



Interdisciplinary Education through the Lens of Music

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“Music is the universal language of mankind.” – Henry Wordsworth Longfellow

Longfellow’s quote is a familiar one; this essay will discuss what makes music the universal language, and how educators can help to make sure that this language is truly understood.

Bob W. White, professor of anthropology at the Université de Montréal, says that “music is not merely a manifestation of global processes and dynamics but is the very terrain on which globalization is articulated.” It is the social aspect of music that manifests a “deeply embedded...culture and history...[and] can provide a wealth of information about how people from different cultures and class backgrounds engage with one another and attempt to work through what it means to be simultaneously ‘of the world’ and ‘in the world’” (White, 2011).

Talent has always been considered the most important aspect of conservatory culture. However, for the 21st-century musician, talent is not enough to create a sustainable career. What separates one music graduate from another is not just a set of skills, but the way in which one takes those skills and translates them into a connection with an audience.

When most Americans think of studying music at the conservatory or university level, they think of the best and brightest preparing for futures at Carnegie Hall; and if one questioned most students studying music seriously, one would be informed that playing in an orchestra will be a large part of their professional life. However, in reality, how many students – even the best of the best – go on to perform in regular symphony jobs?



The United States has only sixteen 52-week orchestras; the supply far exceeds the demand.

Rather than playing in a full-time professional orchestra, the vast majority of these students will teach, record, free-lance, and/or create new modes of promotion/marketing on the internet. In addition, the students will not be performing in the same environment as they did a generation ago; instead, they will have a global presence. A music educator's goal is to take the student's natural gifts and help them to grow their skills to a level where they can innovate in a way that the educator will never be able to do his or herself, because each student has a unique cultural background and world-view that allows him or her to innovate in ways that we cannot always imagine today. This is what modern education is all about.

In order to achieve this, educators must embrace an interdisciplinary approach to education that empowers students to reach into a tool-bag filled with skills from a variety of disciplines that were once felt to be separate and wholly un-related. It is no longer enough to be simply a skilled musician – the musician of the 21st century must be that, of course, but also must be nimble with different forms of media, facile with computers, and able to promote and advertise their talent to an audience who looks at musicians with a different gold-standard than the audience of even a few years ago. Their talent is global. Their audience is global. Therefore, their educational focus must also be global.

Charles S. Burwell, Dean of Harvard Medical School in the 1930s and 1940s famously said, "Half of what we are going to teach you is wrong, and half of it is right. Our problem is that we don't know which half is which." That sentiment can easily be applied to education as a whole.

Understanding the utility of an interdisciplinary education is one thing; however, putting it into practice in a performance-driven world is another thing entirely. There are specific difficulties and controversies in an interdisciplinary approach inherent in this



setting. Though the practicality of a lesson may change, the principles of an interdisciplinary education do not.

Implementing interdisciplinary education makes sense when the benefits can be easily seen: for example, in business school. Business schools teach their students to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to their learning because it impacts the bottom line from the start: their students learn to exploit global sensitivities and cultural awareness in ways that we as educators can emulate.

While interdisciplinary education has been utilized in academic areas such as art (Healy), economics (Flohr), social sciences (White and McCormack), and mathematics and the sciences (*Curriculum Review*), it appears that music in higher education has been less willing to embrace the idea of interdisciplinary initiatives in teaching, research, and performance. Some feel that such an approach can infuse so much interdisciplinary information that music becomes secondary (Cook). Interestingly, much of the current research demonstrating the positive effects of interdisciplinary music education has not been conducted by music educators (Piercy, Eady and Wilson, Tinari and Khandke), and extant research has often been geared toward the younger learner (Rogers). If “music is the universal language,” what does this say about how “music provides a window on human experience and social life during an era of globalization,” (White) as well as what is not said, if it is studied in isolation? By failing to integrate culturally relevant musical methods of expression, the next generation can be robbed of an effective means of communicating contextually through music – thus further highlighting the global inequality that already pervades our world.

One of the most effective ways that music educators can better prepare their students for culturally relevant, globally-reaching careers is by building a “bridge of relevance” through music history classes. Music history is one of the pillars of an undergraduate music education (the others being performance and theory/ear training), and can be the foundation upon which performers can develop a profound connection to the music they are learning, which can then translate into the kind of performances that resonate with



their audiences to become a “universal language.” The following are some reasons why this can be effectively accomplished:

1. **CONTEXT** Music history helps performers to place the works they are practicing into a greater socio-cultural historical lens, which could spawn a deeper understanding of and connection to the work(s) and, subsequently, affect one’s performance and interpretation thereof.
2. **SKILLS** Music history helps students to develop such skills as the ability to assess evidence, conflicting interpretations, and past examples of change. Studying music history may also help students to learn to gather, organize, and interpret information (again, within a greater socio-cultural historical lens)
3. **CURIOSITY** Music history awakens a “love for constant discovery and appreciation for what additional insight one can bring to the music one is playing, and inspires one to ask of oneself, ‘How can I convey this?’” This is especially important for the performer aspiring to connect with a global audience.

Kramer (2003) believes that the marriage of music and socio-cultural historical study is the most effective and authentic means of studying music at all:

This is not simply a matter of using sociocultural awareness to contextualize... the arts. It is a matter of using the arts, critically and imaginatively taken up, as tools for thought—a thought that breaks down the barriers between “art,” “self,” and “society,” just as it does the boundaries separating the arts from each other and from speculative thought, and speculative thought from knowledge. (p. 6)

In Nott’s (2002) opinion, music majors are “eager to discover how other musicians lived out their commitment to music and how their art contributed to the life of their community....” (p. 14)



ART

“Yet another interdisciplinary connection might be made between art and music. Citing Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*¹, Healy (2007) states, ‘Art and music are blended as one’ (para.1), and that though ‘[Music] may be different [from art]...the creative process of expressing oneself based on vivid experiences remains the same’ (para. 4). Cosenza (2006) feels that an interdisciplinary approach, ‘...a cross-pollination’ approach, if you will, may foster deeper understanding of both music and art’ (para. 1).

Gausch (website) goes so far as to say,

Contemporary art production and its critical reception around the world can be readily identified with notions of ‘the global’ and ‘globalization.’ One of the most crucial issues in art today is the extraordinary increase in its practice and circulation at the regional as well as international levels through a variety of spaces, events, circuits and markets, and especially through electronic communications. New artistic initiatives are springing up locally all over the world. And many of these practices, in addition to creating active local dynamics, have taken on board an international approach. Artists tend to be well-informed about other contexts and aware of hegemonic art, while they also seek an international audience for their work, moving inside, outside and alongside local, regional and global spaces.

SOCIAL SCIENCES

According to White and McCormack (2006), “Music is a powerful tool to enhance learning, to connect issues and the times in history, to illustrate a cultural identity, or to promote unity for a cause” (para. 28). Integrating music into the social sciences may therefore help students to develop a deeper perspective of their respective field and help students to gain a better sense of cultural association with what they are studying. Macey (2002) finds such integration particularly useful in teaching Medieval and Renaissance Music: “One can emphasize that real, living individuals performed and cared strongly, even passionately, about this music. Far from a cobwebbed artifact, it is

¹¹ *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a musical suite, each movement of which describes different paintings at an art exhibition.



rather a vehicle for living human expression, and it needs performers to bring it to life” (p. 3).

Fink (2002) feels that teaching music within the socio-cultural historical lens is paramount—so much so that he teaches a class purposely titled “Music in Twentieth-Century History” rather than “History of Twentieth Century Music” (p. 46). He describes such a course as a “free-wheeling attempt to use musicological, historical, and cultural perspective to illuminate some representatively chosen current events in the postmodern musical scene” (p. 56).

English professors can attest to the role music plays in literature in conveying atmosphere and mood – and an understanding of this music can deepen the reader’s understanding of what is being portrayed. For example, Pierson (2016) notes that “One of the devices [Jane Austen] uses to round out and illustrate her characters is music.” By understanding the song “Robin Adair” that Jane Fairfax plays on the piano in *Emma*, the reader can at once know that Jane must be both a talented pianist and that the song’s somber lyrics betrays a longing for something missing in her life.

“Vernacular music” – a term the author coined as a doctoral candidate that essentially means a culture’s contemporary music – is a combined study of music history and anthropology. In the United States today, this study could encompass hip-hop, jazz, and pop. In Costa Rica, it would also encompass *musica guanacasteca*, *musica aldeana*, *musica limonense*, and *musica generalena*. Vernacular music is the music of the people – it is what classical music has become. Classical music was the “pop” music of the day: people rushed out to hear the latest Beethoven symphony the way they might today go out to hear the latest Beyoncé single. Music is a prime reflection of social globalization: the music performed in US symphonies is the same repertoire that is performed in Asian ones, just as the music played in the clubs on Sunset Boulevard is the same as the music played in the clubs in downtown San José.



In order to gain a deeper understanding of how this globalization in music might be made manifest, one might listen to *Symphony Number 5* by Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich was a Soviet-era pianist and composer whose music vacillated between criticism and adulation by the government. The 5th Symphony was able to accomplish the remarkable feat of dual praise from both the Soviet regime and the public: the Soviets declared it a success, due to the fact that it demonstrated the “required...lyricism, a heroic tone and inspiration from Russian literature,” (PBS) whereas the public responded by openly weeping during its performance, perhaps due to the composer’s ability to “subtly [weave] a deeper and sardonic musical truth, bearing testimony to the despair and terror that reigned over the nation” (NPR). Having this background information prior to (or even after) listening to even a portion of the symphony is certain to make the piece resonate differently with the listener.

Likewise, most people associate Impressionism with French painters, or with composers like Claude Debussy. What many do not realize, however, is Debussy’s fascination with Javanese gamelan.² Though one might not immediately draw a connection between the tiny dots of Impressionist paintings with traditional Indonesian instruments, Debussy managed to do just that in a number of his compositions, including his *Danse sacrée et Danse profane*.

In conclusion, there are there are countless similar examples that can be listened to and discussed. However, the point is that an interdisciplinary approach to teaching – whatever the specialty – takes learning to a deeper level, and highlights today’s social globalization.

As a musician, knowing the historical and social background can change the way one approaches learning and performing it. Musicians should want to be able to convey the composer’s message to their audience in a way that resonates with them on a personal level. Having the same kind of connection with a country’s musical, economic, political, technological, and social culture helps us to promote the “mutual understanding and

² Gamelan is the traditional music of Indonesia. It is primarily comprised of percussion instruments.



appreciation for one another” that the Global Awareness Society International strives to perpetuate.

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