

Strengthen Your Capacity for Empathy

Civilizations—east and west—have given us a treasure trove of clues to help each of us grow in understanding, wisdom and happiness. But it's not the rulers or the religions that matter: it's the art and music they leave behind. Here's a beautiful cross-cultural combination that can help us all replenish our empathy and compassion even though we're living "in interesting times."



Luohan (Arhat), Liao dynasty, circa 1000 AD, China
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

How much longer can we hold out? Yes, we still celebrate our traditions, like these 16 days leading up to the first full moon's Lantern Festival. But we want the pandemic to be **over!** We want to get back to breathing without just...enduring. In today's world, it's all too easy to abandon empathy—for others and for ourselves. Don't.

We are all works in progress.

And although we may be at very different points in our individual life journeys, we are always at crossroads, intersecting with others. Like traffic signs, we need reminders to activate our empathy and compassion, particularly during “times that try men’s souls.” Great art and great music can revitalize the best qualities of humanity—the modes of behavior that build character, presence and happiness.

The life-sized *Luohan* sculpture pictured above embodies what I’ll call the wisdom of compassion. There are only a dozen or so of these three-toned (*sancai*) glaze ceramic sculptures, and each one has its own magically arresting humanity. They were created during the early period of the Liao dynasty—a time of great upheaval following the collapse of the Tang dynasty.

Nine hundred years later and four thousand miles away, Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted the Berlin Philharmonic with Edwin Fischer in a 1943 performance of Brahms second piano concerto during the collapse of Nazi Germany. There’s massive beauty, sadness and love in this performance. Furtwängler was criticized for not leaving Germany during Hitler’s reign, despite never joining the Nazi party (and helping more than a few Jewish musicians escape Germany). The writer and theater director Ernst Lothar noted that Furtwängler “did not stay with Hitler and Himmler, but with Beethoven and Brahms.”

Listen to the opening of this movement—about the first three minutes. See if you can grasp the resonance between the heartfelt dignity of the Luohan and the deep, profound gift of love in every note from the solo cellist, Arthur Troester. If you can, take the 13 minutes to listen to the entire movement: it can help you persevere with kindness through all the frictions of life.

[Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, 3rd movement](#), Edwin Fischer, piano; Arthur Troester, cello soloist; Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor; Berliner Philharmoniker, 1943.

We are all works in progress—individuals and societies alike.

But we all do need to work toward that progress.