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Keynote Commentary

The Essentiality of Music

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While music is often thought of as entertainment (background soundtrack for daily life, a luxury for those with leisure time, or simply a pleasant diversion from routine), it has had a far more profound role in shaping human existence. From the earliest beating of drums in prehistoric rituals to the sophisticated symphonies of the modern concert hall, music has always been woven into the fabric of human life. It informs our emotions, strengthens social bonds, preserves cultural memory, and supports both mental and physical health. Hence, music is not optional or ornamental; it is essential. Humanity's survival, identity, and emotional well-being have always depended on it.

At the most personal level, music fulfills a fundamental psychological need. Scientific research in neuroscience has repeatedly shown that listening to or performing music activates the same pleasure centers in the brain that respond to food, love, and social connection. When we hear music that moves us, our brains release dopamine, the chemical associated with motivation and happiness. This response is not merely a coincidence; it reflects an evolutionary adaptation. For early humans, rhythmic sound and song helped synchronize group activity and emotional states, promoting cooperation and trust.

There are also biological and psychological phenomena that may be attributable to causes other than evolutionary. For example, music regulates emotion, reduces stress, and enhances cognitive function. In hospitals, music therapy is used to lower blood pressure and manage pain. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that music therapy can be useful in improving coping skills for children with cancer. In schools, children who engage in musical study often show improved memory, attention, and problem-solving skills. Even casual listening has measurable effects: calm, slow-tempo music can lower cortisol levels and heart rate, while upbeat music can elevate mood and energy. These biological and psychological effects demonstrate that music is a natural medicine—one that does not require a prescription.

The emotional power of music transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries. A melody composed in one culture can move listeners from another, even when they do not understand its lyrics or context. This universality underscores music's essentiality: as a medium of communication, it bypasses the limitations of language. In a world often divided by politics, ideology, and prejudice, music often serves as a rare bridge of empathy.

Consider, for example, the global response to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Though written in early nineteenth-century Europe, the piece has become a worldwide symbol of unity and human aspiration, adopted as the anthem of the European Union and performed in countless humanitarian settings. Similarly, contemporary artists, from Bob Marley to Beyoncé, reach millions across cultures through songs that express universal emotions such as hope, struggle, and love. The shared experience of listening unites strangers in a temporary but powerful community. Communal singing is an even more powerful tool. Indeed, during the Civil Rights Movement, communal singing was used as a way to empower and bring all of the races together in the fight for Civil Rights. The late Bernice Johnson Reagon, one of the founders of the Freedom Singers, expressed it this way, "once we began to sing there were no difference in races." These moments remind us that music is not a luxury for the privileged; it is a fundamental expression of what it means to be human.

Music's essential role extends beyond the individual to the collective. It strengthens social cohesion and expresses shared identity. Anthropologists have long observed that in nearly every known culture, music accompanies rituals, celebrations, and public gatherings. Whether sung in religious worship, played during weddings, or chanted in protest, music turns groups of people into communities of meaning.

Historically, music has also been a tool for social change. The freedom songs of the American Civil Rights Movement, such as *We Shall Overcome*, unified marchers and gave emotional strength to their cause. Similarly, folk and protest music from artists like Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Nina Simone provided not only inspiration but also a sense of solidarity for movements seeking justice and equality. When words failed or were censored, music spoke. The rhythm of a drum or the refrain of a chorus could rally people as effectively as speeches or manifestos.

Even in everyday life, music serves as social glue. It marks holidays, athletic victories, and family milestones. It plays at graduations and funerals alike, helping people express emotions too complex for speech. In triumph and in grief, music connects people and gives structure to the collective rhythms of society.

Beyond emotion and social function, music plays an indispensable role in preserving and transmitting culture. Every civilization, from the ancient Greeks to modern nations, has used music to tell its stories and define its values. Folk songs recount local histories; national anthems symbolize collective pride; indigenous chants carry the spiritual and ecological knowledge of ancestors. When music disappears, so too, does a vital record of who we are.

Consider how enslaved Africans in the Americas preserved elements of their heritage through spiritual and rhythmic traditions that later evolved into blues, jazz, gospel, and hip-hop. These genres became not only artistic expressions but also testimonies of resilience and identity. In this way, music serves as a living archive of human experience. It can survive censorship, illiteracy, or displacement, ensuring that the voices of underrepresented people continue to be heard. Without music, cultural continuity would break down; with it, cultures remain alive and adaptable.

Some critics argue that in today's world of constant technological distraction, music has become background noise—streamed, commodified, and stripped of meaning. Yet even within a digital landscape, music retains its essential power. During times of crisis, people still turn to it instinctively. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, musicians played from balconies, virtual choirs formed across continents, and isolated listeners found comfort in familiar songs. These acts were not trivial; they were vital expressions of hope and human connection in a moment of global isolation.

Moreover, technology has expanded access to music in unprecedented ways. A person with an internet connection can now explore the musical traditions of any culture, fostering understanding and empathy across borders. While commercial systems may sometimes exploit artists or dilute meaning, the democratization of music-making and listening ultimately reinforces its essential role: to unite, heal, and inspire.

At its core, the argument for the essentiality of music is moral as well as practical. To devalue music is to devalue part of the human spirit. Education systems that treat music as an extracurricular luxury, easily cut from budgets, misunderstand its importance. A society without music education risks emotional illiteracy and cultural amnesia. Music cultivates empathy, creativity, and discipline—qualities essential not only to art but to citizenship. Making the case for music's place in schools, communities, and public life is thus, a defense of our shared humanity.

Music is not an accessory to life; it is a necessity of life. It shapes our minds, connects our communities, preserves our histories, and restores our spirits. To imagine a world without music is to imagine a world stripped of color, emotion, and meaning—a world where human beings could no longer fully express or understand themselves. Whether through the haunting strains of a violin, the steady beat of a drum, or the joyful harmony of voices raised together, music continues to remind us of our common heartbeat.

The preservation and celebration of music is tantamount to affirming life itself. Hence, there should be no doubt that music is essential.