

Music in Liberal Education: A Harmonization of Academic and Professional Pedagogies

by Dr. Charles D. Morrison
Dean
Faculty of Music
Wilfrid Laurier University

I've often pondered the many ways in which music may be thought of as a metaphor for life. Music's temporal nature reminds us of our own extension in time: both music performance and life itself are delineated by clearly articulated beginnings and endings, with complex unfolding narratives connecting those extremities of existence. Music's harmonic structure is one of the principal means for expressing dissonance and consonance, tension and resolution. Tensions may resolve immediately, or they may take the life of the musical narrative to resolve. Life is, of course, full of consonance and dissonance, and its tensions and resolutions occur at different paces, some immediate, some long-term. Music maintains a complex relationship with human emotions: at any given time, music may be said to evoke emotions, to express them or to imitate them. And what about the very act of *performing* music? Surely a string quartet is as close to a functioning democracy as one could hope to find: four voices contribute to a narrative that has them expressing their independence in one section, while coming together in a unified voice in another. The negotiation—perhaps even hostile argumentation—over interpretation in rehearsal that gives way to the seemingly unanimous public face presented in concert nicely mimics the trajectories of our privately nurtured and publicly revealed personal relationships with others.

We breathe life into art and art breathes life into, well, life. Given music's richness, its temporal extension, and its powerful, if ineffable, relationship to human emotions, it certainly seems to be a convincing metaphor for life. But what about the *study* of music? What role does it play in higher education? In this essay, I explore the college and university music curriculum as a bona fide, indeed rich, example of liberal education and propose that examining the relationship between music's academic and applied areas might suggest ways to resolve broader tensions in the academy between the liberal arts and the professions.

Music in and as Liberal Education

Music curricula are at once complex and curious, consisting of courses that one might call "liberal" or "academic" and others

LiberalArtsOnline is a monthly publication that promotes inquiry and reflection on liberal arts education.

LiberalArtsOnline

that are clearly “professional” or “applied.” On the liberal or academic side, the music curriculum consists principally of music history and theory courses. Music history includes broad historical surveys; courses on specific periods, composers, styles, and cultures; feminist, gender, and popular music studies; and even courses on the developments and impacts of technology. Theory courses typically range from harmony, counterpoint, form, and arranging courses (involving both analysis and composition) to specialized courses on particular analytical methodologies or theoretical systems applied to distinct repertoires. Musicology and theory curricula may also include a wide range of philosophical-aesthetic topics. Virtually all of these are liberal and academic in nature in that they deal with broad historical, cultural, and humanistic contexts of music, on the one hand, or with structural, formal, and often abstract details of analysis, on the other.

The applied side of the curriculum is rich with performing opportunities, ranging from participation in a wide variety of ensembles and weekly master classes to intense study in the signature one-on-one private lessons on one’s major instrument (or in voice). These performance-based courses, especially the private lessons, are often considered more “professional” in nature, as they focus on particular skills leading to the refinement of a specific vocation. One could claim that composition study, music education, and certainly music therapy, while not necessarily performance based in the usual sense of that term, are also quasi-professional subdisciplines of music, again, because the specialized courses in those areas focus specifically on the development of particular skills in preparation for application in clearly defined vocations.

Exploring music “in” and “as” liberal education first requires consideration of the very meaning of “liberal education,” for it is often confused with “liberal arts” (among other things). In current parlance, the term liberal arts usually refers generally to the various disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and even the sciences; historically, it referred to the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, and the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—all of which formed the basis for an education in the *Artes Liberales*.

Liberal education, however, can be something quite different. As Sheldon Rothblatt asserts, choice of subject is not the only defining feature of liberal education: “The telltale identifying marks of a liberal education are the manner in which a subject is taught or learned, the spirit in which it is offered, and the attitudes that may result from the teaching and learning.”

LiberalArtsOnline

[2, p. 15] I would argue that liberal education and its counterpart on the student side, “liberal learning,” are defined more by the way subjects are taught than by the subjects themselves. Rothblatt underscores this independence of discipline or subject from the manner of teaching and learning: “Any type of study may be taught narrowly or broadly, imaginatively or unimaginatively, in plodding or exciting fashion, in ways that further the art of making connections or in a manner that stifles all possibilities for encouraging large and spacious reasoning.” [2, pp. 44–45] Indeed, for me, liberal education is the act of developing (in oneself as teacher, as well as in one’s students) intellectual curiosity, sensitivity to nuance, and a willingness to celebrate the dynamism of varied interpretations and potential interconnectedness of multiple perspectives.

The aforementioned comments give a general sense of what liberal education entails, but what of its more specific features? And how is the music curriculum in particular demonstrative of those qualities? “Multiplicity”—in terms of expressed, received, and respected opinions; alternative teaching methodologies; and varied learning contexts—would seem to be one of the more significant, overarching themes in liberal education at its most powerful. Schneider and Shoenberg suggest that liberal learning includes “. . . ways of approaching knowledge that expand imaginative horizons, develop intellectual powers and judgment, and instill in students the capacity and resolve to exercise leadership and responsibility in multiple spheres of life, both societal and vocational.” [3, p. 7] And their list of specific learning strategies (collaborative inquiry, experiential learning, service learning, research or inquiry-based learning, and integrative learning) is familiar to those whose interest lies in liberal education. [3, p.10] Virtually all of these modes of liberal learning operate in most college or university music programs to at least some degree.

Rarely in the study of music does (should) an effective pedagogy consist merely of a one-way transmission of information from the instructor to the student. More often than not, some form of collaboration is not only possible but necessary in facilitating a rich learning experience. The most obvious examples of collaborative efforts include the many ensembles in which music students participate, ranging from orchestras, bands, choirs, and opera ensembles to more intimate and intense chamber ensembles. But collaborative learning can, and very often does, take place in academic settings as well: in music theory classes, where joint analysis projects invite discussion of and support for varied interpretations of structure; in music

LiberalArtsOnline

education seminars, where students routinely test out and hone pedagogical strategies; and even in composition programs, where, in spite of the solitary nature of the act of composing, student composers necessarily consult with performers to ensure they are writing idiomatically for particular instruments. Collaborative learning is not only possible within the music curriculum, it is essential.

A second mode of liberal learning that emerges naturally and meaningfully within the music curriculum is that of service learning—a context that overlaps the processes of collaboration just discussed. Service learning covers a potentially broad range of activities, bound up as it is with the potentially expansive concept of community. Contexts for service learning in music programs include music education students assisting area school teachers in volunteer placements; composition students running after-school group composition workshops; performers assisting local arts organizations with concert organization, promotion, and implementation; and, of course, music therapists working at various community agencies. The overlap with collaborative learning in these contexts is obvious. Music, by definition, is something collaborative and community based: musicians collaborate with each other, with audiences, with clients, with other students. They also render a wide range of services, from aesthetic and cultural enrichment to spiritual and emotional well-being; and they offer those services to a vast range of communities, from the local to the international.

Not only do collaborative and service learning overlap with each other, but they both intersect with the third and final learning process to be discussed in this essay: integrative learning. Interdisciplinarity is inextricably tied to the concept of integrative learning. And the potential for music to engage creatively, meaningfully, and uniquely with other disciplines—from those in the humanities and social sciences to those in the hard sciences and other professions (e.g., business, social work, medicine, law)—is significant indeed. Music therapy is a discipline that celebrates numerous intersections between structure, affect, performance, and improvisation, on the musical side, and developmental, abnormal, motivational, emotional, and clinical psychology, on the social science side. Integrating knowledge and best practices from the two disciplines yields a more informed and effective pedagogical outcome than does restricting the learning context to a single discipline. Music history is another obvious subdiscipline of music that enriches and is enriched by interdisciplinary and integrative pedagogy. Music didn't emerge in a vacuum, and so studying particular composers and their musical oeuvres,

LiberalArtsOnline

without regard for the broader historical, political, and cultural contexts in which those composers lived and worked, gives an incomplete picture at best and an outright inaccurate or misleading one at worst. But the enrichment goes in the other direction too: what better way to provide students of, say, nineteenth-century European history with a more direct sense of the culture of the time and place they are studying than by a visit from a string quartet introducing and then playing music composed in that very setting? The potential benefits of such integrative learning contexts are numerous. When combined with the various contexts for collaborative and service learning suggested above, the integrative experience may well be a far richer one than a siloed disciplinary perspective could ever offer.

The Harmonization of Academic and Professional Curricula

It is no secret that many tensions exist between academic and applied areas of musical study. Those criticisms are virtually the same as the ones that exist between professional and academic programs in the college or university as a whole. In the academic and applied subdisciplines within music, these tensions appear when a music performance major questions the need for rigorous theory training, or a music therapy student does not see the need for intense historical study. Many music programs attempt (with good intentions) to create a “both/and” scenario but find that in spite of their best efforts, students on the applied side still tend to view their academics as “something to get out of the way,” just as some students majoring in academic music areas continue to resent the need to perform as much as their programs require. Thus, it is often within the music curriculum itself that interactions, integrative learning, and what I term “*intradisciplinarity*” are most challenging, for it is especially within music that questions of identity arise: Is music a liberal art or is it a profession? Is it an academic study or is it applied? Music is all of these really, and while it manifests many of the tensions that surface between liberal arts programs and the professions, it also offers many potential resolutions.

Space does not permit an analysis of all possible tensions and resolutions involving the myriad of academic and applied courses in music, but I want to end with one particularly striking area of dissonance in music programs and briefly suggest a path towards the resolution of that dissonance. It is my hope that this mode of harmonization can extrapolate to

LiberalArtsOnline

the broader arena of academic and professional disciplines in liberal education. The central tension in question is essentially that which exists between theory and practice, literally. Music theorists, of which I am one, analyze music and make interpretive decisions largely on the basis of score study (the music as represented in its notated format) rather than assemble their interpretations based on performances of the music (data that is ephemeral and subjective). There has been a tendency for theorists to offer their “enlightened” interpretive comments to performers (some might say “foist” their interpretations on performers) in the hopes that the latter will “get it right.” It should be no surprise that performers are not always gushing with enthusiasm and gratitude for these offerings, for they, after all, are the ones slaving away in rehearsal, attending to every imaginable nuance in the music, precisely towards the same goal: to get it right. The problem is that one camp often views the methodologies, the language, and the outcomes of the other as insufficient at best or irrelevant at worst.

The fact of the matter is that both theorists *and* performers are approaching the music meaningfully, if differently, and resolution of the academic–applied tension will have to acknowledge the fact that information, interpretation, opinion, and advice simply cannot be a one-way transaction. What is needed is a more cooperative and respectful interaction between theorists and performers, a concerted effort at integrating their respective approaches and discoveries towards a richer composite understanding of the subject at hand. One kind of observation may be better disclosed through the abstract, nonlinear temporal realm of score analysis, while a completely different kind of observation may only be available through performance and by performers. Again, this is not only about sharing opinions and respecting different interpretations expressed in different “languages,” as important as those are. Were it only those things, we would be describing a both/and kind of pedagogy (admittedly an improvement on an either/or configuration). Rather, this kind of interaction and integration would amount to a bona fide intradisciplinary “blending” (to use Chew’s and McInnis-Bowers’ term) of academic and applied pedagogies: analysis informing performance (not just coexisting with it) and performance informing analysis (again, not just coexisting with it). [1] Few subjects, problems, issues, or experiences—in the academy or in life—are so one-dimensional that multiple, integrative analytical approaches of an academic and applied nature cannot yield a more accurate, relevant, indeed richer, understanding.

LiberalArtsOnline

Collaborative, service, and integrative learning are hallmarks of liberal education as well as the professions. The study of music—a dynamic blend of academic and applied courses—is richly demonstrative of these learning contexts. In many ways music may be thought of as a metaphor for life; as it turns out, in its educational context, it also models many positive features of meaningfully engaged pedagogy and demonstrates a particularly vibrant example of the harmonization between academic and professional, liberal and applied, pedagogies.

References:

1. Chew, E. Byron and McInnis-Bowers, Cecilia. 2004. "Blending Liberal Arts and Business Education." *Liberal Education* 90/1.
2. Rothblatt, Sheldon. 2003. *The Living Arts: Comparative and Historical Reflections on Liberal Education*. Washington, DC: The Association of American Colleges and Universities.
3. Schneider, Carol G. and Shoenberg, Robert. 1998. *Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education*. Washington, DC: The Association of American Colleges and Universities.