

Artistic Integrity and Innovation vs. Selling Out (Part IV)

Luis C. Engelke

An international scandal occurred during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. A seven-year-old girl named Yang Peiyi was selected to sing “Ode to the Motherland” for the event. However, at rehearsals organizers deemed that she was not pretty enough. Nine-year-old Lin Miaoke was selected to lip synch to Yang’s prerecorded voice in an effort to achieve a result that was “flawless in image, internal feeling and expression” as revealed in “Olympic girl seen but not heard” and other stories. Is it acceptable to utilize multiple individuals to convey an aesthetic of perfection?

This is not the only time that the Olympics have been a source of controversy regarding music. The Vancouver Symphony refused to appear in the opening of the 2010 Winter Games. Music Director Bramwell Tovey believed faking the music was dishonest and fraudulent and compared it to a famous athlete who had taken steroids. Read the similar reservations by members of the London Symphony for the 2012 games. The orchestra did follow through with the appearance.

Whitney Houston is known for one of the most powerful renditions of *The Star Spangled Banner*: her performance for Super Bowl XXV was broadcast internationally in 1991. Watch the iconic performance and hear her nuances as she performs the arrangement in 4/4 meter (common time) vs. the original in 3/4 time. Moreover, does she appear to be lip-synching, and is this indeed a moving performance? Her music director and colleague Ricky Minor reveals the answer and provides some insight in “Did Whitney Houston Lip Synch The National Anthem At The 1991 Super Bowl?”.

At one point lip-synching in popular music was considered dishonest and unacceptable. Read about Milli Vanilli who won the Grammy for Best New Artist in 1990. Soon after, it was learned that the band was lip-synching other artists’ voices. Co-leader Fab Morvan reflects on how this was not an uncommon practice at the time, and artists 20 years later are all using technology to make themselves sound better, as well as lip synching their prerecorded voices that have been significantly altered. Where should the line be drawn between musical expression and technical perfection? Listen to today’s artists and compare to those 10, 20, 30, 40, or even 50 years earlier. Is the aesthetic improved or enhanced through technical perfection, or has some individuality been lost? Hundreds of orchestral musicians audition for a position with nobody being hired. At times, is an impossible ideal being set by the standards in a highly engineered recording? Does this type of standard exist in other aspect of society?