

A Performer's Argument against the Hierarchy of Musicians
Set Forth by Boethius in *De institutione musica*

Julia Kittel, Lynchburg College

In the early sixth century, renowned Christian philosopher Boethius (*ca.* 480-524 CE) published *De institutione musica*, or “Fundamentals of Music,” in which he divided musicians into three categories. According to Boethius, the three distinct classes of musicians are the instrumental and vocal performers, the composers and songwriters, and the adjudicators who evaluate the works of the previous two classes (137).

Boethius places the least value on the group of performers. He asserts that they are wholly subservient to composers and adjudicators because they merely play their instruments and have no independent thought processes or comprehension concerning musicality. Boethius is leery of the composers and poets, his middle category, who create works of music. He is doubtful that their compositions are the result of prodigious skill and diligent study. Rather, he believes that their compositions are written instinctually, without a full understanding of music (Boethius 137). However, Boethius holds the third class of musical judges in high esteem. He believes that only the adjudicatory category of musicians possesses a full understanding of musical theory and principles, while the first two classes are limited in their musical comprehension.

Boethius is dismissive of instrumental and vocal performers as well as poets and composers due to a lack of reasoning and thoughtful processes involved in their crafts. Members of the third category, the judges, possess the ability to reason and to think critically about the music they adjudicate. Factors important in musical adjudication include melody and rhythm as well as theoretical components, such as modes, consonances, and the genera of the piece. Boethius believes that while virtually anyone can learn to perform a song or instinctually

compose music, true knowledge and critical thought is necessary in order to evaluate a musical selection effectively according to the components of musical theory (137).

It is easy to assume that Boethius is entirely correct in placing musical performers at the bottom of the hierarchy of musicians; however, Boethius lacks an understanding of an essential gift possessed by performers. Although at times performers are obliged to obey their conductors submissively and to struggle to recreate the complex rhythms dictated by composers, performers also possess a unique independence. Musicians are the only class capable of enjoying music without necessitating the presence of other people. Composers can write unlimited musical scores, yet musicians are needed to share their works with the public in order to experience the creations that previously existed solely in the composers' minds. Judges would have no point or purpose if musical performers did not create music for them to dissect, study, and critically analyze. When either of the other two classes wishes to enjoy a musical experience, they are wholly reliant on the performers.

Musicians are fortunate to be able to create for themselves a journey that those who do not sing or play a musical instrument can only experience secondhand. Although musicians at times find it galling to have to spend hours perfecting a piece of music, independently or within an ensemble, they also have the wonderful ability to create musical experiences for themselves completely independently; that ability is truly unique because it makes all other stresses pale by comparison throughout the duration of the musical performance. Boethius places performers at the bottom of his hierarchy; however, he fails to acknowledge the unique abilities and assets possessed solely by performers.

Work Cited

Boethius. "Fundamentals of Music." *Source Readings in Music History*. 3rd ed. Ed. Leo Treitler.

New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. 137-143. Print.