

Tapping the Power

I caught myself doing it when I was in the sixth grade. And I wasn't alone, either. I looked around, and four or five other kids were doing it too. We were sitting on the tile floor in the lunchroom at my elementary school. The lunch tables were up, pressed and locked into the wall, and the whole sixth grade sat in curved lines around a high school jazz ensemble. The band played a swing tune. And I'm pretty sure it was the drummer, the way his drumstick rapped the cymbal, with a quick *dat ta-da, dat ta-da, dat ta-da*. That wave of energy struck me, and I couldn't stop tapping my foot.

More than 40 years have passed since my foot became animated, and it hasn't stopped. Okay, it rests while I sleep. Or when the room is silent. But turn on a radio, put a CD on the stereo, or put me in a business office with someone's iTunes, and pretty soon, like a bloodhound catching a scent, it's up and running. At a good concert—well, there might as well be a full moon.

Foot tapping has served me well these past years. After my *awakening* in sixth grade, I entered the junior high school band. The band director (who just happened to be my trumpet teacher) encouraged foot tapping. It helps you feel the beat, he said, and if the band doesn't feel the beat, then what's the use?

So I felt justified with the Simple Toe Tap. The Simple Toe Tap is easy, it works well when you're sitting, and if you're self-conscious, you can modify it by just tapping your big toe inside your shoe.

Myself, I became a devoted fan of The Machiavellian Heel Slam. It is a no-nonsense, domineering beatkeeper, a favorite of jazz trumpeters who, unlike the

trombones and the saxes, have to stand during rehearsals and performances. Try standing and tapping your toe. Feel the tension? After a few one-night stands of that, you're prone to pull a hamstring during *In The Mood*.

The Machiavellian Heel Slam was born of necessity: to keep the lead trumpeter from limping offstage, his arms around the drummer and the bass player, sidelined like an injured quarterback. Using the ball of your foot as a fulcrum, you simply kept the beat by slamming your heel to the floor. No wusses here. It had to be a my-way-or-the-highway, stomp, like you were killing cockroaches. The Machiavellian Heel Slam, while exuding authority, has the power to entrance the musician. The courses of the planets, the fixed motions of the various star systems, i.e. The Rhythm of the Universe is compacted in the heel of your shoe, seducing you with the anticipation and eventual reward of the beat.

I've come to realize that there's energy in foot tapping just waiting to be, well—you know. Just think of all the energy that's being wasted in jazz clubs, honky tonks, bluegrass festivals, and concert halls. (Yes, Shostakovich has just as much foot-tapping propensity as Wynton Marsalis.) At any given moment, millions of people are tapping their feet to a tune, whether it's jazz, classical, or something from the World Pipe Band Championships.

So how do we harness this energy?

Your local power company would do well to invest in a diversified music building, something contemporary and attractive, yet unassuming. The building would be built over a foundation filled with hundreds of small generators, all connected to the company's power grid. It would be divided into sections with different musical genres, but only those whose rhythms could be efficiently turned into energy. That, of course,

would eliminate most New Age, or that stuff that Tibetan monks listen to. We're talking more traditional music, something with an evident beat. You could have the Country Western section, the Jazz section, the Classical section (that would include everything except the beautifully nebulous pieces such as Mahler's Symphony No. 5), and the Rock n' Roll section. Each section would then be divided into rooms. In the Rock n' Roll section you might find rooms ranging from Elvis to The Beach Boys to Aerosmith to The Police to Pearl Jam.

With an offer of a 30 percent reduction in your electricity bill, your power company would invite you to spend two hours each week at their *Music2Megawatts* building. So one Saturday morning you head out to the power company. You're well-rested, feeling like you could cut down a few trees and take out the stumps, trim the 40-foot hedge at the side of your property, and clean out the garage, all before lunch.

With your musical palate prepared for a feast, you pull into the *Music2Megawatts* parking lot thinking, "Hmmm. Let's see. I'll start out with some Wagner. Then move onto Basie, just to balance things out. Then finish off with a bit of Michael Bublé."

In the lobby of the *Music2Megawatts*, a woman behind a counter greets you and asks for your ID card. You give it to her. She swipes it through the computer on her desk and taps the keyboard.

"Okay, Mr. Jones," she says, "who will you be listening to, this morning?"

"Wagner, Count Basie, and Michael Bublé —in that order."

She clicks her mouse a few times, then bites her bottom lip.

"Is there a problem?" you ask.

“Well, we can get you into Wagner and Basie. But Michael Bublé’s going to be kinda tight. She’s looking at the monitor, gritting her teeth. “Ever since he released his last CD, they’ve been coming out of the woodwork. Bublé’s booked through three this afternoon. If you would have called even last night—”

“That’s okay.”

“Tell you what we could do—” She clicks the mouse again. “Yes, here we go. By eleven there should be some room in Roy Orbison. Orbison is usually packed on Saturday mornings. But we could squeeze you in.”

“Great. A little Roy Oribson sounds fine.”

“Okay, will you be using one foot or two?”

You’re feeling pretty energetic. The Grand March from the *Tannhäuser Overture* is already going through your mind. “Let’s go with two feet.”

She reaches beneath the counter, then places two metal harnesses—foot-shaped brackets with buckles that look like they belong on ski boots—on top, as if she were working at a roller skating rink. “There you go.”

You take the harnesses and make your way to the Classical section. After an interminable walk past rooms labeled Albinoni, Anderson, Bach, Beethoven, Copeland... Handel, Holst...Mendelssohn, Mozart, ... Paganini, Puccini...Saint-Saens, Schubert, and Sibelius—at the end of the hall, you find Wagner.

Lucky you. As you open the door, the violins at the beginning of *Ride of the Valkyries* are starting their portentous upward sweep from the stereo speakers mounted in the corners. There are nine round tables, each one seats about eight people. A group of college students fills one table, books and papers spread out. They’re writing in

notebooks and highlighting paragraphs in textbooks. One guy's typing on a laptop. Another table is nearly filled with people playing cards. In the corner, a man sits alone with his hands folded, his eyes closed, his head swirling gently with the music. All these people have at least one foot in a harness that is fastened to a binding atop a metal rod in the floor, and they're all tapping their feet.

You choose the card-playing group. There's one chair left. As the sound of galloping brass fills the room, you make your way over.

"Mind if I join you?" you ask, raising your voice above the trumpets.

"Sure, sit down." The heavyset man next to you looks at you over his reading glasses. "You play pinochle?"

"Ah—it's been a while." You strap on your harnesses. You set the Tapping Mode knobs to *Heel Slam*. This is Wagner, after all.

"Well, you're not the only rookie here. Get hooked up, and we'll deal you in on the next hand."

Once you're connected to the generators below the floor, you place your ID card into the slot in the table. A narrow LED screen lights up: *Good morning, Mr. Jones. Your generating goal today is: 1.5 kilowatts.*

So you become the transformer, proving to the world that, with the right technology, music can not only move your soul, it can power your vacuum cleaner as well. With people congregating to turn our diverse musical heritage into real power, we could reduce our dependence on fossil fuels for electricity, even set our sights on cutting back nuclear power.

Yes, there will still be outages. When it comes to electricity, we seem to be an insatiable lot. And Mother Nature can be relentless. On those occasions, in the dead of night, in the middle of a storm, when the community is powerless and dark, or on a sweltering summer afternoon, your power company calls in their emergency team of tappers. Within an hour of the call, the elite group assembles in the *Music2Megawatts* lobby. No need for check-in here. With their own nickel-plated harnesses in hand they stride toward the Jazz section. After one team member enters a code on a keypad, a panel in the wall opens, and they proceed down a narrow and dimly lit corridor toward a room isolated for its dangerously high-voltage capacity: *The Dizzy Gillespie/Charlie Parker Room*.