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Music Is Something You Do
by Richard Whittaker

Interview: Gail Needleman: Music Is Something You Do

Gail Needleman teaches music at Holy Names University in Oakland, California. Her work as a writer and teacher addresses the essential role of music in the moral and spiritual development of children. She is the recipient of the Parsons Fellowship from the Library of Congress for research in American folk music, and is the co-creator of the American Folk Song Collection website, a pioneering online resource of American folk songs for teaching music to children. We met at her home to talk about music...

Richard Whittaker: How did music enter your life? What were the early experiences?

Gail Needleman: I'm told I was always singing when I was a child. My parents told me that that when I was a toddler we would be visiting with friends and my parents would pick me up and stand me on the piano and I would sing for everybody. And when I was very small we drove out to California to see my grandfather who was very seriously ill. They let us in to the intensive care ward to see him and they put me up on the bedside table and I started singing "Jesus Loves Me" to the whole ward. I don't actually remember any of this, but obviously something was there. I do remember standing at the piano when I was five and climbing up on the bench and taking a hymnbook. I couldn't read music, but I could read. I would open it up and see the title and then I'd try to play it. When my parents discovered me doing this they decided I better have piano lessons.

RW: Were your parents musical?

GN: My parents both appreciated music, played music, would sing. My father played violin. I remember standing in church singing and hearing the voices of my mother and father. My mother would sing alto and my father would sing bass or sometimes tenor and I'd be singing the melody. My brother is also a musician and he said we didn't have to learn about harmony because we were immersed in it from childhood.

When my brother and sister and I were in elementary school we used to make up our own little arrangements of folk songs. We played the ukulele and would sing three-part harmony.

RW: What church did your family go to?

GN: Baptist.

RW: And you'd sing in the congregation?

GN: Yes. Later I sang in the choir.

RW: I wonder if you have memories of any particularly strong experiences with music when you were younger. I know I have, for instance listening to Ravel's Bolero on a big old 78rpm record when I was 9 or 10.

GN: We didn't have a record player until I was in junior high school. My father was in graduate school so we had no money at all. For a while I had one of those tiny record players and I had one record.

RW: What record was it?

GN: It was a Handel trumpet concerto. [laughs] Basically, music was something that you did. And in that sense I think I'm more in the line of the way the world has always been in all cultures at all times. Music is something you do and it's only very recently that it's become a passive activity.

RW: And I wanted to explore that, but I'm still curious about the singing. Were there any memorable moments in the singing?

GN: Yes, I would say—moments of something coming in. Let me tell about a later experience with a Gregorian chant workshop a few years ago. It was not fancy music at all. It's just a few notes, the way you chant the psalms. And most of the chanting in monasteries is of psalms rather than what we would think of as the more melodic music of some of the offices. [demonstrates by singing] That sort of thing, just two or three notes and you chant the text. We were doing it in English so we would understand the words and the emphasis on the words.

When you have a group of people together, the first tendency is for it to get kind of sing-songie. So you work a long time to find a natural way of speaking the words and to know which ones should be stressed and finding a group consensus about how it moves and a way of beginning together that doesn't rely on a leader. The person leading this workshop had a rule. If you were the first to enter twice, you had to wait. So anybody who had a tendency to rush the moment of silence between the verses learned to see that and hold back. The group as a whole would try to find that moment when the silence ended and then come in together. After doing that for several days, at one point, the words really came in. I really heard the words of this psalm in a way that I've never heard before. And it was a very familiar text.

If you read the early fathers of the church talking about chanting, they're talking about the importance of the word. And the purpose of the music is to bring the word in, into the heart. To me that's very much connected with one's experience of music because the first

experience of music is of your mother's voice—even just the way that mothers speak to children all over the world. In whatever language and whatever culture, mothers speak to children in highly inflected speech. "Oooh, little one." [demonstrates]

RW: That's so interesting.

GN: It's instinctive. There's something there. So the pitched speech, which is the beginning of music, modulates the relationship between the infant and the mother—as do the mother's gestures. There's this kind of song and dance which is the infant's first experience of human relationship. And it's all one thing. Song and dance and love are one thing. Which is why to me it's such a sorrow that, with the professionalization of music in this culture, so many people think, "I can't sing." Mothers are not singing to their babies now because the culture is telling them that they can't sing.

RW: Oh, my gosh.

GN: And I have pleaded with some young mothers, please, sing to your babies. And some of them are doing it. But one young mother said, "No. I can't sing. I'm going to give him CDs of lullabies." So then music for that child doesn't mean love. It means something that comes from a machine.

RW: Going back to your experience with the Gregorian chant and how after a few days, the words really came in. Can you say anything more about that? People might think, what's the difference? Everything comes in. But there's something different in what you're saying, right?

GN: Yes. And you see it in children where they're just singing little children's songs. There's a lot of wisdom in these traditional children's songs and games that have been passed on.

I was thinking the other day about a children's game called "Lemonade." One child stands in the center of a circle and there's a kind of call and response that goes back and forth. The child in the middle sings, "Here I come," and then the circle of children sing, "Where from?" Then the child in the middle chooses wherever he's from, "New York." They sing, "What's your trade?" And he sings, "Lemonade." Then they sing, "Give us some. Don't be afraid." And the little child in the middle pantomimes as if he had a pitcher of lemonade. The other children are holding out their cups, and he pours.

When I saw first-graders playing this, it was—they were so serious. And when they said, "Give us some. Don't be afraid," the barrier between the individual and the group was broken. They all just gathered around and held up their cups. It was just a very simple example of how in making music together, the barriers between people go down. That's part of the thing about the words coming in. We're armored most of the time, even to ourselves, but certainly to others.

You speak—and can I really listen? I think it takes a long time to see how much fear is in one's ordinary relationship to people, how much fear and defense. And when you're singing together with somebody, you're not afraid.

There's a lot of talk about listening now in terms of the loss of civil discourse. Can I listen to someone that I disagree with? That's a very advanced form of listening. If you haven't learned to listen to something non-threatening like "Lemonade" or your mother's voice, I don't see how you can possibly learn to listen in a situation where you have dispute and

all of the walls are up.

RW: I remember a young man, a trumpet player, who told me it was scary for him when he performed. It must have been about the openness needed to really connect with oneself and to do that in front of others.

GN: People do have that—stage fright—when they're performing and there is a sense of me and them. And that's a different question. When you're performing, I think you have to learn that the audience wants you to be good. But when you're doing it together, there's a connection that happens.

I think that fundamentally music, as something that you do, and music as a spectator sport are very, very different activities.

RW: It seems that the culture doesn't recognize this so much today, that music you do together is important.

GN: Yes. I was doing a workshop one time and talking about American folk music. I had some interesting recordings, but I was also teaching some songs to the people. There was a man in the audience with his twelve-year old son, so I don't know if what he had to say was triggered by wanting to be cool in front of his son, but what he said was a knife to my heart. He said, "Nobody sings together anymore." He said it as if it were something hopelessly old-fashioned—as if I were talking about churning your own butter. Then he said, "People relate through music by having the same songs on their iPod." It was such a shock. And I couldn't say, "That's not what I call music!" It was clear that he didn't have the experience of what I would call music.

You know, it only takes one generation to lose a culture if something isn't passed on. You have a generation of adults now who have grown up without any music.

RW: You mean, without singing together or playing an instrument themselves, right?

GN: Yes. We're awash in this other thing that people call music. But rather than teaching us how to listen, it's teaching us how to block things out—how to not listen. Because it's everywhere and, if you want to function, you have to not pay attention to it. Music-making, just developmentally, is how you learn to listen, whether it's the mother and child going back and forth or with traditional children's songs with all kinds of things embedded in them.

RW: I wanted to get a little metaphysical about music. This relates to how you said it seems to be true in all cultures that mothers have a sing-song way of speaking to their infants right from the beginning. We have certain fundamental modalities as human beings. Language is one of them. And maybe you could say that there's also music. Do you have any more thoughts around this basic way of looking at it?

GN: Of course. Well, there are a lot of ways to approach this. Apes sing.

RW: I didn't know that.

GN: Orangutans do, anyway. They sing duets calling back and forth. And there's certainly a current of thought in various disciplines now that music is prior to speech. And rhythm, which is a musical function, is a language precursor. If there isn't an understanding and experience of rhythm, you can't learn language. It's a brain thing. And certainly musical

activities are performed by non-human beings. There's one ethnomusicologist who has done a huge study of multi-voiced singing all over the world and tied it into paleontology and those kinds of things. He thinks there was group singing in the earliest days of human beings. There's a certain fear mechanism that doesn't activate when you're singing.

The Smithsonian put out field recordings that were made during the civil rights movement. You can actually hear recordings of people who have come back to a church after a day on the barricades. They're listening to Martin Luther King and others and then they'll start singing. You can feel that YES! When you sing with one hundred other people We are not afraid, you are not afraid.

So our recent history has this extraordinary example of how music-making together can really change the world, or at least, people's lives.

There are various ways of saying that it's in us and very deeply. There's one psychologist who says human beings could live perfectly well without music and I'd like to know what his evidence is. There is certainly a lot of evidence to the contrary. You could have life without music, but I'm not sure it would be human.

RW: I think it's clear that music is an avenue to feeling. And how is it that these vibrations touch our feelings? Isn't that sort of mysterious?

GN: In a way, it's mysterious. In another way, I think it's only mysterious if you have a fairly mechanical or mental view of what a human being is. But if a human being is a nexus of vibrations in a world of vibrations, and ancient teachings and modern science do agree on that, then why wouldn't vibration affect the whole organism?

Certainly, one of the aspects, when you look at how ancient cultures regarded music —music as a healing force is there very early.

RW: So isn't that all kind of mysterious?

GN: It's mysterious in that we don't understand it, I guess.

RW: If you look at this thing and you…

GN: Everybody has an experience. If you start talking about music, most people have some kind of memory where they were really touched.

RW: If you talked about feeling in relation to music, is there anyone who wouldn't get it? I mean, I never even thought about this before.

GN: With school principals who cut music from the curriculum because it isn't really important—you wonder.

RW: That seems to reflect a bias in our culture that feeling is not important.

GN: I think that's true. And so the idea of music education only gets attention when someone learns that the children who study music get better at math.

RW: Now it seems that we're having studies of the brain that begin to reveal that this feely stuff is important, which a lot of people knew before science came along.

GN: I have conflicting views about that because I've always had kind of an instinctive irritation when scientists prove something that your grandmother knew. Scientists prove that babies need to be held, you know?

RW: Yes.

GN: There's an awful lot of that going on. Do we need this massive apparatus to prove what everybody all over the world has already known? So then I started to think, we live in a culture with a worldview that denies the possibility of attributing wisdom to our ancestors. I call it the "our ancestors—the dummies—theory of history." [laughs]

RW: That's so true [laughs].

GN: With earlier cultures it's always, "Oh, they just didn't know." So we can't access the wisdom of our grandmothers unless it's packaged as the latest scientific development. It's very sad.

On the positive side, I could look at science as a bridge carrying the wisdom of humanity over that gap so it isn't lost. The trouble is—there's this intriguing book I read recently called The Wisdom of the Myth Tellers. It has a phrase that really struck me: "the sacred is that which does not wish to be spoken about." In a way, my reaction to taking all these things that have been passed down by human activity and making them "this is just a brain-thing" —it—I don't know what the word is…

RW: It robs them of something.

GN: It does. And if it's a fact, it's not the same fact via brain research as what my grandmother showed me about how to plant a seed or how to sing a song, which has this whole other aspect we call feeling. But who knows what else is involved there?

RW: It's a culture of exteriority and so now the study of experience is being done from the outside through brain scans and neurochemistry, and so on. And singing and making music, as you said, has this deep function of creating relationship. It happens in the moment and it's kind of ephemeral. It's really what life is like. Life is actually like that. It's not so much like the scientific project.

GN: It's also not like a recording.

RW: You've called recordings dead butterflies. That's pretty striking.

GN: Sergiu Celibidache, the Rumanian conductor, never made any recordings. All kinds of people made secret recordings of his performances, but he never did. He didn't believe in it. He said that a recording was not music, but was only evidence that somewhere, sometime, music happened. A recording is like an artifact. But music is real and in the moment. And in that sense, it's not repeatable and therefore precious in a different way.

RW: As we've been talking, I'm aware that your feelings have been stirred a few times and I'm wondering, are you ever moved to tears by music—by singing or playing, or hearing it?

GN: By singing or playing, sometimes, yes. That's not supposed to happen when you're a performer [laughs]. But there's a certain extent to which it doesn't matter if I'm feeling it. It only matters if those that I'm sharing it with feel it.

RW: Don't you think there is a connection?

GN: I think there is a connection. But it's not a one-to-one correspondence. My feeling could interfere with my ability to transmit something. Or maybe there are different kinds of feeling. It will happen that sometimes I'll play a piece and while I'm playing all that's going on is that I feel completely inadequate to the task, and I'm really suffering from that. Then afterwards someone will come up to me and tell me how moved they were. I heard one of my students play something recently and it was just extraordinary. I said something to her afterwards and she said, "I made lots of mistakes." So she wasn't feeling it.

RW: But do we really know that? Someone's response may be just a portion of their experience because our experiences can be hard to convey.

GN: That's true.

RW: I know that when someone comes up and praises me, I go into a certain place in myself that isn't really connected much with where I might have been.

GN: You're right. Maybe that's not the evidence I think it is. But I'd like to go back to what you were talking about, this whole idea about interiority, because I was actually very struck by something you said in an interview with Jerry [Jacob Needleman]. You were talking about how, in this culture, we've given over all authority to external measures. That struck me because it's something that, first of all, I see in my students increasingly over the years. They don't trust their own experience. It means I have to try to come up with different kinds of tasks for them to try to get them to pay attention to what they are experiencing. If they can't do that, their musical development is just going to stop at a certain point.

I've talked with the other people I teach with and they have had the same perception about this lack of faith in the reality of one's own experience.

RW: It reminds me of something I heard in a Terry Gross interview a few years ago. She was talking with someone about the fall of the Berlin Wall. This man said his immediate impulse was to go see it with his own eyes. That's how he would know it really was true. Later he was talking with his students about it. They said they didn't know if it was true until they saw it on television.

GN: [laughs]

RW: And I've heard from a number of teachers that students are getting more and more cautious. That seems to fit with what you're saying. If I can't trust my own experience, I better not give voice to my own questions or thoughts. I don't want to look stupid or uncool.

GN: I have one student and it almost became like a running gag. I'd ask a question and she'd start to answer it kind of under her breath. Then she'd stop herself. And it was always the right answer. But she had no faith in it. After a while, the other students started saying, "Say it!" They could tell that it was her own lack of confidence. She's a senior now, and finally it's like somebody arrived. She can speak. It's really kind of a wonderful thing to see.

RW: That’s a wonderful story.

GN: It is. We’re having a Hungarian music festival where I teach and one of the things I did was make a lobby display with quotations from various Hungarian composers. There’s one quotation from Zoltán Kodály, a composer and music educator who was also a good writer. So there are a lot of things he said about music that are quotable. He says, “The purpose of music is not to entertain us.” Then he says, “There are regions in the soul where only music can penetrate.” And something like “The purpose of music is to connect us to, refine and develop our inner life.”

But now music has become virtually synonymous with entertainment, and this is just such a small segment of human expression. I hear musicians talking, “Oh, we should do this or that—it’s all music, you know.” Well, let’s take language. It’s not an exact parallel, but I think it’s revealing. You would never say, “It’s all just words.” You recognize big differences in intention, in level and to what aspect of a human being words are meant to correspond.

People don’t recognize that so much about music. So music is “entertainment.” It’s as if all of a sudden the only examples of language we had were pulp novels, advertising, puff-piece journalism and pornography.

RW: That does open up this whole area, going back to the ancients, Plato and so on, where it was understood that there were different kinds of music and they were to be employed or entered into for different occasions. There were fitting uses for music.

GN: Yes. And today this kind of view is not politically correct.

RW: This must be another case of our ancestors, the dummies. They must not have understood something.

GN: It’s not even that. Where I teach, there’s an institute that trains teachers in a method of music teaching based on the philosophy of Zoltán Kodály. He wrote a lot about Plato and music. He talked over and over again about how children should have only the best music, that giving them anything less was not treating them with respect. And yet I’ve had conversations with teachers who claim that they’re following this philosophy but absolutely refuse to say there’s such a thing as good music and bad music. It’s such a strong thing in the culture. Hopefully it’s a phase that will pass, but it’s very dangerous to think that there’s no difference.

RW: You have experience with your students, and I wonder if there is something that verifies for you that these different levels are real—in terms of how the students respond to different kinds of music.

GN: Absolutely.

RW: Can you say anything about that?

GN: They are surprised when something real like that appears in the midst of class. I think they don’t expect reality at school. You know what I mean?

RW: Oh, yes.

GN: I can try to convey my own enthusiasm for something, but within the confines of a

class—this is a class; this is what we're studying; this is what we're learning— and once in a while, something will happen. And it can be something very simple.

There's an exercise I have the students do sometimes. It has to do with singing a chord in three parts. Then one of the three parts changes by one note. And one note at a time, they climb up the scale until they're at the same chord at the top of the scale. It's just an exercise in hearing harmony. But when they finish, so often, they go [whispers] "That was beautiful. Can we do that again?" And it's just the scale. But it's singing together. It's listening to each other. It's not music in the sense of a composition.

RW: But just singing a chord together, I can imagine the possibility of amazing things in there.

GN: And I would say that very often that happens. You're singing different intervals just to tune the hearing, and the voices lock in on the vibration so that it's really a true, pure interval. Then the overtones start to ring out in the room and you've entered the world of forces. I can tell them until I'm blue in the face that these are properties of matter that we're talking about when we're talking about overtones. This is physics. This is how the universe is created. And then they hear it.

RW: They experience it.

GN: Right. And then it's quite different. Because again, their inner experience doesn't have reality for them. The idea that their inner experience could actually be obeying the same laws as the planets in their orbits doesn't make any connection. But when they sing one note and hear the overtones that are there, that they couldn't hear before—that's a real experience.

And yes, it happens sometimes in pieces of music.

When we're working on medieval music we do sing a Gregorian chant. I always take them up into the chapel so we can sing it in an appropriate setting, not just in terms of the feeling of the space, but also in terms of the acoustics.

And once in a while, one of the students will say, that was like meditation. So something is being received.

RW: That does bring up another aspect. A person's states change. Let's say I'm on a retreat. After a period of time something has changed and I'm open in a new way. I've had the experience of listening to the same piano pieces many times and my experience varies. I find it so interesting. Once on a retreat a piece was being played and it just, not only was I crying, I was almost sobbing. I don't know what that was. It was just incredible the effect that piece was having on me. And the sobbing was not from sadness. And occasionally there's something in a person's voice that really gets to me.

GN: There's some direct relationship between feeling and vibration. I think it's what you were saying. We don't know what it is in us that has to be arranged in a certain way by the changing conditions of life in order to enable something to be received. This idea of replicability, this scientific thing, when it's applied to personal experience, can become kind of a prison.

RW: It's so clumsy, at least in terms of the inner life.

GN: What you were saying about music-making being like life—there's that difference between listening to a recording, which is the same every time, and singing or playing, which is different every time. It's live music. And the opposite of live should be dead, right? [laughs]

But the sensitivity that develops when you perceive that something is a little different every day is not unrelated to the true scientific attitude. My brother decided one day—he could see the sunset from his walkway on a building where he worked—and he decided that for a year he would chart the position of the sun when it set along the horizon. So he did that for a year. This is the scientific impulse. It's to become sensitive to these differences.

So the idea that something should be the same every time really goes against the idea of investigation. In terms of music, you play the same thing, but you do it a little differently each time and, in that way, you discover something about the music.

I was at a workshop one time with Alice Parker. She did all of the research and arrangements for Robert Shaw. He was the big conductor, but she was the one who was doing the research and the composition. She taught a song to a group of people without saying a word. Her way of doing it was that she would sing a phrase and have everybody sing it back to her. Then she would sing it just a little bit differently—and then just a little bit differently from that. And at the point when people caught on and were actually able to sing back what she was doing, she knew they were really listening. Then she sang the phrase the way she wanted it to be.

So she got people to listen by making these little variations and having them sing it back to her. That's such a lesson on teaching. It was inspirational to watch her work that way.

RW: That's wonderful.

GN: You have to find the courage to repeat something. After awhile the students start to hear something they weren't hearing before. Then we can go on to something together, what the composer put in the music or, if it's a folksong, what a series of performers were passing along orally, what they thought was important, and what was transmitted over generations. Because, if it didn't speak to the feeling of the people it was not going to get passed on. Certainly, there's a great power in traditional folk music, just for that reason. It's carrying something about our common experience.

RW: Which makes me think that with the way things are today, folk music probably doesn't have a prayer. I mean today it seems like people are feeding themselves with music all the time, almost as a form of self-medication. It seems symptomatic of something being out of whack, this kind of constant music consumption.

GN: Like junk food. It's like eating sweets. Something is not being nourished by it or you wouldn't have to keep eating it all the time. And to stay with the food analogy, if people have only eaten junk food they actually don't know what they're missing. There was a story in the paper recently about a five–year-old boy who wept upon eating a peach because he'd never tasted a real piece of fruit. And fifty years ago nutritionists were saying that there was no such thing as good foods and bad foods. So maybe there's hope that this idea that there's no such thing as good music and bad music will go away too. Kodály said that if children were exposed to good music early, it would inoculate them against bad music.

RW: My grandkids are going to St. Paul's school and they have a great music program there. I'm sure all the teachers are very good, but a couple of them really stand out. Music is really given importance, and these kids just completely respond to that. It's hard to put this into words, but just by watching their performances I get an intuitive feeling for how substantial and important music could really be in a child's development. I wish I could make it visible what I could see there. It would show why we need music in schools.

GN: I wish more people could see that. It speaks for itself, as you said.

RW: Yes. But it has to be there. This is not just a bunch of kids fidgeting, and some of them focusing and others distracted. This was way past that.

GN: When you've seen something come alive in little children like that, it's unforgettable. And even with older kids. We had a high school choral festival at one point and there was this one choir that came from Hayward. This is a school district that has maybe 120 languages spoken at home. It's multi-cultural central! And this was their chamber choir with about 36 kids of every possible ethnic background. This man, who was the music director there, got something out of these kids. All I can say to describe it is that they were singing with an utter unity of intention. It was unmistakable. It was extraordinary.

It gives hope when you see this sort of thing, and there's so much to be not hopeful about now. In the midst of all the technology and the depression and the drugs and all the things wrong, there's still something about music that has this power to free the soul, in a way.

And the other thing I think is really important is how a sense of trust in one's own experience is really central for our life as a society. It's not only that those who rely on verification of truth from others are subject to demagoguery, it's that you can't have a participatory culture if it's composed of people who don't have any trust in their own experience.

RW: That's right.

GN: Bernice Johnson Reagon is a scholar at the Smithsonian and one of the founders of Sweet Honey in the Rock. She was talking about, how were these people in the civil rights movement, who were ordinary people, maids, store clerks, how were they able to stand up and become leaders? She attributed it to two things: one was the black church, the sense of community there; and the other one was growing up playing these traditional children's singing games, where everyone gets to have their turn. When it's your turn to be in the middle, everyone supports you. Then you go back and become part of the circle and you support that next person. Growing up with that allowed people to step forward to be a leader for a moment and for that kind of leadership to emerge.

There's an aspect of that musical culture that's a rehearsal for democracy, a rehearsal for civic life, for give and take and for the relationship of the individual to the community as one of mutual support. All kinds of things are learned, in a way, in play.

RW: I'm reminded of a couple of things. With many Native Americans, I gather, a crucial part of their development is finding their own song. Maybe it would happen in a sweat, or a vision quest.

I had dinner with some friends and C.K. Ladzekpo was there, the drum master from West Africa. I got to ask him a little bit about drumming. And the breadth and depth of what is

going on in the drumming is amazing. I saw how truly ignorant I was about that. And just from having seen a little through this one window, I got a sense of how ignorant we, as a culture, are about music in other cultures. Do you have any insight into music in other cultures?

GN: We really don't know what we're missing. I spent a few days at an Indian reservation in Montana during their Sun Dance ceremony, and you don't have to spend much time with traditional people to realize what a honky you are, you know? It's so clear these people, even if they're poor, they have something. And they have something in their relationships.

I was with this friend of mine. Her father had been adopted into this tribe. We had our tent and we camped out there in a circle and as soon as we got our tent set up all the teenagers started dropping by and hanging out in our tent. So we did what was apparently the right thing to do. We fed them. So then we were in. [laughs] One of the boys told us about his vision quest, and sang us the song he had been given.

RW: That sounds very touching.

GN: It was very touching. A sixteen-year-old boy, and he had something we don't have.

But your drumming story reminded me of the first time I ever heard Hamza Al Din. He was performing at San Francisco State University. He had this big frame drum and he told us there were four different sounds that the drum would make. One was earth. One was air. One was fire. And one was water. Then he demonstrated each one. Then he started to play.

Well, first of all it was like, "Oh, there's this whole cosmology of the relationship of earth, air, fire and water in the sounds of the drum!" Then the drum started setting up reverberations in the room so that you were hearing way more sounds than he was playing. And I realized this was a master musician. And that's not even his main instrument.

RW: I remember him at a concert. He was playing the frame drum and he slowly turned in a circle while playing it. I remember his presence. In a way, it seems to me that I have to be prepared to receive what someone like Hamza Al Din brings. I can't just walk into the room and be getting it. I think we need some initiation to begin to be able to receive this. We don't know what we're missing, as you said.

GN: And we don't know about what we're receiving. Maybe it's just a fraction. Bruno Nettl, who is a well known ethnomusicologist, wrote an article called "You Will Never Understand This Music." He studied Persian classical music for I don't know how many years and, at a certain point, his teacher told him, "You will never understand this music." So there's this cautionary note.

Yes, now we have access to different kinds of music from all over the world through recordings and musicians traveling. But can we really receive it? Or is it like another kind of colonialism?

RW: Yes. And the modality of consumption we have is sort of a gross thing. So maybe there are certain things that are protected against being consumed because they're hidden from us.

GN: Or there's a certain kind of activity that's required. And we're being trained in passivity. That's for sure, as consumers. There are some things you can only receive if you're actively engaged.

RW: A participant. Yes. What do you think of this thing where you always have these little musical interludes? For example, in a news program, even on NPR. You have these news bites: sixty-seven people were killed by a suicide bomber... Then you have a little musical interlude. What do you think of that?

GN: I have a theory about that. It's all designed to make you comfortable. You know that this person's voice is going to be exactly the same everyday. After he says, "All news, all the time" there's going to be this little musical riff, and that tells you the next thing is going to be the news of the day. And now we have another little riff and that means...

RW: Traffic. Weather.

GN: So it's like in your chaotic state of not having an inner life and getting pulled around by external circumstances, you can turn on your radio on the way to work and have a feeling of "I know what's going to come next."

I could start complaining, but I don't think it's useful. Have you ever had the experience of being somewhere and it's very quiet and suddenly you hear a flute playing in the distance? Something in you moves towards this wonderful thing and it feels like such a natural function of the ear. It's like when you're in the forest and alert to every sound. You're moving into your environment in this very organic way that's very different from the focusing of the eyes.

That function of the ear must develop the brain in a certain way. And it must develop the brain in a different way for the ear to have to constantly be screening out noise and focusing on the one thing you want to listen to—not that you don't have to do that. That's another function of the ear to be able to pick out a sound from the background. But to have to be shutting things out all the time, I can't imagine that that isn't doing something to our ability to just be in the environment we're in, whether natural or social.

RW: Before coming over this morning I walked my dog. And it's such a beautiful day today, like spring. Coming back to my house, there was a finch in the top of a tree.

GN: Yes, the birds were really singing this morning.

RW: My god! I was listening to that bird, and it was just beautiful. I think you wrote something describing a moment where you realized that birds listen to each other.

GN: I remember exactly where I was. It was on Hartstene Island in Puget Sound. Usually, I hear this bird singing and I hear that bird singing. But suddenly I heard them calling back and forth. It wasn't back and forth to each other, because they weren't the same kind of birds. This was more like, this bird makes a sound and then the other bird makes a sound. It wasn't like they were talking to each other. They were occupying the same sonic space and saying here I am, and here I am, and here I am. It was like they were all saying here I am.

Maybe that's too anthropomorphic. But they were listening to each other, if not directly responding. And I was listening in on this whole, self-sufficient thing. It was a world.

RW: What you're describing is a moment that's hard to describe, but a real experience. These things are hard to convey.

GN: They are very hard to convey. One tries. Sometimes you sort of wonder—the things that have made a difference to me are my own experiences, not someone else's. So maybe I don't have to convey them, in a sense. Maybe it doesn't help. It's like teaching. Once you realize that you never learned anything by somebody telling you, you stop feeling so compelled to tell students things.

RW: Well there's another possible view. I met this very interesting man, Ron Nakasone. He used a phrase "cartography and the arts." He's a Buddhist priest and some kind of master with large brush calligraphy. What he meant is that the artist sometimes is able to give form to an experience. Without it being given form, it would remain hidden from others. So ideally, this is an important thing the artist could do—sort of map experiences out into form so they would become available for others.

GN: But that's why art is not just telling. I guess that's what I'm saying. Art is to transform one's experience, not just to describe it.

RW: Yes. And if somehow something hidden is made available to you, that could be transformative, too.

GN: Could be. That's true. And I don't mean that I haven't learned from other people. It's just that when you're teaching there's this wish to share your discoveries, but you realize that they were your own discoveries. And everybody needs their own discoveries. Not yours. So then how can my experience help? It's an open question. Some of it could be to try to understand in what conditions it was possible for me to receive something.

RW: Yes. You want to share your experience, but is it useful? Is it possible? And here's someone else who had an experience similar to yours, but never was able to focus on it, never able to embrace it or bring it to the center of their attention. It's there, but it's in the shadows. But now, thanks to your attempt to give your experience form, suddenly that person's experience hidden in the shadows comes into the light you are providing. Now it can take on a standing it never had before.

I can imagine that. In fact, this is an experience I've had. I discovered poetry this way through a poem by Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning." It was a deeply transformative experience. His words called to me back to experiences I hadn't been able to really focus on somehow. The poem became an intersection where something of my own experience was brought to life through reading the words Stevens had struggled to write.

GN: This is really interesting because I think it comes back to this question about different kinds of music or different levels, if you will. A certain type of popular song is popular because people feel connected to something about what it's expressing. But it's not necessarily the most noble part of the human being that it's connecting to. Maybe the reason it's connecting is that it lets listeners wallow in self-pity. Do you see what I'm saying?

RW: Some kinds of country music, for instance.

GN: Whereas something like the Gregorian chant resonates with something deeper. You don't even have to understand the words, necessarily. The form speaks directly. Or Bach's music, which is constructed so that it gives this sense of order, and one can experience

the sense of order directly.

We were in Paris one time, and it was really hot. So we ducked into this little stone church figuring we'd be cool inside. Just as we stepped in the organist—who was in there practicing, I guess—started playing a Bach fugue, the fugue in G minor. So we're just sitting there, listening to this fugue. It starts out with this very strong melody and then it develops in different voices, and you're sort of lost in, you don't know what—a universe of spinning planets and stars. Then the theme comes back in, BOOM!—the bass, you know, with boom, BAAAM, boom bom bom. It's like God spoke. I mean in that music there's this incredible vision of order in the universe. And that's Bach's vision. That's his perception.

I'm sorry, it's not the same as "My girl left me. I'm gonna go hang out in the bar." [laughs] I mean there are different levels of common human experience.

RW: I remember one afternoon sitting alone listening to this Bach piece and having the feeling I was present to a kind of calm and eternal movement. It's one of my best music memories.

Now here's something I wanted to try out on you, a little snippet about music from the painter Agnes Martin. She was unusual. She came to a kind of spiritual insight I find pretty astounding. This is from a little interview late in her life. She told the interviewer that music was the art form that touched the feelings the most directly. And she paused as if calculating something. Then she said, "Music gives about twelve times as much feeling as painting." [laughs]

GN: [laughs] Well I suppose I could be a smart aleck and say that, our musical scale has twelve tones, so maybe she was saying that a pure painting represents a single tone. But music doesn't represent a single purity. It represents relationship. It represents movement. There's movement in painting too. When the painting is done, the movement is over.

RW: Your eye has to travel around.

GN: Yes, all that sort of thing. But it's not the same kind of movement where you're carried. I think of music as being more like sculpture, actually. With sculpture you have to move around it. I don't know anything about sculpture, really, except that I have this sense of something about form communicating directly.

RW: And music communicates directly.

GN: Music communicates directly in that same sense, I think. When you say it models inner journeys, there are different kinds of inner journeys. There are journeys towards truth and beauty, and not all musicians are interested in that.

There are always people who are more interested in the mechanics of things—in any field, I think. But the training of musicians used to be more or less a private matter. You worked with a teacher and that teacher worked with you to impart what they knew, almost like an apprenticeship. Then music started being taught in classes and therefore things started being expressed more in terms of rules, something you could teach to a group of disparate people. Now you have conservatories and music schools, and it's very competitive.

A lot of people sort of pride themselves on the approach that it's a tough world out there

and you have to be tough to make it. So the system is biased against the people who are more sensitive and need a more individual approach, which was accommodated in Mozart's or Bach's day. So increasingly you have competitive people who know how to game the system. They're the ones who can succeed, but a lot of them burn out. A friend of ours said that she was the only person from her class at Juilliard who was making a living as a musician. How come they all quit music?

RW: Well you know it's the same in the art world.

GN: Really?

RW: Oh yeah. You get all these MFA's a year, and five years later not many are still doing art.

GN: But is it because they burn out?

RW: I think it's complicated. But there's not much of a place in the culture to receive all these people wanting to be artists.

GN: A place. I guess what I'm talking about is you have an activity that requires sensitivity and cooperation, and the funnel for the profession is rewarding competitiveness and a thick skin.

RW: Yes. I think there's something like that in the art world, too. A big reason is because the art world is also a money game. Money is always close to the people who become well known. It's a chicken and egg thing. But artists who may have real magic may only be known by a small group. And these groups are isolated from each other. I don't know if that happens in music.

GN: Music has the advantage that most musical activities require groups of musicians. So I think it's probably a little less subject to that because today this person is playing with this group and tomorrow they're playing with another group. Which is a nice thing. I think that's always been the case. Musical influences travel with musicians, and so I think music is probably better off in that sense.

But this other aspect of music is something you do. Art is also something you do, and I think that probably the art world is even more divorced from art making as a normal human activity than the music world is.

RW: I agree. Here's another thing I wanted to ask you about—the pentatonic scale. It's an ancient scale, isn't it?

GN: That is a very ancient scale.

RW: Did you see the Herzog film about Chauvet? [yes] Do you remember that little bone flute?

GN: Yes. I used to carry around a picture of that flute on my iPhone to show to people.

RW: They say it's 30,000 years old, you know.

GN: Now they're saying 40,000, actually. That's the one made out of the wing bone of a griffon vulture. You have an already hollow thing but you have to understand the physics

to cut the holes in it to get the scale, which is not a small thing. And from the same site there were also ivory flutes—two pieces carved from ivory and fitted together to make a flute. Presumably there was a good deal of experimentation, but this is already a highly developed technology.

The pentatonic scale exists all over the world, and in places that couldn't have had any connection with each other. So how could this happen? It's much easier to sing in the pentatonic scale. It doesn't have any half-steps, which are difficult—and difficult to tune. So many, many children's songs and folk songs are in pentatonic scales. We teach the pentatonic scales first, and then the diatonic scale from that.

There's a contemporary Estonian composer who's interested in astronomy. He did a whole thing analyzing the motions of the planets and deriving a scale from that, and the scale he came up with is an ancient Japanese scale, which he didn't know at the time.

What the ancients called "music" is really closer to what we would call physics. The seven liberal arts, which were the classic education, consisted of the trivium, which were rhetoric, logic and grammar—and the quadrivium, which were mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music. And music meant the science of vibrations. The physics of music, the acoustics of music and the science of vibration were considered to be the real. That was the real music. Then the human expression of that, which we call music, that was like a secondary phenomenon.

RW: Based on what you're saying, it becomes a little more understandable how the ancients would understand music was of different types and was to be used for different purposes.

GN: Of course we know nothing about what their music was like.

RW: What a shame.

GN: What a shame that is. I mean I would love to be a fly on Pythagoras's wall. And of course for Pythagoras it was the discovery of the mathematical and physical principles of physics in music. And there was also the esoteric study in ancient Egypt, and healing. It was all one thing.

RW: I can't help imagining that people at the time of Pythagoras would have been more attuned to their own experience.

GN: Well this modern idea of the self—as a monad, in a way, a self-contained, separate unit—my sense is that the relationship between people was different then. I heard about a man talking to a woman from one of the Northwest coast tribes. He asked her to tell him something about herself. She said, "My mother was so and so from the so and so clan, and my father was so and so." Then she stopped [laughter].

And the guy was like, "Okay, that's nice, but tell me about yourself." But she thought she had done that. That was who she was—not a separate entity. So we've certainly lost that. And music, the most communal of human activities or arts, becomes those billboards with the person with the iPod dancing to music that no one else can hear.