

# *The Music of Life*

**Bliss Carman**

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# THE MUSIC OF LIFE

By Bliss Carman

**A** brilliant woman once said to me, "Life without abandon to me is a dance without music." And I knew instantly what she meant, with that delight one always feels in the perception of a fresh statement of truth. It was a poet's phrase, and as all good poetry will, it illumined the mind at once with a radiant conviction, and left itself in the memory as a perpetual word of wisdom. Every day, everywhere, I am constantly having it borne in upon me how true the saying is; and as I hear of the incidents in the lives of my friends, or of their friends, and as I watch the expression of men and women going by me in the street or gathered in public places, lighthearted with elation or depressed with complaining, I find myself repeating, not without something of the resigned detachment of the philosopher, "Life without abandon is a dance without music."

It is so easy to distinguish where music has gone out of a life, and where it still lingers with its enrapturing possession of the personality. Here go by the dejected mien, the dispirited walk, the drooping shoulders and slovenly gait, the eyes bent upon the ground, the head bowed in hopelessness; these are they who for one cause or another have lost the first fine abandon which is the natural heritage of every mortal born into a beautiful world; they have ceased to make magic music in their personalities; and while they still go through the motions of living, they are scarcely more than automata moving to a joyless mechanical rhythm, creatures of routine, puppets dancing without a tune. Pity them, for they are the unfortunates of the great army of triumphant humanity—not only the deserters and stragglers from the ranks, but the weak, the ignorant, the ill-advised, the wayward, who have somehow strayed beyond the sound of the fifes and drums and go blundering on out of step and forlorn, perhaps wilfully searching for freedom, perhaps only vainly looking for rest, and never guessing that all their wayfaring must be bound in misery unless they can recover the trail of that high inspiring music they have lost, and which somewhere far in the van is still calling

them to enthusiastic allegiance, still marking an irresistible beat for their feet to follow.

If there are many in whom the music of life is hushed or jangled there are more in whom it is resonant and alluring still. For among the multitude of the silenced, tuneless personalities, pace for pace with the dejected and disheartened, moves the splendid company of confident men and spirited women, those who walk with springing step and lifted chest, with dancing eyes and traces of rapture in their bearing. They may not be radiant with happiness, they may even be sorely touched by natural sorrow, but in either case they carry themselves with a freedom and intensity, with an alertness and vibrancy, that bespeak the undefeated soul and the mind still free from the blight of disillusion and discord. One sees at a glance that they have not surrendered to misfortune, nor been tainted by any inward corruption of fear or despair or ruthless cruelty, and if black pessimism has ever whispered in their ears, it has not been able to mark them for its own. For them the bands are still playing enlivening airs, as the human pageant files along in its tatterdemalion celebration of living. Whether they be going afoot or on horseback, in velvet or in rags, matters little to them. The one great fact is, that they are filled with the music of life; never having allowed themselves to become unstrung; their resonant personalities are still played upon by the ravishing harmonies of beneficent, joyous being.

The music of life is everywhere, and those who have apprehended its presence in themselves and in others are in possession of an invaluable knowledge. It must always seem to them of the first importance to maintain their power of abandon, of rapture, of exuberance, at all hazards, let their actual fortune be what it may. They will make any sacrifice, forego any material advantage, disrupt any bondage, to save their natural responsiveness—their zest, their spontaneity, their faculty of individually reechoing to the concord of existence. To be out of tune with themselves and incapable of sharing in the mighty music of human life, whether that music be glad or sad, sorry or triumphant, must appear to them as the greatest of human misfortunes, for they will truly apprehend such injury as a fatal beginning of death.

Abandon in life—vivacity, animation, ardor—is like music in that it gives and demands enlarged scope and freedom for action, and introduces us into an ideal world, where the will may find free play without harm, where “nothing beautiful is extravagant, nothing delightful unworthy.” Those who walk the world in a cloak of unsundered rapture, however worn and threadbare their actual garments may be, are in possession of ampler

opportunities and enjoy purer and more generous rewards than any grudging, unjoyous labor can command. They always have hope and faith and charity, because by some means they always keep attuned to unpolluted life, to nature, to the world, to society, to truth and beauty, and never permit themselves to be severed from the great choral unison of fellow-beings, nor cease from bearing part in the divine vibrancy of existence. They may have griefs in plenty and adversities without end, but they will not live in toneless despair—they will not become passive automata ruled by rote. Dance they must, and they refuse to dance without music.

This metaphor of the musicalness of life is applicable to many things. The music of wealth is the freedom it gives us, the power of realizing our generous impulses immediately and without hindrance, as in an ideal world. The music of night is its space and mystery and the liberation it offers the spirit from the unimaginative limitations of the day. They miss its music who do not yield to that fascination of vast, majestic leisure and solemnity, as those miss the music of wealth who carry on their affairs, on whatever scale, in a spirit of penurious, fretful timidity, without ever hearing the melody of spontaneous generosity and the greater harmony which would arise from making the utmost use of their resources. The music of a great festival like Christmas is the spirit of love and kindness which it celebrates. We miss that music altogether if we allow ourselves to make a burden of the day through petty selfishness or pride or greed; if we are unwilling to take pains for the enjoyment of others; if we let ourselves grow disgusted from a few hours' shopping, if we fear to give the little that we can afford joyously, or if we demand material enrichment. Great and worthy music is not produced without care and thought, nor sustained without effort.

The music of life is written in the key of the ideal, in the time of the possible, and with the cadences of personality. To be without ideals is to be incapable of appreciating or reproducing this magic music. Its very source is ideality, its whole aim is to make real the encouragement of imaginary perfection, and to bring happiness actually to pass. Its rhythm, however, must not be impossible of performance; for ideals which are incapable of any practical realization are hardly ideals properly, but only fancies and phantasmagoria of the fertile mind. Moreover, it is only when the music of life shows a personal cadence, only when it is modified by this or that personality, that it has individual interest and significance. Personal cadence is what transforms the music of life into recognizable melody. Abandon in life finds its most opportune and appropriate field in the middle realm of the spirit, midway between high-pitched thought and low-tensioned physicality. True, it has its affinities, its roots and blossoms, in both these regions; it

could not be born without taking thought of some object for an ardor and enthusiasm to attach to, and it could not be maintained without some pleasurable realization; but its service belongs chiefly to the emotional world. As the human voice shows its rarest beauty in the middle register, so the music we make of our lives shows its loveliest qualities when it is modulated to the compass and solace of the soul, between the extremes of ultimate thought and crude sensation. It can afford to make sparing use both of the deepest bass notes of the senses and the keen, thin treble of mentality. In the generous middle octaves where the chords of the heart are strung it finds its most congenial and potential range, and while daring to sound all notes throughout the gamut of being, uses most successfully and frequently those that are most sympathetic to human weal and woe.

This does not mean, however, that any melody can ever be made in the music of life without the command of the whole keyboard. The low, strong notes, when needed, are indispensable to give force and body; the fine, high notes to give clarity, definition and finesse. It is hardly possible to feel the abandon of life without giving it some expression in voice or gesture, in speech or conduct, and without being influenced by it in imagination and thought. It is vital to the very essence of abandon that it should be shared by the whole personality without restriction. A strange sort of abandon that would be which stopped short with the impulse and never found vent in actual expression, nor ever had any effect on our ideas! Persons may accentuate one tone or another in human relationships—they may chiefly exchange thought or offer sympathy—but not magnetically or musically until the whole personality is harmoniously represented in the intercourse. You may form an acquaintance with an unknown person in a distant place by correspondence, but there can be no true fellowship or friendship until you meet him eye to eye and hand to hand. The primitive, wholesome instinct of the wolf within us must be satisfied, as well as the more tenuous requirements of spirit and intelligence, for in its sphere it is quite as fastidious and trustworthy as they.

Thus it is that men drink together to bind a bargain, or shake hands upon a transaction. The discussion of the subject and the final agreement to which it leads are mere processes of understanding, where personal bias need play no part. But after the terms have been settled, and if the men feel a liking for each other, they instinctively turn to some natural physical expression of their unanimity and sympathy; there is a relaxation of insistence; the senses begin to beg for their part in the compact; then the glasses are filled and, "Here's luck to the venture!" They find gladness in that abandon and become participants in the music to which the world goes round.

So, too, in affairs of the heart, as our grandsires called them, there is no assurance of a happy concord short of the ultimate test; and many a marriage has proved a pitiable disaster because the consenting mind and spirit led the senses blindfold into a relation from which they revolted without compromise. There is no foretelling the preference of instinct, and in these sacred matters to do violence to instinct because of any supposed obligation to duty or advantage or self-interest is an abhorrent wrong punishable by death—sometimes death of the body, sometimes death of the soul. How often, too—perhaps how much more often—the opposite calamity occurs, when the too eager and willing senses find themselves responding to a seemingly kindred individual, only to discover when too late that there could be no harmony of feeling or understanding. Nature has arranged that the body shall know its own kith and kin, as the mind and soul know theirs, without heed to advisability or unselfishness; with an instinct that is uncompromising and unequivocating. It is this possibility of divergence between sense and spirit that works such havoc in our destinies, unless we learn at least to try to introduce some rational unison among our correlated but only half-reconciled powers through their appropriate education.

When some measure of this reconciliation has taken place, however, in any personality how capable of delightful melody it becomes—how responsive to an innocent and happy abandon! Then, indeed, is the fine music of life made possible. Then, indeed, may that thrice fortunate individual give thanks to the gods, for the musicmakers in life are superior to circumstance. Possessed of so lovable a talent, so indestructible an asset, they are everywhere welcome for a charm that is never outworn. Whether they be wise or foolish, calamity cannot embitter them nor age render them unlovely. Having once become thus attunable, life plays upon them with all its infinitely variable phases, only to produce new measures of a universal harmony. And through their power of music-making, their capacity of transmuting every experience into some intelligible theme, either of gladness or sorrow, they escape the monotony, the tedious insignificance of those who are discordant or mute. A nature in which such an adjustment has taken place may become as tuneful as an old violin; it can only mellow with years; so that to the end of life its ever enriching temperamental tone gives forth, to wise and gentle evocation, strains of rarest music.

When two such personalities meet and find themselves in harmony in all the realms of being—unanimous, congenial and at one in the delicate register of sense—so that their individual melodies may blend and mingle with perfect freedom and without disparity or discordance, the greater eternal music of life begins to be heard in all its purity and bewitchment.

There can then be no jarring nor disagreement in those two fortunate ones, no fatal blighting conflict between spirit and sense in either life, to tear it asunder as so many lives are torn—no stirring of the blood while the heart is cold, no leaping of the emotional soul while the pulses still sleep, and neither infatuation nor rapture without the glad appreciative assent of the vigilant yet amenable mind. If love is the only source of abandon, the primal note in every melodious personality, it is also surely abundant sanction and sufficient fulfillment of the soul's dearest rhapsodies.

It is easy to recall in human history memorable names of characters who were verily permeated with the music of life. That, for a modern instance, was Stevenson's rare distinction. There was the frailest of mortals, in no way exceptionally favored by worldly circumstance, an invalid all his days, yet absolutely refusing to live without abandon. In spite of sickness or hard fortune, he would not dance without an accompaniment, and made music every hour he was alive. There are myriads like him unknown to fame, cheery, brave, diligent souls, who will not succumb to dreariness, weariness, skepticism nor despair. It may only be your Chinese laundryman, the porter who makes up your berth, the boy who runs your elevator, or the first cabby you pick up at the curb, who has the magic gift of tuneful joyousness that, unreasonable as it may seem, will nevertheless make him a more desirable acquaintance for the hour than lugubrious brokers or unctuous divines. And consider, in comparison—if reports be true, poor gentleman!—such an inharmonious character as Carlyle's. It is a pity that so sturdy a soul should become a byword for crabbed unhappiness, but he comes to mind as an example of the type which is never happy, never makes music in life. His physical frailties were too great for him to overcome. A constant strife between body and soul, fretted by dyspepsia and railing against fate, make sad personal discord. He was among those who, for all their strength, have a mighty handicap to contend against in their own lack of harmony. The world is full of them, jangling dissonant souls, corroded by peevish discouragement, incapable of evolving any concord in their own beings and unable to produce any resonant joyousness to sweeten their noise or gladden their silence or in any way heighten the pleasure of their fellows. For them no task is easy, no matter how great their genius. Though they were emperors or prelates, they would still be merely slaves and drudges of the world, full of biliousness and resentment, feeling the very gift of existence to be a bane.

Abandon means fervor, ecstasy; enchantment of the mind, fascination of the will, enravishment of the senses—the brimming over of vitality, exuberance of spirit, the charming play of intelligence. It constitutes the



good measure of life needed for great growth that is the mainspring of progress, in science, in religion and in art. Without some overabundance of impulsive ardor we should only stand still, having barely enough energy to carry us through from day to day, from birth to death. And yet the quality of abandon I am thinking of is not an attribute only of youth or of an excess of physical vigor. You may see many old persons who continually make music in their beings as they sit by the fire all day long with their readings or their dreams. It is not that they have never known sorrow; they may have borne many grievous burdens; but the central spirit within them has never been infected with the sullen discontent which makes happiness forever impossible. Whatever evil destiny may have befallen them they have confronted with fortitude, never acknowledging the supremacy of hatred or harm, tempering instead of mutilating the fiber of their being, and so remaining always resonant with goodness and gaiety and a courage of endurance that no frailty can destroy. They have never ceased, and need never cease, from the ever welcome music-making of life, though many of their younger neighbors, perhaps more fortunate than they, with far less cause for the lassitude of despondency, may be coddling their moping souls in unbeautiful taciturnity and resentment.

Possibly these unfortunates never felt what abandon means, nor ever heard the entrancing music of life calling to them throughout the world. But as I see such folk living in desolate loneliness, dwelling, as it were, in the silent halls of gloomy imagination, unlovely and unloving, harboring to the last their grudge against the world, and as I contrast their defeat with the happy triumph of those sunny dispositions who never refrain from sweet-voiced fervency of enthusiasm even in age, I shake my head, repeating to myself, "Life without abandon is a dance without music."

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Music of Life* by Bliss Carman]