musethica* Programme

Axel Petri-Preis: Djanay, would you please share some insights into your experience with the *Musethica* programme?

Djanay Tulenova: The first time I participated was in Norway and all the concerts were very unusual for me. There was one particular concert I will never forget. It was in a hospice when a nurse came to me and asked me to play Bach for a

patient who was going to die in three days. This turned everything 180 degrees in my head. It wasn't like going on stage to play for a regular audience. This person was unconscious, so I had to reach very deep parts of the brain. It was like the mythological journey from one shore to another. On one side, there was no pressure regarding tradition or technique. But on the other side, it awakened the instinct of why I play music in the first place. It brought a purity of purpose and I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility, because I realised my music would be the last thing she would hear in her life.

Avri Levithan: Part of our problematic education as musicians and teachers is that we always like to define what is an important concert and what is not. Why is one more important than the other? Because some notable people might be there, or I might be invited to something later? This dichotomy of important versus unimportant is very problematic on all levels. If you do not play an important concert, you might not care as much, and if you do play an important one, you might suddenly be unable to deliver. Djanay told the other students in Oslo that this was the most important concert of her life. And I understand that feeling. I remember standing outside the door, hearing her play. It was very special and beautiful on all levels. This change in perspective on what is important has been an enlightening learning experience for me.

Preparing musicians for their performances in new settings

Axel Petri-Preis: Djanay, it is very impressive to hear you talk about these special moments, perhaps your most important concerts. What I wonder though is – and I am asking both you, Avri and Johannes, as tutors, as well as you, Djanay, as a participant – how can you prepare young musicians for these challenging situations? Playing for a dying person, for instance, can potentially be an overwhelming experience. I am glad to hear that it played out very well for you, but I imagine it could also be, in the worst case, a traumatic experience.

Avri Levithan: We discussed this from the beginning of *Musethica* and also considered involving therapists in one of the sessions. We found out, however, you cannot really prepare for that. It might not even be necessary to prepare because we come as musicians, acting as a bridge in these situations. We have to do our job, our function, in this context. Preparing might have the opposite effect of scaring some people. From my experience, and I think this is an open discussion, preparation might not be the best approach. Maybe having someone

on call that musicians can talk to if needed could be helpful. This is something we have considered.

Johannes Meissl: We had this consideration and discussion before we started our first activities with *Musethica*. I would agree that it requires a certain general preparation to know that musicians will not be met with the same environment as a concert hall. But we encourage them to be open to the situation and the people they meet. We did some wrap-up discussions, but it turned out they were not as necessary as we initially thought. And maybe this is an important point from the tutor's perspective. It is not just about sending people somewhere and leaving them to their experiences. There is always an experienced tutor who either plays together with them or at least plays something him- or herself. And there is always the possibility to talk about the performance, the situation and the impressions.

Avri Levitan: But I think it is important to note that there is always a guiding person from *Musethica*. Musicians never go alone.

Johannes Meissl: Exactly, it is never that musicians are just sent somewhere to figure things out on their own. There is always someone from *Musethica* ensuring they find the place and that there is a tutor present. The exchange usually covers both the performance and the artistic side, as well as the personal impressions. For example, with the prisons, you learn afterward that the people you played for were sentenced to 25 years or life. That tells you something, but it is better not to know beforehand what they were convicted for.

Avri Levitan: I never want to hear that because we are not there to judge. They do not look at my history, and we do not look at theirs. We just play, note by note.

Djanay Tulenova: As someone who experienced it firsthand, I would say that preparation would have actually ruined my experience. Imagine if someone had told me beforehand, that I would play for this dying woman in a hospice. I would have had a completely different attitude towards it. It would have felt like more of an obligation, which isn't really pleasant to do. But when you are caught off guard and you are right there, you have to prepare and play at that moment. It is your job as a musician to provide for the last journey of a dying person. We were not prepared for anything we experienced in *Musethica*. But it was much better because the experience was more sensational, stronger, and deeper.

Musethica at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna

Axel Petri-Preis: Johannes, Avri has already talked about the foundation of *Musethica* in Spain. How did the collaboration with the mdw come about and why do you think that the programme is an important part of the education of mdw students?

Johannes Meissl: It has to do with my experiences as a musician, teacher, and human being. When I accepted the invitation to experience *Musethica* for the first time in Spain, I was very curious and open. It was a striking experience for me. It showed me that if everything works together in the right way, it can be very powerful. Of course, it requires good preparation in terms of organisation. Everything must be sorted out beforehand. Institutions must not feel invaded, and everything must fit well. The musicians must be at the highest possible level of artistic preparation, and everyone must be open to the experience. When these elements come together, it becomes not only an added value but a crucial tool for achieving the excellence we have been discussing. It combines immediate communication, awareness, and the ability to perform without being caught in strange conceptual bubbles. We are now on a good track to sustainably establish *Musethica* as a very important way of achieving our goals, which include addressing the needs of changing societies and the evolving classical music world and business. I am very convinced that it was the right decision and that we will continue to grow stronger with it in the future.

Axel Petri-Preis: Thank you all very much for this insightful conversation!

Bibliography

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