The Spirit of Song: Artistry and Talent in Folk Music

By Barry Oreck

“Art is the social technique of emotion.” Lev Vygotsky

“All that man does is a kind of art, and this implies skill in doing things,

as well as perception of how things fit or do not fit.” David Bohm

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A dozen years ago, when I turned 60, I began dedicating myself to writing, singing, and recording folk music. I'd been playing guitar and occasionally writing songs since I was a kid but when I stepped fully into the folk music world, I realized how completely it embodies ideas about art and human potential I'd been studying for decades in my career in arts education. My work with children and teenagers had led me to develop a concept of general artistic ability I called A, for Artistry[[1]](#footnote-1), that crosses artistic disciplines and domains -- and here it was, proclaiming itself in every song circle, late night jam, and songwriting workshop I jumped into. The essence of A.

A is a general disposition -- a way of seeing, experiencing, responding in the world. It is attuned to the aesthetic, the intuitive, the seen and the unseen. Not dependent on a specific talent or set of abilities, A is a gestalt, a whole. More than anything else, A is access – access to our inner, emotional life. Every human has A. Some people have readier access (people we may label as artists) but whether making art or experiencing it, we are accessing that emotional/aesthetic channel. Making music, dancing in the living room, cooking a meal, arranging flowers -- the inner-outer connection brings meaning and care, aesthetic awareness, and emotional resonance. It also deepens the potential to connect with others. In this view, artistic talent is infinitely varied and widespread, not a narrow, definable set of characteristics, qualities, and skills possessed by only certain people.

My thinking about A gained greater definition and statistical support through a research project I conducted in the early 2000s[[2]](#footnote-2). The State of Ohio had mandated that the arts be included in identification of students for gifted and talented programs. We had the rare opportunity, funded by a grant from the US Department of Education, to observe and systematically assess the same 3rd and 4th grade students in five carefully designed classes in each of the art forms of dance, music, theater, and visual arts. The students had had some previous in-school instruction in music and visual arts (one period per week or less) but none in dance or theater and few had taken outside classes in those art forms. Statistical analysis[[3]](#footnote-3) revealed a huge overlap, almost a perfect correlation (+.90), in student performance among the three performing arts and a high correlation (+.6) with the visual arts. In other words, without prior instruction and with a wide range of specific physical abilities, the same students tended to excel in all the art forms. At the most fundamental level, the underlying artistic abilities identified were general, not specific. A strong speaking or singing voice, a flexible body, excellent rhythm were not, alone, predictors of selection for advanced instruction. Rather, what stood out most, to both arts professionals and non-arts-classroom teachers, were a range of behaviors that signaled students’ artistic inclination and motivation including attention and focus, the desire or need to connect and communicate with others, a sense of curiosity, and the motivation to improve. These artistic behaviors and ways of being transcended domain-specific talents and proved to be an excellent predictor of success in advanced instruction. I had empirical and practical evidence for the existence of A.

In folk music A is communicated via the song. Whether writing and singing one’s own song or a song written by another, authenticity and connection to the feeling and message of the song are the most crucial elements. It is the fit between the person singing and the feeling and ideas they are communicating. What we think of as “talent” -- vocal, instrumental, rhythmic, poetic, etc. – can be recognized, analyzed, and compared, but does not explain the success of a song in connecting with and touching another human being. A three-chord song sung with a thin, crackling voice can create a bond with an audience as powerful as the most complex music and highly trained voice. The connection of meaning, intention, emotion and the interplay between lyrics, music, and voice is what moves us, whether it be in the most well-known musicians or everyone else.

I am not suggesting that talent is irrelevant in folk music. A beautiful or distinctive voice, expert instrumental work, compositional skill, great lyric writing, deepen and expand the possibilities for Artistry. But without the A – the fit, the feeling, the authentic connection of the performer with the material – talent, no matter how prodigious, means little.

A is access. A is authenticity. I may not be as talented a songwriter as Bob Dylan. But I am not writing Bob Dylan songs. I can only write Barry Oreck songs. The fit between who I am, what I care about, how my voice and guitar deliver my song, and my desire and courage to present them to others is a measure of my A. Folk music, in its almost unlimited variety, allows people to express themselves without a great deal of instruction and free from most stylistic rules. Tradition is valued, as is individuality and originality. The song form is understood in all cultures. The story, the poetry, the rhythm of music is internalized and physicalized throughout human history in our bodies, minds, and spirits.

It seems perfect that my retirement from teaching and academic research would land me in a hotbed of home grown and widespread creativity and artistry. Artistry, in whatever form, is a way of seeing and being in the world, drawing out our inner life, motivating us to transform and create, to integrate and make sense of our experiences. Folk music constantly reminds me that A is all around and inside all of us.

1. A parallel concept to “g” or general intelligence described in the early 20th century by Charles Spearman and expanded upon by many current researchers including Robert Sternberg and Howard Gardner. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Project STARTID, Ohio State Department of Education/Ohio Arts Council: Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Grant. <https://barryoreck.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/talentidoutcomespsid.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis [↑](#footnote-ref-3)