

The Music of Relationship

Tina Smelser, MFT

During a recent couples' therapy session, I had an image of myself as a conductor; cueing each person in turn to make sure that his or her sound was heard, signaling one to come forward while signaling the other to hold back, stopping the playing altogether when each person was so focused on their own sound that they couldn't even hear the other.

This image led me to ponder some of the musical elements that I have observed in relationships. I write in terms of couples, but these elements can also be applied to relationships with friends, family members, coworkers, etc.

- Tone** In referring to arguments between couples, I have often heard such statements as, "well, it wasn't so much what she said, but it was that sarcastic tone she used". Or, "when he talks to me in that tone, it feels so patronizing". The same words spoken in a different tone can be received very differently, at an emotional and even physical level. Awareness of the tone one uses, and willingness to consider it's impact can make all the difference in keeping an argument from escalating.
- Rhythm** Each of us has a different rhythm. This can include how fast we move and talk, how much space we need between activities, the time of day when we feel most alert. Conflicts can arise when, for example, a faster-moving member of a couple feels that the slower-moving member has no sense of urgency, whereas the slower-moving member was making an extra effort to go faster than his accustomed speed. It is important to become aware of these differences, to accept and honor them without judging one as better than another, and to realize when compromise is called for.
- Harmony** If two people played music together, each playing the same notes on the same type of instrument, the result would be a very one-dimensional sound. The richness of relationship comes from having one's unique sound come together with that of another. That means having enough sense of yourself to not completely lose your own sound, the ability to listen to the other and not drown out their sound, and the willingness to adapt your sound at times for the sake of the duet. This doesn't mean never having conflicts! In fact, there is particular satisfaction when a chord of resolution finally arrives after a period of discord.
- Entrainment** This term refers to the way that vibrations of one object will lock into step with the vibrations of another. Entrainment is talked about in the context of music therapy in terms of the way that a person's heartbeat, breathing, and brainwaves will become synchronized with the music he or she is listening to. When each person in a couple comes together at the end of the day from their different roles and responsibilities, it can take some time to "tune in" to each other, to get on each other's wavelength. You may want to ritualize this process; perhaps taking a walk together, sitting in meditation together, exchanging a shoulder massage, preparing a meal together, etc.
- Practice** Musicians can hone their craft in many ways; listening to music, watching others perform, studying theory. But ultimately there is no substitute for the actual time spent practicing on the instrument. Likewise in relationship, there is value in each person developing his or her individual self, but there is no substitute for actual time spent together in order to nurture the relationship.

I encourage you to listen attentively to your own sound and the sound of your partner, and to experiment with some new improvisations together!