

14th March 2025

Understanding

“The thing is to understand myself.”

Søren Kierkegaard, *in a letter to Peter Wilhelm Lund (1835)*

I was invited by a friend to an art exhibition in a private club, which prides itself in giving young, aspiring, talented artists an opportunity to exhibit their work. This exhibition featured four such artists, and the walls of the club were filled with upwards of forty paintings, all in a “modernist” style. But the paintings contained nothing that was understandable to me. There was dramatic colour – plenty of it. There were lines, and swirls, and blobs, and texture – plenty of that too. There was life and vibrancy – unmistakably so. But I had *no* idea what it all meant. I didn’t understand it *at all*.

I was once at a performance of the 4th Violin Concerto by the Russian composer, Alfred Schnittke. For most of a cadenza, the solo violinist never once touched the strings of his instrument with his bow. He just mimed his playing instead, in a series of dramatic flourishes, tics and twists. The programme notes informed me that the piece contained a *cadenza visuale*, which starts, but becomes mimed, as a protest that it can’t be heard above the orchestra anyway! What an amazing composer Schnittke was! But, as they say in Scotland, “Aye, right!”

There is some art – paintings, music, drama, visual performance – that I just don’t understand. I try, because it’s what I feel I’m supposed to do. But, in any measurement, I fail. Some of it is just beyond me.

But here’s a thing about the art exhibition – and maybe the violin concerto too. There was more to a sense of understanding than just the paintings. I understood what the club was doing in allowing young artists to have their creations on display. I understood that the walls of the club were the better for having some colour and life, other than just their faded magnolia. I understood a deeper relationship with the friend who’d accompanied me – especially in our differing opinions of the artwork. And all in all, I understood myself a little better too – at least, I hope so.

Kierkegaard was right when he wrote to his friend, “The thing is to understand myself.” Most of the time, that’s enough to be going on with. So understanding modernist paintings *and* Schnittke’s 4th Violin Concerto will just have to wait – until I understand *myself* a little more.

A prayer for today

For a deeper understanding of important things, I pray ... especially about me! Amen

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