What is Music?

Part I.

What luck! After two frustratingly long months of looking for a high school music teaching job with no leads whatsoever, you have just received an invitation to interview at the state's premiere school of the arts! Known for its rigorous curriculum in music, dance, theatre and the theatre arts, visual arts, and communication arts, the select high school is looking for a teacher of general music who brings with them a wealth of experience in varied performing ensembles at the collegiate level, as well as a strong academic foundation. Moreover, their successful candidate must be willing and able to creatively collaborate with teachers who specialize in the performance of western art music, world music, jazz, and popular music.

As you listen excitedly, you are told that the interview itself will last a day and a half. During the first afternoon, you will tour the facilities, audit an "introduction to music" class, and meet with students. Early the next morning, the formal interview process will begin with a demonstration of your teaching in a 9th grade general music class, interviews with colleagues from the musical specialties defined above, and a meeting with the school's administration. In the spirit of fair warning, you are told that the principal likes to begin his interview with possible job candidates with the complex question: what is music?

Questions

1. What are your initial thoughts and questions about this situation?
2. How would you proceed in planning for your interview?
3. What additional information might you need in order guarantee your full preparedness for each of the elements of the interview?
4. Where might you go to find this additional information?

Part IIa.

As your interview draws closer, you decide that it is time to more fully prepare your answer to the question "What is music?" Though the question seemed ridiculously easy at first, you find that the more you think about it, the more evasive its answer becomes. The only solution, you think, is to approach the question scientifically... but how?

Questions

1. How might you initially define music?
2. What questions or issues might arise to problematize or complicate your definition?
3. How does your personal experiences with music affect your definition? How do they limit it?
4. How might you scientifically begin to explore the question "What is music?"
5. What sources might you consult during this investigation?

Part IIb.

After giving careful thought to the question "What is music?" you finally decide that one approach might be to consider a variety of types of music and try to define what their shared characteristics are. Pleased to have found a process that can be easily implemented, you eagerly set off to compile a list of works.

Questions

1. What works and genres do you consider?
2. What commonalities are found across all of these examples?
3. In what ways does each example further confound (or muddy) your obtainment of a clear and specific answer?
4. To what extent do your individual experiences with music affect the following:
   a. The works that you've chosen to work with
   b. They way in which you critically think about each of these works
   c. The import that you give to each of these works when trying to determine if they will be helpful in answering the question "What is music?"
5. Though you have not yet fully answered your question, can you develop any working ideas about what music truly is?

Part IIc.

In order to ensure that you have been as complete as possible in your exploration of musical examples, you decide to revisit your notes from your first semester introduction to the study of music history. As you review your notes, you find that you listened to a diverse selection of recordings, including the sound of a dog barking, khoomei, the work song *Rosie*, some Ghana postal workers, and an infinitely long recording of Kepandung Sita. Hmmm… you think, I should probably consider these clips when trying to define music!

Questions

1. What information do you know about each of these clips of music?
2. What additional information should you know about each of these clips in order to work with them in an informed manner?
    Hint: be sure to consider the following:
    - Venue
    - Performer
    - Performance context
    - Function of sounds
    - Meaning of sounds
3. Where and how might you find this information?
4. To what extent would you classify each of these listening clips as music? To what extent are they *not* music? Give a rationale for your answers.

Part III

As you were going through your old notes, you stumbled upon a quote from somebody named Heinrich Heine that begins "Now, what is music?" Now this could be really helpful! You continue reading:

> "Now, what is music? This question occupied me for hours before I fell asleep last night. Music is a strange thing. I would almost say it is a miracle. For it stands halfway between thought and phenomenon, between spirit and matter, a sort of nebulous mediator, like and unlike each of the things it mediates – spirit that requires manifestation in time, and matter that can do without space.
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> We do not know what music is. But what good music is we know well enough; and even better, we know what music is bad. For of the latter our ears receive a larger quantity. Musical criticism must accordingly base itself on experience, not on *a priori* judgments; it must classify musical compositions only by their similarities, and take as standard only the impression that they create upon the majority.
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> Nothing is more futile than theorizing about music. No doubt there are laws, mathematically strict laws, but these laws are not music; they are only its conditions – just as the art of drawing and the theory of colours, or even the brush and palette, are not painting, but only its necessary means. The essence of music is revelation; it does not admit of exact reckoning, and the true criticism of music remains an empirical art."
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> - Heinrich Heine, *Letters on the French Stage* (1837)

Questions

1. What does Heine mean when he says that music stands halfway between thought and phenomenon, spirit and matter?
2. What assumptions are implicit in Heine's discussion of music? How do these assumptions affect his views?
3. In what ways are Heine's views limited? What could be the unforeseen result of such limitations on the study of music?
4. Identify at least three non-musical factors that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the Heine quote. Why?

Part IV.

The first day of your interview has finally arrived! Though you started out a mess of nerves, you quickly find yourself settling in quite comfortably as you are shown around the vast complex of music rehearsal halls, practice rooms, and performance venues. The engaged and dedicated focus of the students that you meet is quite impressive and you increasingly find yourself envisioning a future at this school.

The only moment that did not go as planned occurred when you audited the "Introduction to Music History" class and found that it was not at all what you expected. During the portion that you saw, the class discussed their recent Soundscape assignment, paying particular attention to ideas like soundscapes, characteristic sounds, and clustered soundscapes. The last thing that you heard as you were being ushered out the door to your next appointment was the teacher asking students to consider possible relationships between their soundscapes project and their understanding of the nature of music.

"Wow!" you think as you leave the room, "it looks like I need to think some more about the nature of music!" Thankfully you have another night to further ponder that elusive question before you meet with the principal tomorrow!

Questions

1. What are your initial thoughts about the soundscapes project that you completed earlier this year? Share your experiences and self-reflection with your teammates.
2. How did your experiences, and those of your peers, affect the way in which you heard sounds around you?
3. Based upon your shared and individual experiences, develop a working definition for the following:
     - Soundscapes
     - Characteristic Sounds
     - Clustered soundscapes

4. How might your experience with the soundscapes project alter your understanding of the nature of music?

Part V.

You stand nervously in front of the principal's office, poised to knock on the door.

"Ok," you think to yourself, "I can do this."

You knock on the door and the principal invites you inside. As you sit down, she tells you that she likes to start all of her interviews by asking candidates to think critically about an "iceberg" question – that is a question whose visible surface does not begin to acknowledge the depths of its complexities. The question she wants to start the interview with is: "What is music?" In order to answer it, she explains, she would like you to posit a series of four propositions for understanding the nature of music.

Smiling, you confidently lean back in your chair. "Funny you should ask…" you begin.

Questions

1. What is a proposition?
2. What are the requirements of a proposition?
3. What are the four propositions for music that you will use to answer the principal's question?
4. Review your propositions and consider the following for each:
   - Do any of your propositions contradict or negate each other? (If so, you need to change them!)
   - Do your propositions hold true for all of the musical examples that you have encountered throughout this problem? (If not, you need to change them!)

Notes for Instructors & Facilitators

This problem is written in multiple stages, each of which is designed to assist the student in thinking around the problem at hand in a broad and inclusive manner. Students who are working on the first stage or part of the problem should not have access to the information or questions from subsequent stages. In this way, the instructor is able to subtly guide student progress through each stage of the problem. A few of these stages require that homework be assigned prior to the introduction of that stage. For example, students will be required to listen to the five listening clips described in Part IIc in preparation for the class in which that stage of the problem is introduced. Similarly, students will have completed their own soundscapes project, albeit in a very different context, prior to encountering this problem.

The goal of this assignment is to encourage students to think broadly and more inclusively about the nature of music. For many, the knowledge of music is limited to the sounds of works that they perform. Ultimately, we want to reach the point where students begin to identify music as a sound, a concept, and a behavior.

Part I introduces the problem at hand and has the students start to parse out its nature and scope. The inclusion in the job description that the successful candidate will be able to creatively collaborate with teachers who specialize in the performance of western art music, world music, jazz, and popular music is an early indicator that this problem will require students to look beyond the boundaries of the traditional western art music canon. For students who do not recognize this element early on, the inclusion of non-western and popular music in parts IIa-c will further assist them in pursuing a less ethnocentric approach to understanding the nature music.

Parts IIa-c are designed to encourage students to begin exploring music that they are perhaps less familiar with. The first part asks them to identify multiple genres of music, which should result in the eager discussion of both the music that they are formally studying and that which they listen to during their leisure time. Subsequent additions to this part require students to listen to select world music examples, each of which has a specific function, meaning, and performance context. By the end of all parts of this stage, students should be exposed to a wide variety of sounds, instruments, performance styles, and contexts for music making. In addition, they should begin to question what the function of music is and whether or not music has meaning.

Part III is intended to be a bit of a curve ball. Superficially, the quote seems to hold all of the answers to the initial question. However, when carefully read and unpacked, the question of what music is becomes quite complex. As a result, this stage is a challenging one to implement. It requires careful facilitation and gentle guidance by the instructor and peer facilitators and, as a result, should not be rushed. When unpacking Heine's assumptions, students should be encouraged to consider who Heine is, what he values and, how his experiences affect his

values. Among the concepts that more advanced students should be able to tease out of this quote are the ideas that music is an idea, an event, and a "work." (For those teams who made the connection earlier, this stage reinforces the point that music is a sound, concept and behavior. Those teams who did not quite get there in the earlier stages of the project are given another opportunity to connect ideas previously explored and expand their construction of music accordingly.) Finally, more advanced teams might even be encouraged to think critically about Heine's closing line about music criticism as an empirical art and to relate this idea back to earlier team discussions of music and function.

Part IV revisits the idea of music as sound. The Soundscapes assignment requires students to select a space of their choice and quietly sit for 10 minutes, recording in detail the time and place in which they completed the assignment and everything that they heard during the course of their 10 minutes. Student notes during this process tend to vary widely, with clear-cut identification and naming of sounds at the start of the project (i.e. a car drove by) giving way to the identification of sound patterns, some of which students even organize into music, by the period's end. Team discussion of their soundscape projects and the identification of learning issues should lead to the easy definition of the vocabulary words associated with the project.

The development of the concluding artifact – a set of four propositions about the nature of music – requires teammates to pull together all of the pieces of this project into a meaningful whole. Because each team may only submit four propositions for their grade, it is necessary for teams to work through and agree upon the propositions that they submit.