

DIFFERENT TASTES – IT'S ALL SUBJECTIVE

This is summed up in the title. But allow me to elaborate.

Some time ago I did an online course on the senses. In one study, it was found that people's idea of the colour of an object can vary tremendously. Everything we see goes from the eye via the optic nerve to the occipital lobe at the back of the brain where the information is processed and produces what we imagine to be true images of the world around us. But what we see is purely subjective and depends upon our background, our age, our state of health, our gender and certain things we associate with other things.

The same can be said of taste. Someone who eats nothing but British traditional food may have a vastly different taste sensation when eating something from another culture than an Indian might have. This determines whether we like that item of food or not. Indians who are used to a complex mixture of spices in their dishes must find English cuisine very bland. Their reaction to Italian food would be very different. The appreciation or dislike of the dish will also depend not only on what it is, but on the factors mentioned in the first paragraph.

Our sense of smell, which is closely related to that of taste acts in a similar way. Someone living near the coast will be used to the smell of the brine coming off the water and will find the smell of things far inland very different. We do become accustomed to certain smells, and over time we no longer are conscious of them. That can be said for people living in slums with the stench of sewage ever-present, or shop assistants in shops selling strong perfumes. To outsiders, the odour in the stinking slum or the highly-scented shop can be over-powering.

When it comes to music, when we hear something which excites us and we get another person to listen to it, we should not expect them to experience it in the same way that we do. When I went to music college, the lecturer once played some opera to the class. Not being a fan of opera singers myself, it left me cold. To be honest, I found the heavy vibrato of the singers to be very irritating. Another person in the class, however, was moved to tears by the music. I have been guilty of believing that music I like would automatically be liked by other people too. Bill Evans piano-playing, to me, is sublime, but there are some people who would actually dislike it. That is hard for me to understand, but it is true.

This is where differences in people's background and taste in music comes in. My brother once told me that my music was not his "cup of tea". A Polish woman I know once came to a concert of my music and informed me that only one of my pieces had any semblance of a tune. That hurt, as I had thought that the one thing I could do, was to write tunes. I was proved wrong.

I often wonder about people who like early classical music or some pop music which is entirely made up of triads and unadorned dominant sevenths. How do they hear music which is very harmonically rich? It must sound very discordant and unsettling to them. I

must add that when I hear this type of very basic pop music it leaves me cold. Then there are the complex rhythms in modern jazz which must also be very disconcerting to such people. If you combine advanced harmonies and complex rhythms and overlay them with tunes which are not restricted to pentatonic scales, it is no wonder that people not used to this are instantly put off by it.

As well as age, health, gender, and cultural differences/backgrounds, we have to take into account people's sensitivities to different aspects of the music – consonance/dissonance, volume, tone quality of the instruments/voices, people's moods at the time, maybe even the association of certain instruments or sounds with good or bad memories.

My wife has a low threshold with regards to the volume of music and if I play anything above mp, she will instantly tell me to turn it down. Likewise, the manager of a restaurant where I once played solo piano was only content when I could hardly hear what I was playing. On the other hand, young people often do not find music at all exciting unless it is very loud.

In other words, we all like different things. Music, then is a subjective experience. It does not exist as an objective reality. How do you write or play music, then, with this in mind? The answer to that is to try not to think of it. As Miles Davis might have said: let people come to you and do not be tempted to cater to their tastes (unless you have to for professional reasons).

If you are lucky enough to be able to do this, make sure you know what you are doing which means learning theory, having a good ear and playing in the right kind of venue.