

Essay:**When music is “about” something,
don’t forget to listen**

by Jarrett Hoffman



Imagine two hypothetical works of music. Piece A has a story behind it — maybe a moment in history, or an issue facing the world, or that time the composer stubbed their toe — while Piece B is just music, period.

For composers, there are some advantages to writing a “Piece A.” They can easily describe it to people who might want to hear, publicize, perform, or present it. And those same

people can quickly latch onto something that’s interesting (current event) or relatable (stubbed toe). But just as easily, that concrete description can come to overshadow the actual music in discussions about the piece.

Violinist Leila Josefowicz (*above*) gave me some gentle sass about this during an [interview](#) last fall. She was bringing John Adams’ *Scheherazade.2* to The Cleveland Orchestra, and I had asked her a couple conceptual questions about the concerto, which reimagines the character of Scheherazade as a modern, empowered woman. Here’s what she said:

We can talk endlessly about the narrative of this piece, and what it means, and what it symbolizes. But man, what I really love is that at the end of the day, it’s just a great, great piece of music. Even if it had no narrative, no political agenda, it would still be a total masterwork.

That response made me curious to ask other performers where they fall in this debate, and a few weeks ago, I got that chance with violinist Sayaka Shoji. She was heading to Ohio to solo with CityMusic Cleveland in the premiere of Avner Dorman’s Third Violin

Concerto, which is inspired by the idea of mental stillness. She sent me this response as part of a [Q&A](#) over email:

I believe in programmatic music as long as the music is as strong as the program — only when it helps to understand more about the music. Music should come from somewhere, and the audience should be able to feel some source of inspiration when listening to the music. I'm very skeptical when I can't feel anything from the music alone without reading the explanation — or in the worst case, after reading it ten times.



It's true, sometimes programmatic music (in other words, a "Piece A") comes across as vague compared to the vivid composer notes that accompany it. I've also experienced the opposite: when music tries too hard to highlight a narrative. To me, that was the case with Julia Wolfe's 60-minute oratorio *Fire in my mouth*, which explores the horrific fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1911 in New York City, and the movement for workers' rights.

I heard the work at its premiere in January at David Geffen Hall in NYC, directed by Anne Kauffman, and performed by the New York Philharmonic and a female choir, which included members of The Crossing and the Young People's Chorus of New York City, all under the direction of Jaap van Zweden.

I was astonished by what went into the piece: fragments of oral history, bits of folk and protest songs, projected video and photos, huge choral and orchestral forces, and costuming and staging. It felt like a special opportunity to reflect on this event, not only in the city where it happened, but also at a time when women and immigrants (who made



up the majority of the deaths in that fire) continue to face discrimination and violence. In that way, it served an important purpose.

But making an artistic response to tragedy is no easy task. In this case, Wolfe (*left*) aimed to match the emotions around the fire in her music, and unfortunately, it came across as heavy-handed. Others surely disagreed — you should have heard the ovation in the hall. (It *was* a great performance, tight in ensemble and unfailingly energetic.)

I love stories in music. And I think it's important for everyone in our industry to look out the window and connect more with other aspects of the world. Let's just keep listening closely, too.

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