Teaching Critical Music Literacy Across the Curriculum

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Millennial learners may spend more time on their phones, computers, or in front of their televisions than they do engaging in meaningful conversation with people in non-virtual contexts. The ability to evaluate, question, and choose the content we all engage with is an increasingly important counterpart to modern life. Communication courses train students in these skills, but do music history classes?

Critical music literacy, as I am defining it within the contexts of my courses, is the ability to articulate how music—with and without text—transmits, transforms, and subverts ideas about human identity. Several of my courses at Michigan State University treat these issues specifically, including “Music, Gender, and Sexuality,” “Music and Violence,” and “Music and Identity.” The students who sign up for such courses know, to some degree, what to expect; however, I wanted to make critical listening available across the curriculum. Thus, I developed curriculum and assignments for my “Music of the Eighteenth Century” course to help students grapple with identity issues in music that they care deeply about. Although many students who sign up for this particular course expect that it will be a repertoire class, what I hoped to do instead was to reveal how Western music shaped contemporary views of difference, particularly because the eighteenth century was an important juncture for the development of modern ideas about [race](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22080599M/The_invention_of_the_white_race), [gender](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL8298059W/Making_Sex), and [sexuality](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16028700W/The_history_of_sexuality). With the financial support of the [Lilly Teaching Fellows](http://fod.msu.edu/lilly-teaching-fellows-program) program, I implemented my research project in the spring semester 2015. The following essay describes a portion of my goals, strategies, and outcomes.

*Listening Exercises*

While most music majors are quite adept at listening for syntactical features of music, they are generally less proficient at formulating critical analyses. Thus, I began our listening exercises simply. Before we even dove into eighteenth-century music, I asked them to think of film music conventions to begin filling out a simple chart (see Figure 1). I asked them, for instance, what “scary” movie music sounds like. Typically, students easily gauge the emotional effect of a particular musical example, and this chart helps them identity the musical rhetoric that creates that specific emotional response. We filled in “scary” under “affect,” and then they had to identify the “what” and the “how.” They filled in “strings” under “what” and “tremolo in a high range” under “how.” For a romantic feeling, they suggested “strings” under “what” and “lyrical, conjunct melody” under “how.” (See below.) This exercise helped students pinpoint the musical conventions that convey specific meanings.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| What? | How? | Affect? |
| Instrumentation: Strings  Instrumentation: Strings | Tremolo in a high range  Lyrical, conjunct melody | Scary  Romantic |

**Figure 1. Hypothetical Listening Exercise.**

I then introduced students to an additional column that they would soon be able to fill out—the hermeneutic analysis column. Learning this type of analysis helps students understand that [music is a cultural practice](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15892683W/Music_as_cultural_practice_1800-1900) that is contingent upon the context in which it is heard. Knowing how musical rhetoric develops and why may ultimately lead students to be critical of the messages that music encodes. To prepare them for this kind of cultural work, I assigned two articles by Susan McClary. The students studied the readings in advance and, in class, we discussed McClary’s analytical strategies. During class time, we listened to the same work to gauge if they heard the same elements at work for themselves. The McClary articles work especially well because they are relatively easy to read and she uses well-known works by canonical composers.

McClary’s [“The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year”](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16493326W/Music_and_society) provided a terrific introduction to the listening exercises I eventually assigned them. It jumpstarted their memory of high Baroque conventions of tonality, form, and instrumentation, while also encouraging them to think about what it might mean, particularly in a rigidly stratified society. After reading the article and listening to a movement one of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, they were struck by the role of the harpsichord—how, as McClary argues, the harpsichord plays a larger role than simply a continuo part and it seems to enact “the exhilaration and risks of upward mobility, the simultaneous desire for and resistance of concession to social harmony” (41). We discussed these ideas first and, when we listened to it, several students laughed out of recognition at the long harpsichord cadenza. Then we filled out the chart again, adding the hermeneutic analysis column (see Figure 2). To solidify these skills, we practiced in-class again after reading McClary’s [“A Musical Dialectic from the Enlightenment: Mozart’s ‘Piano Concerto in G Major, K. 453.’”](http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/stable/1354338?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoAdvancedSearch%3Facc%3Don%26amp%3Bq4%3D%26amp%3Bf4%3Dall%26amp%3Bf2%3Dall%26amp%3Bla%3D%26amp%3Bq3%3D%26amp%3Bc2%3DAND%26amp%3Bisbn%3D%26amp%3Bar%3Don%26amp%3Bf1%3Dall%26amp%3Bf0%3Dau%26amp%3Bc6%3DAND%26amp%3Bf3%3Dall%26amp%3Bsd%3D%26amp%3Bq5%3D%26amp%3Bq0%3DSusan%2BMcClary%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone%26amp%3Bc3%3DAND%26amp%3Bq6%3D%26amp%3Bc5%3DAND%26amp%3Bed%3D%26amp%3Bpt%3D%26amp%3Bc1%3DAND%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3Bq2%3D%26amp%3Bf5%3Dall%26amp%3Bc4%3DAND%26amp%3Bf6%3Dall%26amp%3Bq1%3D&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| What? | How? | Affect? | Hermeneutic analysis |
| Harpsichord | Extended cadenza | Jubilant, subversive | May be read as social ambition |

**Figure 2. In-Class Listening Exercise 2.**

Following two class periods introducing critical listening, I assigned six listening journal exercises, comprising twenty percent of their final grades. (See the prompt for Listening Journal Entry #2 below.) Each listening assignment asked students to reflect on specific elements of human identity, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and national identity, and music’s role in communicating these ideas. To cultivate this skill, we performed the first two listening journals in-class. We briefly discussed the assigned reading for each piece, and then I asked the students to write their answers to the prompt as we listened to the musical selection twice. We then discussed our insights as a class and I invited students to continue filling out their journals with their colleagues’ observations. Thus, while each student submitted his or her own individual listening journal, these were collaborative efforts. Students worked individually on only listening journals #3 and #6 outside of class. Students thus learned what was expected of them before they worked on their own, and these assignments provided excellent feedback both on how the class was doing as a whole, and how individual students progressed in their ability to identify musical rhetoric, particularly as we moved through our units on class, gender, and ethnicity.

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| --- |
| **Listening Journal Entry #2**    Please listen to “Zu Hilfe” from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*. In 500 words, please answer the following questions: How does Mozart’s music introduce Tamino? What might we suspect about him based on this music? Is he brave? Is he the hero of the story? Does his music have masculine signifiers? Is he young or old? Is he an aristocratic or lower-class character? Describe the music that introduces the Three Ladies? What might we suspect about them based on their music? Are they aristocratic or lower-class characters? Are they good or evil? Does their music have feminine signifiers? |

*Reflective Assignments*

In addition to the listening exercises, students also completed five self-reflections, also worth a total of twenty percent of their final grade. For each assignment, I asked students to identify at least three musical markers for the identity most recently under study. I then asked them to discuss these features in a specific musical example from the syllabus. Finally, for each reflection, I asked them if they felt that music could communicate ideas about human identity to assess whether or not they were beginning to become fluent in critical music literacy. (See the third self-reflective essay prompt below.)

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| --- |
| **Self-Reflective Essay #3:**    1. In the first part of the essay, please identify 3 *musical* markers for each of these concepts: class, gender, and ethnic identity.  2. In the second part, using either *Rinaldo* or *Les Indes galantes*, show how all three of these musical signifiers contribute to the portrayal of ethnic others. Describe how composers drew on European ideas of class and gender to portray exotic characters, and why they might have compelled to draw on European musical signifiers of difference, rather than attempting to incorporate music from the people they were depicting.  3. Based on what you learned in this unit, do you think music can transmit, transform, or even subvert notions of human identity? Why or why not? Can you think of any other examples of how music shapes our ideas about ourselves? |

*Outcomes*

In the early self-reflective assignments, students responded that they felt that music simply “reflects,” “channels,” or “interacts” with culture. By the second assignment, they began to see that music could tell us about opera characters in ways that are just as meaningful as the text they sing. By the third assignment (above), students had already become much more critical. One student, for instance, wrote that, “It is interesting that European composers would simply fabricate music that sounds ‘exotic’ out of thin air…they wanted to define themselves as superior in order to justify the colonization of the Americas.” Another noted, “A culture, nation, or specific race can [become] stereotypes through musical styles, as well as text. [Such effects] can shape an identity.”

By the end of the course, students began to reflect on race, class, and gender signifiers in contemporary music. Overall, the listening and self-reflective assignments were very effective in helping students become more critical of the ways that music transmits, transforms, and subverts ideas about people. One student reflected, “As seen through the eighteenth-century musical identifiers of class, gender, and ethnic groups, music can change how a group is seen. [Music] tells the audience how we should view [foreigners], i.e. as inferior. Current examples of how music shapes our ideas about ourselves is the idea that classical music listeners are smarter or that country music is for unrefined listeners.”

*Aims and Benefits*

The benefits of critical music literacy are numerous. Knowing more about how music communicates helps students challenge and even refuse received ideas. As a result, the differences that they perceived as longstanding between people of different races, genders, classes and so forth can be understood as products of particular times, places, and historical anxieties. Furthermore, music provides an excellent medium to introduce dialogues about charged issues in all kinds of courses. Conversations can center on music, rather than more difficult conversations about personal beliefs.

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