

MUSIC

Incorporating Discernment into a Music Course

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Abstract:

A model of academic learning that uses music to link traditional academic content (intellectual primary and secondary source data plus critical analysis) to the process an individual uses in forming values and moral decisions made through the application of the Ignatian discernment process.

There is a long history that speaks to the power of music to move people, from the story of the Walls of Jericho in the Bible to the settings of Wilfred Owen's poetry by Benjamin Britten in his "War Requiem." Yet, all too often the music instructor, the published texts and the scholarly histories go out of their way to remain "scientific," adhering to the rigors of excellent musicological standards when teaching students about music.

In this course, all the standards of traditional music research and instruction are woven into a deeper review of music not just as an art to be studied and appreciated but as a cultural expression to move people and ultimately influence and affect them in a personal way.

Traditional instruction would include the composer biography, the music history surrounding a work, and a musical analysis all presented to a depth appropriate to the course level. These include the musical score, a live performance or a audio/video recording, the lyrics or musical program, documented historical associations with the work, primary writings by the composer, evaluation of the validity of all musical evidence and evaluation of the interpretive elements of the work of music. Also the work of art must be evaluated in a social context that would include the social, political and cultural history of the era. For this course, these would specifically relate to selected wars, peace movements, issues in censorship, key philosophical writings, class structure and government structure.

The traditional academic model for music study demonstrates academic rigor through study by the student, exams, and papers. Listening to music is essential and combines the sensual experience with the intellectual understanding of the art. The student would exit the experience with distilled knowledge as packaged by the course and from the sensual experience of listening to the music. Often, this is the end of the experience and the learning.

The model discussed below incorporates the necessary and expected step that artists themselves use and experience in the creating of the artwork itself, discernment. Music might be viewed both as an inspired and constructed work of art. It is easier to understand the construction process (its history and analysis) and to teach that process retrospectively than the inspired process that ignited and imbued the work with its special quality that makes it art. Typically music appreciation centers its work on finding ways to deliver the construction process to a student in a pre-packaged and digestible form. How could we teach or learn something from the privacy of the composer's inspiration, something they themselves can barely articulate? We would need the language of the soul to teach such material. It is precisely this silent language that resides in the listener and it is also the proper intent of all music that artfully derived sounds activate this language. Thus, the only way to completely understand and own a piece of music is to go through the reverse composition process. The listener must decompose (reconstruct the work) and then sensually accept the inspiration that the music fires up in the listener's soul, an inspiration not necessarily equal to the composer's inspiration. Both components are key to understanding music, yet the latter remains almost impossible to accurately and academically articulate not to mention evaluate.

Discernment is thinking and feeling combined. It is a holistic evaluation, both objective and subjective. The making of a decision is key to this process, a process that is founded upon facts (academic data) and imagination (fantasies). Wisdom, the well-wrought decision, is the goal and results from intellectual

analysis of distilled knowledge blended with spiritual intuition, the seeking of beauty and truth. The problem is finding a method, especially in a classroom setting. Once we accept the fact that learning is both hierarchical as presented in our traditional methods of studying music and also equally a wondering, searching series of thoughts that are both structured and unstructured we come close to activating the discernment process in the student. The extreme end of this method is to incorporate prayer or meditation, something the traditional music classroom has little experience in managing as a goal.

We as teachers need to accept the fact that the student's mind is their own and most of us do, but where we as teachers are challenged is how to incorporate that individual's wondering mind into a curriculum that can be evaluated. This requires a targeted process. The instructor, the course, and the area of study provide the discipline. In the case of music, this is musicology in its largest sense. The less structured elements of the class depart from the listening to the music. Here the instructor makes a decision. One can adhere to the traditional music history, analysis and style study and stop there or one can bridge from the sensual experience that results when listening to music into the world of discernment. In the best of all experiences a synergy takes place between the analytical and spiritual dimensions and between the student and the instructor and the music. We hope that the listening experience ignites the intellectual and spiritual knowledge in the student. Thus, the outcomes are academic knowledge infused with values and moral content that can inform a group or individual decision. Hopefully the student has formed a bridge for the soul to influence and participate in the actions of everyday life through this musical experience. No one will question the study of physics of sound in time, music, but to reach into the intention of music to move people requires a new step. Teachers need to recognize that the evaluation and application of a spiritual language that delivers meaning to listeners is a benefit to that individual and therefore holds a place in the classroom experience. Incorporating spiritual elements into a course comes with a significant burden: the spiritual language of music is undefined and therefore, cannot be subject to evaluation in the traditional sense.

It is easy to assume that issues of values, spirituality and meaning ultimately belong to the student in their private world. This paper argues that there is a place for both the process the student goes through and the decisions that the student arrives at in the classroom itself. Education is knowledge based upon organized facts, analytical data and understanding of the relations between the facts. Wisdom goes beyond this and is the result of discernment. Thus, the classroom experience would incorporate time for reflection and distillation of the student's thoughts, values and derived meanings, not just the "lectured" information. The teacher and the student need to accept the confusion that is normal for this process and is in fact, possibly, the opposite of what a traditional course of study would hope for. Once, the spiritual evaluation takes hold of an idea there can be a lack of clarity in sorting and understanding the thoughts acquired through the rigors of academic study because one allows the sensual experience and the feelings to influence the thought process, thus it is not pure, but is more holistic. It is the trust in the spiritual self and the reflecting process that includes prayer, no matter where it leads one, that ultimately delivers a conclusion of a moral nature to the student. Once this has happened the discernment process has contributed to the academic and intellectual process. It is reasonable to say that the music has now led the student to wisdom, the combined understanding of knowledge through education with a recognition of a discerned truth about the nature of a specific beauty, the music.

Application is always more difficult than theory. In the course Music, War and Peace, incorporating the discernment process was entered into gradually mostly through writing assignments and in-class discussions. Writing assignments generally progressed from purely reporting about the music to reporting plus personal observations to reporting plus observations plus imagination and correlation to any extra musical information about the music under study. For example, the war symphonies of Shostakovich were challenging for a classroom full of students that had only listened to limited genres of American popular music prior to taking the course. However, as archival video footage of the siege of Leningrad was shown and primary source statements from Soviet composers and citizens at the time were incorporated into the course, the sarcastic and somewhat obscure musical language of Shostakovich came alive. At this point in the course students had already been writing about other war or peace music. They had developed some degree of technical writing skills related to music criticism. Now, it was time to add in a component of discernment. This was done by asking the students to not only write about the music but to offer their personal reflections on the music, the war, current wars the U.S. is waging and their values about these topics. Their first efforts were of limited success as one might imagine, but they all did take the step to seriously reflect, to be honest about the confusion that resulted and to exercise their imaginations. Throughout the last third of the course similar assignments were made, each with various degrees of success, some more than others. All students cannot relate to all pieces of music presented, but with a variety of music in the syllabus (ethnic, folk, popular music, traditional classical music, world music and 20th and 21st century concert music) most students made progress incorporating discernment.

Discernment, inspiration and imagination were given time at the lecture podium and as part of classroom discussion, although not of long duration, these were important because they licensed the idea as acceptable in the course. Students, through conditioning in other courses, would typically not venture to discover these ideas (discerned musings from a fantasy, from imagined relationships, or from confused information) within the classroom setting. By the end of the course students created their own group wiki on a current topic in music that related to war and peace. As a concluding segment, the students were asked to step beyond the usual reporting, analysis and formatting of information to include a short section that offered what they had arrived at about this music using the discernment process. In each case, the results were constructive. The student response was very positive and they appreciated the freedom to reach beyond the usual academic boundaries.

One would not expect great revelations in learning by the end of the course as it relates to those elements learned through discernment. More important is the exposure to the discernment process within the context of an academic discipline that begins a life-long learning experience for the student, one that is hopefully broader than an academic course confined to academic study and evaluation. It may be easier to integrate discernment as a process into courses about the arts than some other disciplines; imagination, feeling and sensuality are part of the academic package in the arts. These last elements may be less evident in a pre-med Biology course and more appropriate in a medical ethics class later in the students study. This is precisely the contribution the arts can make to the undergraduate liberal arts study, practicing discernment is a natural for the arts because it was part of the original creative process and thus must be experienced in the listening process. Even though the listener will arrive at a different place than the composer started, this is the nature of art, to take the listener beyond themselves and into their world and hopefully, a little bit wiser.