

GAIN THE WORLD, RETAIN YOUR SOUL—WINEMAKER VANESSA WONG



I know that I am going to sound like an old person when I say that young people these days (“Youts deez days!” as I shake my fist) think they can figure out how to do anything by simply watching a YouTube video. Don’t get me wrong. I have found some pretty good tutorials on YouTube where I learned how to do something more easily by watching someone do it rather than reading instructions on how to do it: How to stop autoplay of those annoying video ads on my computer; how to fold an origami Yoda; or how to apply Halloween makeup, except that unhelpfully they never seem to use a squirming 4 year old as a model. There are some fundamental things, however, that can’t really be summed up by viewing a video a couple of times. Some things are better mastered when experienced hands-on from the get-go, like: cooking, playing a musical instrument, or, say, brain surgery. Our millennial-age baby sitter once spent hours watching videos on how to make cookies but never actually attempted to bake a batch of them. I think taking a stab at it in the kitchen would have produced at least some edifying if not edible results.

In truth, I don’t spend much time watching how-to videos online but the one thing I do try to find are music videos. No, I am not talking about videos of the Katy Perry or Wiz Khalifa sort. I am looking for videos of musicians playing music that I am trying to learn how to play on the cello. Cello is an instrument that I used to play off and on when I was a kid but quit after a few years. I always knew I would one day pick it up again when I had the time and means to commit to learning it because I did enjoy it. So after a 25 year hiatus, I decided to take lessons alongside my son. I delight in the process as I find it both challenging and relaxing at the same time (although I have to say that there is nothing relaxing about forcing my kid to practice).

My proficiency level at playing the cello is happily beyond “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” but is lamentably most definitely not high enough to play anything interesting or well-known in the classic cello repertoire like the Bach Suites or anything by Elgar. So, I have found YouTube quite handy for hunting around for possible recital pieces by first viewing the sheet music online and then watching a video of somebody playing that very piece of music. This way I can see someone playing as well as hear how it sounds to judge whether it is appropriate for me. Isn’t the internet fantastic? And yet there is nothing quite as demoralizing as watching some 6 year-old prodigy playing the very same piece I am sawing away at with skill, ease and much better sound than I ever could hope to produce. It was on one such tumble down the rabbit hole of YouTubing that I happened on a video of *Six Studies in English Folksong* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It was a chamber music piece Vaughan Williams had written in 1926 for the cello with piano accompaniment. I “watched” or rather listened (lots of classical music YouTube videos are nothing more than a photo still while the music plays) to the simple and haunting melodies that capture the purity of each of his studies. The brevity of the simple songs express their own beauty.

I didn’t know much about the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams so I did a little research to find out more about him. Vaughan Williams was a prominent and prolific English composer who composed a catalog of many genres of classical music including symphonies, operas, film scores, and choral music but he is most well-known for his work for strings *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. Not only did he study music and composition, but his love and fascination for the rural music of his native country, England, also led him to collect and preserve folksongs. He trekked throughout the English countryside recording and transcribing music that had traditionally been passed on orally. This passionate study of English folk music largely informed his approach to his composition in that he wove elements of his native music into

his writings using a musical language derived from the folk song. Vaughan Williams also lectured and wrote prose writings on the subject of music itself. It was in my reading of his essay "Should Music Be National?" that I stumbled upon a most astonishing and poignant passage in the conclusion of his essay:

"I am told that when grapevines were first cultivated in California the vineyard masters used to try the experiment of importing plants from France or Italy and setting them in their own soil. The result was that the grapes acquired a peculiar individual flavor, so strong was the influence of the soil in which they were planted. I think I need hardly draw the moral of this, namely, that if the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything individual to give you, you may still gain the whole world and not lose your own soul."

Here was a composer drawing an analogy between grapes and where they are grown to music making. He was explaining the notion of terroir to illustrate his idea that even though music can transcend its borders or its frontiers, one's music should express itself in a way that speaks of its origin. That, in its very essence, music, if true to its nature, should embody all that brings it into being or makes up what it is: its surroundings, its environment, its community, its history, in other words, its terroir.

I read in this that we may grow grapes originally from Burgundy and that we may strive to make a "Burgundy-style" wine but, in the end, the wine should be true to its origin and express the individual terroir in which it is grown. If I make a wine that is sincere to its terroir *I gain the whole world and not lose my own soul*. Wow.

I often liken the balance of the components and flavors in a wine to the way a symphony blends the various sounds of all the different instruments into a polyphonic balance that is expressive, harmonious, and evocative to the senses and emotions. But now having learned more about Vaughan Williams and his music, I also like to think about the melodies in his *Six Studies in English Folksong* and how the purity of the folk song is the strain that provides the framework of the music. The expression of terroir in a wine should be true to its origin and bring forth the very essence of its site. In order to have a universal meaning or message, one's work should first have what Vaughan Williams calls a "specialized meaning" or "local" meaning, a significance that speaks of a sense of place.



Looking at the sheet music for *Six Studies in English Folksong* for cello I realize that although the music has been described as popular with cellists because it requires "only modest technical demands on the performer", it is still too difficult for me to play with my less-than-modest musical abilities. So, I am content just to put on some earphones while sipping a glass of wine to listen to this beautiful piece of music while contemplating either the pastoral English countryside or the lovely far West Sonoma Coast where our grapes are grown. And everyone knows that drinking wine is much better than watching someone on YouTube doing it.