

# Teaching Music Appreciation: A Cultural Approach

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Half a century ago, Frank Harrison invited us to consider social aims as part of our scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In ethnomusicology, implicitly at least, social aims reach well beyond Harrison's notion of "developing understanding between man and man" and between the past, present, and future, to include bringing to fruition social conscience, justice, and action. Musicology as well has begun to explore the social conscience of music making with the advent of ecomusicology and the exploration of issues such as music and torture.<sup>2</sup> These ideas, however, usually do not form the substance of our teaching, especially in our introductory courses. The authors believe, however, that these very ideas are those most essential to our general education music courses.

In this paper, we argue that an introduction to music course is a different animal not only from history courses for music majors, but also from more focused topical courses for non-majors. We believe that after taking a music appreciation course students should be equipped with tools to distill fundamental understandings from all of their musical experiences, beginning from the here and now and extending to the there and then, that is, from Beyoncé to Bach.

To achieve this, our remarkably engaged students need to situate themselves within the world of music with deepened foundational understandings, need to increase their skills in thinking about and engaging with musical experience, and need to be comfortable with a diverse set of musical tastes and affiliations. Equipped with these assets, students will be prepared for a rich future of life-long musical learning. These measures will benefit not only

1. Frank Ll. Harrison, "American Musicology and the European Tradition: Introduction," in Frank Ll. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology*, Humanistic Scholarship in America (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 6–7.

2. See for example: Aaron Allen, "Ecomusicology," *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Suzanne G. Cusick, "Musicology, Torture, Repair," *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008): 24 pars; <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2008/Cusick.htm>.

our students' personal lives, but will enrich our society as a whole. Thoughtful, creative, and proactive musical citizens will enter their various professions as articulate and engaged individuals whose work and leisure will support (perhaps even develop) new, and as yet unforeseen, musical contexts and offerings.

### Who Do We Teach?

Most of our students take our courses for general education credit. They are not music majors, but nearly all express a strong connection to music. Some of these students are already active in the field: a Celtic fiddler, a drummer in a punk band, a composer and music video producer. We often have students who program hip-hop "beats" (this designates all the instrumental music tracks), which they promote and sell over the Internet. All of the above students self identify as musicians, though some do not play an instrument and most do not read music.

Yet, no matter how musically involved students may be, we find that their experience is rarely disciplined, subjective rather than objective, and narrowly focused. ("My tastes are really broad. I listen to dubstep, hip-hop, *and* alternative rock," students proudly tell us.) Even more problematic, students' intuitive understandings of their "own" music generally do not transfer to other musical styles, genres, or historical periods. Therefore, while they may emotionally soar when listening to the music they know, new genres leave them flat. In part, this is because students have difficulty making connections. Before enrolling in our classes, very few have thought to place music within, or see it as a product of, broader social and historical contexts.

### What We Teach

Many music appreciation courses are part of a general education core that emphasizes skills such as critical thinking, the ability to synthesize knowledge, drawing conclusions, and functioning in a culturally diverse and global community. We satisfy these goals by focusing on music as social experience. Emphasizing social experience satisfies our musical needs as well.

It is part of our job to provide breadth. But what sort of breadth? What do we want our students to know, why do we want them to know it, and, most importantly, what do we want them to *do* with that knowledge?<sup>3</sup> These are fundamental questions. Because few students from other majors take more than a single music course, we generally have only one chance to reach them. It is essential we get the answers right.

3. Ken Bains expands on the importance of asking these questions in *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Nation-wide curricula, and most of our textbooks, generally reflect and perpetuate two metanarratives. For students who take only a single music course, both approaches come up short. On the one hand, the European masters reign in our timeline-driven music appreciation classes. This situation may (or may not) be the result of curricular inertia rather than intransigency in the face of America's multi-ethnic, rapidly changing, and globally connected, but deeply divided, society. But whatever the case, too strong a focus on Western art music does a disservice by ignoring most of the world's music while simultaneously devaluing students' own musical experiences. Such an approach makes little sense in a society as culturally pluralistic as is ours. On the other hand, classes in world music, while filling a lacuna that was virtually ignored until a generation ago, tend to exclude Western art music,<sup>4</sup> thereby overlooking an equally important cultural heritage.

In our introduction to music courses, we take an inclusive approach by presenting the greatest musical breadth practicable. We do this by supplanting the metanarratives of "music history" and "world music" with micro narratives that connect more closely to students' lives.<sup>5</sup> This approach allows us to begin with the students' own musical perceptions and interests, from which we begin fashioning pathways outward into new sounds, social contexts, historical time periods, and aesthetic landscapes.

Accordingly, we construct our music appreciation courses in resonance with these simple observations:

1. Students know what they like.
2. Musical experiences unfold in webs of social experience.
3. Students should think, not memorize.
4. We learn best by building upon the foundation of what we already know.
5. If students develop tools to conceptualize their existing tastes, they will be likely to apply those same tools to musical genres encountered in the future.
6. Presenting ideas that link one to another is the way to build broad concepts.

4. One notable exception is Kay Kaufman Shelemay's *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World* (New York: Norton, 2006).

5. Our terms are borrowed loosely from Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Also influenced by Lyotard's work, Robert Fink has proposed an alternative to teaching the metanarrative (to music majors) in his "Teaching Music History (After the End of History): History Games for the Twentieth-Century Survey" in *Teaching Music History*, ed. Mary Natvig (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 45–65. See also Ellen Koskoff, "What Do We Want to Teach When We Teach Music? One Apology, Two Short Trips, Three Ethical Dilemmas, and Eighty-Two Questions," in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 545–60.

7. Understanding another's experience makes one sympathetic to that experience, and may even allow one to live the experience vicariously.
8. Students like what they know.

As the above list implies, we work to stimulate two varieties of thinking: imaginative thinking (which we see as inductive and expansive) and critical thinking (which tends towards deduction, circumscription, and demarcation). The two approaches go hand in hand.

We do not follow the historical timeline (or go backwards against it, as do some instructors). Instead, we develop, explore, and link musical genres through concepts applicable across time and place. Units are built around cultural understandings within which we can range broadly.

This approach requires a certain amount of extra-musical preparation. For example, because we use culture as a vehicle to travel between music of different times and places, a working model for culture is essential. Though the definitions of culture are many, we understand it as a fluid construct that involves material, social, and intellectual aspects of living in the world. Related conceptual "vehicles" that we might fruitfully use for a unit in any particular class, all of which are subsets of culture, include: ethnicity, gender, political organization, spirituality, and many more.<sup>6</sup> We use the ideas inherent within these terms to construct bridges to diverse global presents and pasts. Fortified with this action-oriented toolbox of ideas embracing culture and identity, students find that distant times and places no longer seem so shadowy. The music and its makers no longer seem so inert.

These cultural subcategories resonate naturally with students' experiences. After all, students (and most people) listen to specific musical genres because they comfortably *engage* with the musicians, their style, and (often) social values, not because the music is "good" in some abstract sense. Students listen because the music confirms (or challenges) and energizes important social, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual notions and ways of being.

By crossing boundaries of genre and of time and place, we seek to:

1. Open ears to new sounds.
2. Widen tastes, and confront biases and preconceptions.
3. Open minds to diverse ways of being in the world.

6. Traditional musicology's valuing of great minds and works is also a social lens. Because the conception of greatness is not one of our categories, however, we feel little compulsion to teach the traditional canon (though we do include works from that canon, in other contexts). Any one of the above mentioned concepts might generate its own particular canon, of course.

All of which, when placed within the context of culture, will ensure significant learning by:

1. Presenting music as process rather than product.
2. Encouraging self-reflection and independent thinking.
3. Promoting social understanding through the lens of music.

By offering tools for listening to and thinking about music in a social fashion, we explore music's relationship to the human condition. Students, by being immersed in context, in the "flesh and blood," so to speak, of musical experience, learn to:

1. Listen situationally, rather than simply hear.
2. Articulate social conceptions related to listening, rather than experience amorphous feelings.
3. Learn to apply their musical knowledge in their own real-life settings.

These connections work. Renaissance songs of troubled love no longer seem so far removed when students realize that fifteenth-century hormonal drives, however initially alien (or repressed) they may seem, are expressed musically by means every bit as insistent as those of our own time.

Our micro narratives are developed through a series of chapter-long theme-oriented stories that juxtapose and interweave the musical present with the past. The various narratives explore particular ideas that can be found universally across time and place. Some of our classroom topics revolve around the previously mentioned cultural subsets. Other topics are built on genres (such as film, dance, and theater). With each narrative we begin with the familiar—a well-known composition, style, or concept—and methodically work our way outward across social and chronological distance to more far-flung ideas, repertoires, and concepts.

In our unit on music and nation, for example, we begin with Jimi Hendrix's Woodstock rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, a performance that most students recognize. After listening to the entire performance, we begin with the music itself, by discussing and exploring Hendrix's vivid tone painting. Then we begin to investigate social context. First we look to the personal, by asking our students to describe their own emotional reactions to the performance and the reasons for those reactions.<sup>7</sup> Then we ask them to consider an anthem's place in broader society. Finally, we look at the performance within the turbulent atmosphere of the Vietnam War and the civil rights

7. In general, students are now far more open to Hendrix's performance than they were after 9/11 and during the build up to the 2003 Iraq invasion.

movement.<sup>8</sup> There are still bigger questions to explore. How many interpretive liberties are appropriate to take when performing a national anthem? Do the boundaries change with time and place?<sup>9</sup> Who “owns” *The Star-Spangled Banner*? For whom does it speak? How might an anthem be similar to, and different from, another national icon, such as a flag? And even, why is a Western military band the standard anthem performance ensemble for nations around the world?

From this discussion, now fortified with a range of conceptual tools, we are prepared to go almost anywhere. In our textbook, we move on to a discussion of nineteenth-century nationalism and, specifically, Borodin’s symphonic poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. Again, there are many questions. What musical techniques did he use to portray the Central Asian landscape? Why did Borodin write this music? Were his goals simply musical? Next we consider music in Communist countries: first the opera *Hong deng ji* (*The Red Lantern*), one of the *Yang Ban Xi* (*Eight Model Plays*) of China’s Cultural Revolution, and second, Bulgarian “folk” music as reimagined by Philip Koutev. Moving on, and now backwards in time, we explore the ideal of universal brotherhood in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as well as various political appropriations of that work. And finally we journey forward to the present with the Mexican *corrido*, *El himno Zapatista*, an anthem of resistance of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

Of course, examples by which to teach music and nation are limited only by the instructor’s interests and background. In the text we might just as profitably have focused on a composition by Charles Ives or Aaron Copland, iconic performers like Woody Guthrie, Chile’s Victor Jara or Cape Verde’s Cesária Évora, Japanese *taiko*, or even the Eurovision Song Contest. Sometimes we do. All the music is readily available through the Internet. Taken as a complex whole over the course of a semester, our narratives tell different, but interrelated, stories about music’s power to reflect and shape social and personal reality.

The various social lenses we develop generate distinct perspectives, of course. They also energize and build one upon the other. The story of opera’s Carmen might be introduced through the lens of gender, for example. But she could be introduced just as effectively through lenses of ethnicity, love, nation, violence, or alienation. Carmen’s character, like all of ours, is woven into the warp and woof of the social fabric in which she lives. If she were not, we would not care about her life and death, or even the music she sings.

8. Hendrix said the performance was intended neither to protest nor to offend, but many were outraged.

9. YouTube offers an extraordinary range of performances, from The Marine Band to Steven Tyler, and from Borat to Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ raising of black-gloved fists during a 1968 Olympics medal ceremony.

These characteristics of culture are braided (in different ways, of course) into everyone's social make-up. All of these factors potentially interact with, and impact, one's musical tastes and understandings. Influences work in both directions—powerful musical experiences can impact one's ethnic understandings, political views, sense of spirituality or gender, daily purchases, and even career choice.

## What We Assign

### *My Musical World*

Since good teaching necessarily begins with, and builds outward from, what students know, we begin our courses by trying to understand our students as individuals. Accordingly, every semester, the first assignment our music appreciation students receive is a two-page paper in which they are instructed to describe their musical worlds. This assignment serves a dual purpose. Not only do we learn about our students, but by articulating their own musical backgrounds and tastes, students learn about themselves. Reflection upon how music functions in their own lives also opens a door to understand how music functions, and has functioned, in the lives of others, past and present, near and far.<sup>10</sup>

Almost always, students write about the central role that music plays in their lives. They report how music affects their emotions, relaxes them or revs them up, places them in the world, and reminds them of times past or vitalizes the present. These are important observations that provide the foundation for beginning a dialogue on the power of music and, by extension, the purpose of art itself. Once these ideas have been brought into their conceptual toolboxes, they can be referenced throughout the semester in a variety of contexts. We discover points of intersection, how we and others use music to define ourselves as individuals, families and peers, and cultures.

Students' musical experience is remarkably vital. We work to build on them. The following quotes, all from papers written during the 2013 spring semester, are typical:

My music is a collection of memory triggers for every era of my life. My music tells my story, a story of sadness, struggle, striving, triumph, and love. Music is what I turn to in all occasions. It plays my life to me everyday, and from that I draw strength to continue going.

10. Robert Woody and Kimberly Burns have shown that if students can connect to the mood or feeling expressed in a work, they are more likely to respond positively and to listen to the work on their own. Robert H. Woody and Kimberly J. Burns, "Predicting Music Appreciation with Past Emotional Responses to Music," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 57–70.

Another wrote, “Music is everything to me. It is my life.” And yet another, “Music shapes and defines me.”

Even students less enamored tend to write about music’s power to open doors and animate worlds. “Usually, I only listen to music from video games. But as I play the game, I listen to the music and feel the [game’s] story inside the songs,” wrote one student. She went on to tell how her emotional connection to the music sent her to the Internet, where she searched for the composer and discovered a variety of compositions for orchestra. Now she listens to them as well.

Students often “wear” and act out their music.

When I was younger I began enjoying hip-hop culture and lifestyle, the way they dressed, talked, and walked. My life began looking like a music video. I related to things rappers rap about, purposely getting into trouble because that was cool. Even so, I don’t believe that music defines and shapes who you are. It simply brings out the mood you’re already in.

### *Interview an Elder*

After students have reflected on their own musical worlds, we ask them to interview a family elder, the older the better. Interviewing a grandparent (on very rare occasions we receive a great-grandparent interview) is ideal for two reasons. First, a grandparent’s experience opens windows far into the past. Second, the interview offers a wonderful opportunity for students and grandparents to enrich their relationships.

Our elders are gateways into the past. They have wonderful stories to tell. Recently, for example, one grandparent described the thrill of seeing Elvis Presley perform in the 1950s. Another told of falling for her future husband while dancing to the Glenn Miller Orchestra. One grandfather told of touring with polka king Frankie Yankovich. (The student had no idea who Yankovich was, or even that his grandfather had been a musician.) This semester, a Vietnamese student interviewed her uncle, who told her about the conflicting ideologies embodied in Vietnam’s democratic “yellow” and socialist “red” musical genres, both of which were performed during the Vietnam War; another student’s uncle, a former American GI, described the music he listened to while fighting in the same war. These remembrances shared across generations are powerful gifts. They offer insights far more vivid than textbooks.

Students report they had no idea that grandma was so cool, that grandpa had been through so much. They also learn that musical experience was once much more hands on, that people sang together in the home, at picnics and weddings, and around a campfire. We want students to go back as far in time as possible, to go back to their elders’ youthful experiences. We even encourage them to ask their elders about what they themselves remember about their



own parents' or grandparents' musical worlds. Almost invariably, the elders come up empty. That is because, when today's elders had their chance, they did not think to ask. This lacuna is made visceral when we move into our unit on music and ethnicity, in which we study the *jalolu* (*griots*), West Africa's musical historian/story tellers who sing of family deeds and events reaching back for generations.

### *Concert Review*

We require students to attend a music performance and write about the event. We are not looking for a traditional review, of course, but rather a description of what they experienced. We ask them to include journalisms "five Ws": who, what, when, where, why, and also how. Mostly we are interested in whys and hows, because that is where they discover cultural processes at work. That is also where the thinking comes in.

We mention just a few things students might more deeply investigate, though many others come up in class discussion.

- Costumes/dress (both performers and audience)
- Implicit rules of behavior and interaction
- Level of formality/informality
- Performers' and audience's general age
- Venue
- Ticket price

### *Analyze Period Sheet Music*

During our music and war unit, sometimes we ask students to explore The Library of Congress' American Memory site, where by clicking on the link "Performing Arts, Music," they can investigate a trove of sheet music from the American Civil War and World War I. We ask them look at sheet music covers and song lyrics, many of which are quite remarkable. The assignment itself is amorphous, a treasure hunt without specifying the exact treasure they should find. Indeed, in this case, the prize is in the eyes of the beholder. Some students will be drawn to songs and images of fighting men. Others will investigate pacifist music. Still others will be drawn to the publications rooted in blackface minstrelsy, examples of which exist through World War I. Whatever music students choose to analyze, they should contextualize what they see. At assignment's end we invite one or two students to share what they discovered with the entire class. Depending on the selection, this can make for a most animated discussion.

## What We Test

We use exams to find out how much students know, of course. But, more importantly, we test in order to monitor the development of critical thinking skills. Our exams generally include multiple-choice questions, listening identification, and one or two essay questions.

In the listening section, besides the music we studied in class, we often include a piece that the students have not previously heard. We ask them to describe the music and, based on those observations, assign the composition a time and place of origin. Students are graded on the quality of their thought process, not whether or not they correctly place the composition.

If that is the case, why try to place the music at all? We ask this of the students because we want to reinforce the useful habit of active, goal-oriented listening, which invariably leads to a richer level of musical mindfulness. One hears what one listens for. Listening for melody tends to demote rhythmic attention. One will likely ‘hear’ gender in music if the mind searches for it. This is also the case with ethnicity, social organization, or any number of emotional qualities. All of these characteristics are subsets of time and place.

The essays are what students most fear, and, ultimately, most enjoy. Because thinking is the goal, the essays are difficult. Because they are difficult, not only do the students get them in advance, we discuss in class. On occasion, the students themselves conceive of the basic question. In class, we analyze the problem and consider various solutions. We construct potential thesis statements that could direct their arguments. We encourage students to prepare a full outline of their essays, which will have to be written in class and without notes.<sup>11</sup>

### *Recent essay questions*

1. William Grant Still stated that he wanted to raise the blues “to the highest musical level.”
  - a. Using your knowledge of Still’s life, compositional output, and the general state of American culture in 1930, show what Still hoped to demonstrate and why. Cite and discuss the relevant composition.
  - b. Next, drawing from the music we studied in class, relate how a strategy of musical identification was employed in a very different manner by Maurice Ravel OR Béla Bartók. Again, be sure to place the composer’s ideas and music into a cultural context. Cite a

11. After taking this semester’s (spring 2013) midterm exam, a tired student commented, “I took this class because I thought music would be easy, but you are making us think.”

“And so?” I said.

“I like it,” he replied.

- relevant composition and its musical characteristics to support your points.
- c. Finally, suggest ways in which the klezmer tradition is similar to or different from the above examples. (Spring semester 2013)
2. Music reflects and structures our social values and understandings.
    - a. Using a specific musical example from the textbook (or from your own music collection), construct an argument showing how this statement is true.
    - b. Using the same example, construct an argument arguing that this statement is false.<sup>12</sup> (Spring semester 2013)
  3. Use a single musical example to demonstrate how (depending on one's perspective) music might be used to enhance social cohesion while simultaneously promoting social division. (Fall semester 2012)
  4. Igor Stravinsky's 1913 ballet *Le sacre du printemps* is considered one of the seminal compositions of the first half of the twentieth century. Discuss and analyze the composition in terms of social/historical context and musical characteristics. Consider how aspects of ethnicity, gender, nationality, and even spirituality might influence performance decisions. Use examples from YouTube to support your answer. (Summer 2011)

12. Post exam explanation: You were asked to write two separate essays. Each essay needed to stand on its own with a strong topic sentence to introduce the argument.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to construct a convincing argument that music does not reflect and/or structure social values. How to do this? Many of you discussed how your example piece challenged social mores—for example, Aretha Franklin's rendition of *Respect* reversed or confused accepted gender roles, as did Dar Williams's *When I Was a Boy*, as also did Orbison and k. d. lang's rendition of *Cryin'*. But aren't these performances direct responses to social expectations? And don't these performances have an impact on the way we understand gender?

One innovative paper argued that music was not about values as such, but the real "values" were behind the scene, in music's commercial aspect. Production is a business. Artists produce what sells, not what they value. So, the whole idea of social value, or at least values' truthful representation in music, is a sham to begin with.

The strongest essay argued that musical experience is individually constructed in the ears and minds of each listener, that music is a language of abstractions. Any gesture—a falling melodic line, a vigorous rhythm—can be interpreted many ways. Indeed, maybe a "social" (or associative) focus is arbitrary, one of many equally viable ways of listening.

## Conclusion

Because we introduce study units with material that is relevant to students' immediate lives, and because that material is constantly changing, our courses are always under construction. The downside to this is that classes invariably require updating. The upside, which far outweighs any negatives, is that not only is the material always fresh, but it engages our students and establishes a common understanding on which to introduce new information and ideas.

In addition to our core culture-driven micro narratives of ethnicity, gender, nation, love, and conflict, there are many additional perspectives we can incorporate or interweave throughout the basic topics. These include alienation, displacement, family, social class, power, economics, ritual, taboo, life stages, technology, generational cohorts, and globalization, to name just some possibilities. Viewing musical life through any of these lenses will offer fruitful insights.

One might argue that viewing music through any externally imposed perspective will dilute the quality of musical experience by filtering out music's subtle experiential nuances. Or, that such an approach may even take us away from the music itself. The concern is well taken, but in this case it is misconceived. It is true that focusing on one particular aspect will necessarily blur others (think of working the lens of a camera or microscope). If we sought only to engage with music through the lens of ethnicity, for example, we would indeed be dulling our broader experience for the sake of a particular set of insights. But this is not the approach we advise. Instead, we advocate studying musical activity through a series of lenses, which, when ultimately combined, will engender expanded levels of breadth and depths of understanding. Of course, none of this would be successful without careful listening and the exploration of how different styles and musical languages enhance musical meaning.

Imagine the richness of a class discussion about *West Side Story* when student understanding is fortified with a variety of the energizing concepts listed two paragraphs above. What about *Le sacre du printemps*, *St. Matthew Passion*, or any theatrically oriented musical production? These are just the most obvious examples, of course. Every musical performance includes extra-musical elements.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the biggest problem with the approach we advocate here has been too much student involvement. When discussions get fired up, it is difficult to get through the lesson plans. For that, we are happy to accept the loose ends.

13. See for example: Christopher Small, *Musiking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998) and Nicholas Cook, *Music, Performance, Meaning: Selected Essays* (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).