

Theresa Sauvage
Music 145
Philosophy of Music Education

Since antiquity, music has been a central part of the human experience.

Treatises dating back to the ancient Greeks stress the importance of music and music education in society -- not just any music, but beautiful music. Aristotle himself mused on this idea in regards to education at large in his treatise entitled "Politics" and concluded that music is an integral part of education and is "...for intellectual enjoyment in leisure..."(1) It is for the enrichment of the both the mind and emotions. Although centuries separate from the ancient Greeks, their thought on beauty and music relevant today and are worthwhile considering and including in our philosophy of music education.

In our society we too often forget their wise words and settle for musical mediocrity. Look around you, we have a culture at large that celebrates the pedestrian. As a western culture, we have a rich musical tradition filled with glorious music.

One wise man after listening to a selection of Mozart, described: "The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes..."(2) To discern the "good" and the "true". Aristotle warned that constant exposure to music that only stimulated the senses was dangerous for society. As human beings, we are mixture of body, intellect and emotions. Music that only engages the senses is detrimental to the person. On the other hand, completely intellectual music is also deficient. Truly beautiful music engages the entire person. Each culture has their own standard of beautiful music, but the effect is the same. It engages and forms the

whole the whole person.

For these reasons, we as music educators need to make sure that we give our students a foundation in our own beautiful western music. Certainly a case can be made for exposing and teaching our children the music of many cultures. It is an excellent thing to be able to appreciate a wide variety. Dr. Robert Glidden in an article from the Houseright Symposium specifically addressed this topic. He remarked on the declining musical abilities of the youth at large and specifically stated that it was necessary to instruct them in the basic principles of western music and then move on to learning about the music of other cultures. Even the most primitive of cultures see to it that their own musical traditions are passed on to their young ones. We in our western culture should do no less.

During a lecture at a conference in June of 2008, Dr. William Mahrt, a professor of music at Stanford University made the observation that music evokes a time and a place in every one of us. And also that particular types of music evoke very specific emotions. He used the example of being in church one Sunday morning and hearing a very solemn part of the service being accompanied by a flute, a bass and a jazz piano. He said that he was mentally transported to a bar and thought “Where’s my martini?” Aristotle too remarked on the idea as well:

“... even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each. Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm. The whole subject has been well treated by philosophical writers on this branch of education, and they confirm their arguments by facts. The same principles apply to rhythms; some have a character of rest, others of motion, and of these latter again, some have a more vulgar, others a nobler movement.”(3)

Since music can so powerfully transport us to a mental time and place, we should be very careful as to what music we teach and when. Music education is a part of a broader education in beauty that leads to truth. The truth that integrates us as whole human persons as well as recognizing the inherent dignity of each person we encounter. A tragic example of music education gone awry is found in the life of Adolf Hitler. "The music of Tristan und Isolde went deep into the soul of Adolf Hitler; he expressed the wish that, at the moment of his own annihilation, he should hear the Liebestod in the bunker."(4)

Music has the ability to move us both mind and spirit and makes want to go beyond ourselves. It has the ability to evoke and express the deepest of human emotions -- so deep in fact, that they cannot be expressed with words. Gustav Mahler once remarked that if such feelings could be expressed with words, no composer would bother even attempting to write music.

All of us have experienced a concert at which we could not move from the sheer beauty and emotion that the performer or performer's exuded. The amount of thought, energy and concentration required by the performer is immense. Music education gives us the great opportunity to let our children experience this so that even if they never pursue any musical activity after having left high school, they will be able to better appreciate any concert they attend or for that matter, any recording they ever listen to.

Pope Benedict the XVI after a listening to a concert of Beethoven, Brahms and Beriot, in April of 2008 remarked that "Music infuses hope into the human soul".(5) It is crucial to instill hope in the next generation. I want to help inspire my students and give them hope through beauty that helps them to become an integrated whole person who also recognizes the dignity and inherent goodness of each person they encounter. As a

music teacher, it is my hope that if I can accomplish nothing else with my students, that they will come away with a love of beauty in general and an appreciation of beautiful music. My ideal would have students begin their musical education at a young age and experience the best of our western tradition with choral and instrumental opportunities in group and individual settings. I would like to provide opportunities to enjoy live performances as well as excellent recorded examples inspiring them to aspire to highest ideals.

Notes

(1) <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.8.eight.html>

(2) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html

(3) <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.8.eight.html>

(4) <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1944447/posts>

(5) <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=12460>

