Music Appreciation: To What End?

In higher education, courses such as Music Appreciation present an opportunity to facilitate a positive lifelong relationship with music for the next generation of the concert-going public. However, budgeting concerns and canonized course content often result in a class format that is less conducive to serving this end. Furthermore, adequate training is not necessarily provided for the majority of faculty who teach these courses. Who is qualified to teach a Music Appreciation course, and what is the true purpose of such a course in the general curriculum? What is our responsibility in musically educating our citizens?

Traditionally, most Music Appreciation courses tend to emphasize the Western-European Art Music canon. While there are increasing attempts to include more world music and vernacular music, a hierarchy still exists. Because of the manner in which the content is often delivered, this can have the opposite effect of fostering more “appreciation” for the music that is studied. Rather, it may reinforce the stereotypical perspective that classical music is only for the “elite.” Large lecture-style classes further reinforce the schism that exists by assessing students through multiple-choice tests, and leave little room for the experiential and discovery-learning situations that can help students develop a personal and life-long relationship with music.

General education classes often provide an opportunity to save money because it is assumed that teaching assistants or adjunct instructors can do an adequate job teaching the course. A large majority of the student population at a college will filter through these classes primarily to fulfill undergraduate core degree requirements. Rather than offering smaller sections, the enrollment cap is often raised to accommodate as many students as possible, even in smaller schools that boast small teacher-student ratios. In the case of adjunct instructors (who may, or may not, be well-qualified to teach the class), this stacking of enrollment seems particularly unfair when considering the low pay rate they receive.
Even among music professors there is a stigma attached to teaching non-major music courses. Many view Music Appreciation as a chore instead of an opportunity, and this may be because these courses are not as easy to teach as it often assumed. Across the board, whether it is a musicologist, a teaching assistant, an adjunct instructor, or a studio professor, many teachers that “get stuck” with teaching a General Education music course have not had pedagogical training that prepares them to effectively teach these courses. Studio music teachers are often professional musicians, but not necessarily skilled classroom teachers. Musicologists may have extensive historical knowledge, but may lack the teaching skills or experience to successfully engage the wide variety of students encountered in a non-major music course.

Throughout the United States, there is increasing concern surrounding the declining audiences for orchestra concerts and other “classical” music events. From an advocacy standpoint, musicians need to be able to educate the general public in order to preserve our music traditions and create new ones; however, imposing our values of what is “good” music to “appreciate” can often be perceived as an ultimately selfish attempt to perpetuate our cultural chasms and ensure an elitist paradigm.

General education music classes present a valuable opportunity to actively engage the next generation in learning about music, and also provide a platform for musicians and teachers to learn from the students about current cultural trends. Yet very little training is offered in most music degree programs to help future teachers maximize this potential positive relationship. This paper calls for music programs in colleges and universities to examine the way in which music appreciation courses are presented and by whom, in order to not only preserve the past, but embrace the future.
References


