

Community
By
Daniel E. White April 8, 2024

Ravel's "Bolero" is a staple in the classical repertoire and an audience favorite. Our Symphony program notes said "a 'bolero' is a Spanish song form with a particular rhythm for which Cubans created a dance." In fact, Ravel wrote the piece for a dancer and choreographer.

Fitting, then, that a dancer, in talking about how he approached choreographing dance routines to accompany the orchestra performance, provided the audience with a unique way of thinking about Ravel's creation. He sees the piece as a musical expression of the creating of community.

Most of you will know Ravel's music. One instrument begins a rhythm that will not change until just before the end of the 13 minutes. Then come the two melodies, and there are only two, repeated until the end. The instruments change, more are added, there is crescendo, sure and steady. Finally, the whole orchestra is playing, exploding into the stirring, loud, final bars, the sonic excitement at its fullest.

It felt like erupting from a deep dive underwater and breaking the surface to breathe in the air in one ecstatic gulp.

The thirteen dancers, men and women, began singly, then in pairs, back into singles, then into groups. They started in tights and added skirts as the end neared, the flowing of the skirts lending a visual to the crescendo of the music. At the end, all thirteen were on stage, ending in a formation created by all of them together.

It was easy to see the choreographer's vision of community. Individual dancers and instruments had moments where they were the focus. The melody and rhythm were constant as the sound amplified. In the end, all of the instruments and all of the dancers mattered to the whole effect. No one instrument and no one dancer was more important than any other.

The same day, a local writer, Gil Shapiro, editorialized in the Tucson Star about liberals and conservatives. He noted that each of these dispositions are "innate components of our personality, as distinctive as other traits." He then noted that there are "nurture" factors that have impact as well, so the innate aspects needed to be viewed as "probabilities," not certainties.

Shapiro wrote: "Research at the University of Pennsylvania indicates the core difference between conservatives and liberals is whether the world is intrinsically hierarchical. It concludes that conservatives believe more strongly than liberals that the world should demonstrate a stratified orderliness."

"People who score high in hierarchical world belief see the world as full of differences that matter because they usually reflect something real, inherent, and significant... You might imagine that to them the world looks full of big, bold black lines. In the opposite view—held by people with lower scores for this belief—differences tend to be seen as superficial, and even silly. For those with this perspective, the world is mostly dotted lines or shades of gray."

If one assumes the validity of these research findings, then humankind is divided between two starkly different views about how things work or ought to work. This bifurcation would be across gender, ethnic, national, religious, political lines. How, then, with the easily-demonstrated proclivity of humans to default to tribes, has the world managed to get this far without constant strife?

The answer, of course, is that it has not. The lore surrounding the Baptistery Doors in Florence contends that the doors will be open only on days when there is no war in the world anywhere, and that the doors have been open only once, for one day. It isn't just one's beliefs about "stratified orderliness" that cause people to kill each other.

Shapiro observes "primal world beliefs are genetic, efforts at persuasion will likely fail. It is therefore compromise, rather than endless unproductive deliberations, that political rivals should seek." Unless, of course, you believe that the folks who think otherwise, by virtue of their genetic predispositions, should be obliterated.

Shapiro suggests that "understanding the roots of this diversity dilemma and accepting our differences as irreconcilable, might just help overcome our social, political, and religious divides. This approach is certainly worth a shot." (Tucson Star, January 22, 2024)

The challenge seems to be how to create and sustain community in light of irreconcilable differences. The starting point is to agree that we want to create community. If coming together as tribes is the default position for humanity, how do we reach that first agreement? Doesn't this demand that we examine our core values, what matters most to us in the world? Once we identify those, might we reach out to others to hear about their core values and then seek areas of agreement?

Justice Learned Hand, at a Naturalization Ceremony in May 1944, said: "What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias..."

Might Hand's belief become the rhythm that is constant? No instrument in "Bolero" is any more important than any other, and there is no "Bolero" without them all.

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