

My Life of Musical Purpose, Integrity, and Meaning
Shrouded by Bipolar I Disorder
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What does music mean to you? How does it touch your body, your mind, your heart, your soul? It stirs up emotions...sorrow, loneliness, love, joy. It stirs up excitement, anticipation, and it also gives the soul rest. It creates an image of the forest, or waves in the ocean. It creates moods of darkness and of light. It tells of the wonder that living is more than just existing.

I was a professional violinist, but music was not simply my profession. It was and is the language through which I have experienced my life. For decades I practiced, rehearsed, performed, traveled, taught, competed, succeeded – and sometimes struggled. My violin was my constant companion. It was there in moments of triumph and disappointment, in quiet rooms late at night and on concert stages filled with colleagues.

From the outside, my life could look disciplined and purposeful. But beneath that visible structure, another reality was unfolding, one I could not yet name. I was living with Bipolar I disorder. I just didn't know it. There were periods of extraordinary energy and intensity when ideas seemed to arrive faster than I could contain them. Music could feel almost overwhelming and transcending in its emotional power. I could become completely absorbed in what I was doing, intensely focused and deeply connected to the experience of performing. Then there were other times when that intensity disappeared. The world could become quieter, heavier, more difficult. Motivation could diminish. Things that had once seemed effortless could require enormous energy. But I had no diagnosis to explain any of this since I was not diagnosed and treated until age 65.

So I did what musicians do. I kept playing. My violin gave me something I could depend on even when I did not understand myself. When I could not explain what I was feeling, I could play. When I experienced joy, music gave that joy a voice. When I experienced sadness, music gave me somewhere to put it. A violinist learns very early that music requires attention. You listen to the pitch. You listen to the tone. You listen to your colleagues. You listen to the silence. Perhaps without realizing it, I was learning an important lesson about life: to live meaningfully, we have to learn how to listen.

As I look back on my career, I realize that having a profession and having a purpose are not necessarily the same thing. My profession was being a violinist. But my purpose became something larger: to use music to connect with other beings and the Divine. An orchestra taught me this beautifully. No musician in an orchestra can create the entire experience alone. We have to listen to one another and understand when to lead and when to support. We can become part of something larger than ourselves. That became one of the deepest meanings of my musical life. Purpose is not simply knowing what you want and achieving it. It is about contribution.

It is asking: What can I give? Whom can I touch?

What can I contribute to a world that would not exist in quite the same way without me?

Music also taught me about meaning. There are moments when a musical phrase communicates something that words cannot. Music is ineffable. A melody can express longing. A chord can contain sorrow. A resolution can feel like forgiveness. A silence can say more than a paragraph. These moments have always fascinated me. They have also made me know that music is one of the ways human beings experience something larger than themselves, what I know as the spirit.

For me, music has always been a spiritual experience – not necessarily because it gives me answers, but because it presents me with existential questions. Why are we here? What makes a life meaningful? Why can beauty move us so deeply? How can something as intangible as sound create such powerful connection?

I have not always found answers. But music has taught me that living with the questions can itself be meaningful. There is another word that became increasingly important to me: integrity. As a professional musician, integrity means more than playing the right notes. It means showing up prepared. It means respecting the composer. It means listening to your colleagues. It means being dependable. It means acknowledging your mistakes. And it means understanding that music is not ultimately about the individual performer. It is about serving the body, soul and spirit of humanity.

Living without knowing that I had Bipolar I sometimes made integrity more complicated. There were things happening inside me that I didn't understand. But I still had values. I still cared about doing my work well. And I still tried to live according to what I believed was conforming to the truth. Looking back, I realize that integrity does not mean having everything figured out. It can mean continuing to reach toward what is right even when we don't understand everything about ourselves.

There is a persistent romantic idea that mental illness and creativity are somehow inseparable. I would not say inseparable, but poor mental health is the last taboo of the classical music industry. Though most musicians will seek treatment for physical injuries, mental health problems remain shrouded in silence.

A recent study found that poor mental health is shockingly common among professional musicians. In a survey of 2,200 professional musicians in Britain, it was discovered that 68% experience depression, while at least 71% suffer anxiety and panic attacks. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that only 22.5% of the general population experiences mental illness. Specifically, 10.8 % of professional musicians are Bipolar as opposed to about 1% of the general population (10X higher). And people diagnosed with Bipolar disorder are about 50% more likely to choose careers as musicians than people without the condition. This may be because music provides a unique outlet for intense emotional expression, high energy, and cognitive traits linked to Bipolar disorder.

I have been very cautious about romanticizing Bipolar disorder as a requirement for great music or art. Bipolar disorder is not a gift. Mania can be exhilarating, but it can also be dangerous and destructive. One time as a student, I was practicing and noticed that there was a crack in the skin on the tip of one of my left fingers (my fingering hand). I was in a manic phase, thought “no big

deal” and kept on playing. Soon the wound opened more, yet I continued to play. By the time I stopped the crack had opened up and became a deep wound. I was seen at the Mayo clinic, where they removed several neuromas from that finger. Acknowledging that I was a violinist they closed the wound with paper strips so as not to leave a scar. But the “fix” didn’t work. I was left with the tip of that finger a bit shorter, much decreased in size, and quite tender. A pad of lamb’s wool, and later a section of foam pad allowed me to play, but the sound was not the same, and I never again had the intimate feeling that was so important to me...I played for the next 50 years with a pad on my finger.

On the other hand, depression can rob a person of energy, hope and connection. I would never suggest that someone needs mental illness in order to become an artist. But I also cannot deny that my experiences shaped the way I heard and experienced music. My emotional life became part of my musical vocabulary. My struggles increased my awareness of my vulnerability. And years of not understanding what was happening inside me gave me a perspective that I might not otherwise have had. The important distinction is this: the illness did not create the musician. The musician was there all along. What changed was my understanding of the life I was living.

When the diagnosis finally came, after an intense, angry eruption over an issue I believed was real yet truly was not, Bipolar I disorder became part of my understanding of myself. There can be something profoundly strange about discovering a name for something that has already shaped so much of your life. A diagnosis can bring grief. It can bring questions. It can make you look backward and reinterpret experiences you once understood completely differently. But it can also bring clarity.

For me, the diagnosis did not erase my musical life. It gave me another lens through which to understand it. And perhaps that is one of the most important lessons I have learned: a diagnosis can describe part of your life without defining the whole of your life. I am not simply a person with Bipolar I disorder. I am a musician. I am a violinist. I am a colleague. I am a teacher. I am a friend. I am a person who has loved, struggled, learned, failed, succeeded, and continued. The diagnosis is part of my story. It is not the title of the whole book.

The balance of life often helps me think about the strings of a violin. They have to be under tension to produce a beautiful sound. But there is a limit. Too little tension, and the instrument cannot speak. Too much tension, and the strings can break. Life can be like that. We need passion, but we also need balance. We need ambition, but we also need rest. We need independence, but we also need others. We need courage, but we also need humility.

Living a meaningful life with Bipolar I disorder has taught me that balance is not the enemy of creativity. It can make it possible for the music to continue. When I think about the 64 years that my life was blessed with making music, I don’t want to be remembered simply about an illness. I want it to be about music, about purpose, about integrity, about meaning. And I want it to be about the extraordinary human capacity to continue learning about who we are. My musical life taught me discipline before I understood why discipline mattered.

It taught me listening before I understood how much listening matters, especially in relationships. It taught me resilience through years of practicing and performance. It taught me humility because no musician ever reaches perfection. And it taught me that the most beautiful music often comes from tension, contrast and resolution.

Perhaps our lives are like that, too. We experience dissonance. We experience uncertainty. We experience unexpected changes in tempo (hurry up and wait). Sometimes we lose our way. Sometimes we find our way back. And somehow, if we continue listening, the music continues.

I spent many years living with something I could not name. Yet throughout those years, music remained. The violin remained. The orchestras remained. The search for beauty remained. And so did I.

Today, I can look back with greater compassion for the person I was. I can recognize the struggles I did not understand. I can honor the achievements I once took for granted. And I can be grateful for the music that accompanied me through all of it. Bipolar I is part of my story, but it is not my identity. My identity is larger than a diagnosis. My life is larger than its difficult chapters. And my musical life is much larger than any explanation I can give for why music is inherent in me. I can only say that music is who I am, what I am and why I am. It is my Divine gift.

A professional music career spans decades. It involves thousands of rehearsals, hundreds of performances, and countless quiet hours with a piece of wood and horsehair. Living with a major mental health condition is very much the same. It is a life-long practice.

I stand here, not as someone who "beat" Bipolar I, but as someone who learned to conduct the orchestra of my inner life with intention. My diagnosis is a chapter in my story, but it is not the author. I held the bow and chose how to articulate the line of music. My message for you today is to use purpose to guide your journey, meaning to transform your struggles and integrity to keep your feet honestly on the ground. It is entirely possible to compose one's life in overwhelming beauty, extraordinary resonance and incredible gratitude.

Closing Words:

Music has given me purpose when life felt uncertain, meaning when I struggled to understand myself, and a way to remain true to who I am. I have learned that a meaningful life is not a life without difficulty. It is a life in which we continue to listen, to grow, to create and to love. For me, the violin has been more than an instrument. It has been a beloved companion, an expressive voice and a pathway to the Divine. And perhaps that is what music – and life – asks of all of us. To take whatever we have been given and make something beautiful with it.

May it be so.