

**“How Far is too Far?”
Music, Consciousness, and Mind-Altering Substances in ASEM**

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Music

I teach an ASEM called “Music and Consciousness,” which is meant to provide students with a paradigm for examining thought and experience. An individual’s musical understanding could be described as a melting pot of subjective experience, “observable” data, and intersubjective cultural meanings. This course, “Music and Consciousness,” explores ways of framing and defining individual and collective responses to musical arts, and, in turn, how the understanding of these responses can lead to a broader view of human consciousness. Though the study of different musical cultures (and subcultures), students can critically examine their own musical preferences, as well as respond to other’s aesthetic positions. For many students, music has played a formative role in the development of adolescent identity. As a result, they often feel strongly about issues of musical taste and values, and proceed from those unquestioned values when confronted with music that challenges them. By confronting these values through their own writing, students can not only gain a larger perspective on musical consciousness, but also hone their writing skills as they learn the craft of descriptive analysis.

We study a variety of musics in the course, ranging from John Cage’s 4’33” to Ravi Shankar’s North Indian classical

performances to the music of Charles Ives, Charles Mingus, Beethoven, and Daft Punk. I teach basic musical terminology in the first part of the course, and students begin to examine different positions towards music, including their own subjective responses, culled in short essays such as “Music I HATE.” Work in weeks 1-5 sets a philosophical paradigm for examining different musical genres during the second half of the quarter, during which we listen in-depth to repertoires from around the world, as well as reading at different literary styles such as *New York Times* articles, webzines, and scholarly articles and books focusing on ethnomusicology and music theory.

The study of bias, both obvious and hidden, is essential to this part of the course. We begin with essays the students assume to be “factual,” then progress to more opinionated writings, finally ending with the “Musical Manifesto,” some kind of statement that declares a new future for music, based on sound, song, or perhaps some performative feature. The manifestos we read are extreme, and can often seem like parodies, so at this point in the course, I sometimes introduce a skit from “Saturday Night Live,” or some other comedy show, to facilitate a compare-and-contrast discussion: who goes further, the comedian or the revolutionary? And whose work is more effective?

The last time I taught this ASEM, the question “To what degree is the writer biased?” morphed into “How far is too far?” This question came to life based on a discussion of encyclopedia-type entries, gaining momentum as we compared a Futurist manifesto by an Italian composer at the turn of the twentieth-century and the rock band Riot Grrl. The students were inspired and sometimes inflamed by these works, and I think perhaps their fire got out of control when they set out to write and perform their own manifestos during the last week of class. Below, I’ll take you through the progression of ideas, perspectives, biases, and provocations we experienced during the quarter in an attempt to illustrate my pedagogical uneasiness with a situation that moved into territory that I wasn’t sure belonged in the classroom.

Objectivity and Bias: Two Exercises

The unmanageable undercurrent started out tamely enough in the middle of the quarter. We compared this excerpt on Beethoven from Wikipedia (above) with the one from the Oxford Dictionary Online that follows. The Oxford resource, formerly the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, is a resource written by and for music scholars, carefully edited by experts in the field

Beethoven composed his first six string quartets (Op. 18) between 1798 and 1800 (commissioned by, and dedicated to, Prince Lobkowitz). They were published in 1801. With premieres of his First and Second Symphonies in 1800 and 1803, Beethoven became regarded as one of the most important of a generation of young composers following Haydn and Mozart.

He also continued to write in other forms, turning out widely known piano sonatas like the "Pathétique" sonata (Op. 13), which Cooper describes as "surpass[ing] any of his previous compositions, in strength of character, depth of emotion, level of originality, and ingenuity of motivic and tonal manipulation."³ He also completed his Septet (Op. 20) in 1799, which was one of his most popular works during his lifetime.³

Yet even when dealing with instruments that were not in a state of radical development, he [Beethoven] acted as if they were. The string quartets of op.59 so strained the medium, as it was understood in 1806, that they met with resistance from players and audiences alike. The first movement of the F major Quartet op.59 no.1, though in mood very different from the ‘Eroica’ Symphony, resembles it in its unexampled scope and also, **rather surprisingly**, in a number of technical features. The second movement is Beethoven’s largest, most fantastic scherzando – not a true scherzo, but a free essay in the tradition of the sonatas op.31 no.3 and op.54. All three quartet slow movements, **surely**, cry out for evocative titles, and the last two finales are all but orchestral in conception.

³

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_van_Beethoven Accessed 20 June 2013.

Each quartet was supposed to include a Russian melody, for the benefit of the dedicatee Count Rasumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna. Here for the first time may be seen Beethoven's interest in folksong, which was to grow in later years. **Folksongs did not much help the first two quartets**, but Rasumovsky's notion **came to superb fruition** in the third, where Beethoven gave up the idea of incorporating pre-existing tunes and instead wrote the haunting A minor Andante in what he must have conceived to be a Russian idiom.⁴

The Wikipedia expert essentially provides factual detail, elaborated by a quote that features an opinion. The Oxford example, however, interweaves a narrative of progressive style-types in Beethoven's evolution with subtle value judgments (highlighted in **bold** for the purpose of this discussion). I work with students to develop their eyes and ears from such critical sleights of hand, introducing the idea that even a dictionary entry can value some musics over others, just as they do.

Next, we moved on to consciously biased works, the manifestos. Below, an excerpt from Baililla Pratella's *Musica Futurista*, followed by a few lines published in the fanzine Riot Grrl's.

Pratella

I, who repudiate the title of Maestro as a stigma of mediocrity and ignorance, hereby confirm my enthusiastic adhesion to

Futurism, offering to the young, the bold and the reckless these my irrevocable conclusions:

- 1) To convince young composers to desert schools, conservatories and musical academies, and to consider free study as the only means of regeneration.
- 2) To combat the venal and ignorant critics with assiduous contempt, liberating the public from the pernicious effects of their writings. To found with this aim in view a musical review that will be independent and resolutely opposed to the criteria of conservatory professors and to those of the debased public....
- 4)) To keep at a distance from commercial or academic circles, despising them, and preferring a modest life to bountiful earnings acquired by selling art.
- 5) The liberation of individual musical sensibility from all imitation or influence of the past, feeling and singing with the spirit open to the future, drawing inspiration and aesthetics from nature, through all the human and extra-human phenomena present in it. Exalting the man-symbol everlastingly renewed by the varied aspects of modern life and its infinity of intimate relationships with nature.

⁴ "Beethoven," from *Oxford Dictionary Online*. Accessed 20 June 2013.

6) To destroy the prejudice for “well-made” music—rhetoric and impotence—to proclaim the unique concept of Futurist music, as absolutely different from music to date, and so to shape in Italy a Futurist musical taste, destroying doctrinaire, academic and soporific values, declaring the phrase “let us return to the old masters” to be hateful, stupid and vile.⁵

Riot Grrl

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.⁶

⁵ <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/musicians.html> Accessed 20 June 2013.

⁶ http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm Accessed 20 June 2013.

Then, I gave the assignment in the appendix to this paper. In the past, students had dealt with their newfound freedom in responsible ways. This quarter, however, one student pushed boundaries in a responsible way, opening the floodgates for others to follow.

Manifestos Too Far?

During the last week of class, students present their manifestos. They are required to have musical examples and a PowerPoint slideshow that includes at least some of the edicts they espouse. Generally, some of them are predictable, some hysterical, and some brilliant; this quarter, for example, one student made a case for Taylor Swift's music as the epitome of genius, and another proclaimed that country music lyrics revealed the deep meaning of life, citing songs such as “Get Your Tongue Out of My Mouth ‘Cause I'm Breakin' Up With You.” A music student made a case for “The Emancipation of Consonance,” an alternative to the twentieth-century tract by atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg, “The Emancipation of Dissonance.” He called for the use of at most three chords in any tune, and his performance of “The Song of One Note” had everyone rolling on the floor laughing.

While these projects resonated with those I've had with past classes, that same Tuesday 4 p.m. class, another student, a psych major who was smart and interesting, and usually pretty engaged in class, approached me and said, “I want to do something unusual, but I don't want to tell you what it is, because that will spoil the surprise. I went to the Office of Student Conduct and got permission to do it; I can show you the letter.”

Thinking about it now, I sigh. I liked the student, whom I'll call Jeff. He'd taken steps that seemed appropriate, so his request didn't make me especially nervous

or anxious. But I was exhausted that day, perhaps too tired to get worried—it was the last week of a long Winter quarter, and I had a couple of exams to write for other classes. I knew I really needed a vacation, but Spring Break was going to be filled with grading and writing a new syllabus. And it was already 4 p.m. and I wanted to go home. I didn't have it in me to play bad cop at that very moment, and I was pretty sure it wouldn't help my student evaluations, so I said yes. What could really go wrong?

Jeff set up his computer at the beginning of the room, with his backpack conspicuously on the floor beside it. He took off his jacket, revealing a ripped t-shirt underneath, and pulled a studded collar from his bag, snapping it at the back of his neck. The manifesto was about punk music, and he began with a little history of the movement in the UK. Embedded in his PPT was a YouTube track of the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen." Jeff cranked up the sound and danced aggressively at the front of the room while it played. Then, after introducing Sid Vicious, he blasted another track, reached into his backpack and pulled out a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, cracking it open and slamming the full beer in one swig before the forty-six second clip had ended.

So, this is what he had needed permission for. I was vaguely uneasy; I did not actually know whether he was twenty-one. Also the music was quite loud, and Lamont's main office was on the other side of the wall. By this time it was about 5 p.m., though (I rationalized), and the Director and her staff were probably gone. If he has permission, this should all be fine, I said to myself, and to the pit in my stomach. Just wait and it will over soon. The tenets of the punk movement are pretty well-rehearsed in the annals of the internet at this point, and there wasn't much more left to say.

Meanwhile, the students were eating it up, catcalling and applauding and screaming. And Jeff—Jeff was in his element. He was a small, serious guy, not really geeky, but not cool either. He was someone who had probably never pushed the boundaries of the classroom this far, and he was ecstatic, slam-dancing in front of his peers and grinning from ear-to-ear with their approval.

I'm guessing that Jeff will remember that moment of college for the rest of his life, and if it means that he'll also remember my class and some of the things we studied, and maybe tell his friends or his kids about it someday, then I suppose the inclusion of the PBR did some work that I couldn't have done myself. You never know. At least, that's what I told myself when we left the classroom at 6 p.m. and it smelled like cheap beer.

One-Ups(wo)manship

On Thursday, the last day of class, I somehow naïvely thought that things would go as usual, we'd have a few laughs, and maybe we'd be done early so I could go home and binge watch the "Homeland" DVDs a friend had lent me in celebration of the end of the quarter. Class started routinely enough, with a predictable but funny presentation on Miley Cyrus and a relatively inspired manifesto on "Why Violin Is and Always Will Be the Best Instrument Ever." Then it was Meg's turn; she was a writer, an alternative type with dreadlocks, glasses, and lots of creativity. The week before we'd discussed several ideas for her presentation, including a critique of Insane Clown Posse and a folk music renaissance manifesto, and I wasn't sure what she'd decided on, but I figured it would be witty and full of life.

When she flashed the first slide onto the screen, I cringed: LEGALIZE was

emblazoned in black over a green pot leaf. The Grateful Dead started playing through the speakers, and Meg's voice modulated to a stoner rhythm. "Yeah, man, so I'm going to like play some tunes for you all and um..." she paused, removing a brownie from her purse. "And I am, um, going to share with you the reasons to legalize marijuana."

What followed was pretty predictable: a long playlist, a variety of similar edicts to legalize, and continual nibbling on the brownie, all narrated by an increasingly loopy Meg. Ugh. I was uncomfortable and also bored.

Unlike Jeff, Meg didn't seem to be stretching a new boundary in her life. Given her dreds and the ease with which she'd adopted a stoner voice, it wasn't a stretch to imagine her having a similar conversation with her friends; nor was it difficult to imagine that she knew exactly where to buy a special brownie. My guess is the students probably knew that too—she got some positive feedback from them, but none of the hoots and howls Jeff had, and some looked a bit bored.

Argh. It was the last day of class, and I really, **really** did not want to play the bad cop against the legalize movement with these students. So I let it go, and at the end, I said, "I do NOT want to know whether there is pot in that brownie. You can tell the others after I leave, but please do NOT tell me."

I'm not sure that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is really a solution to anything these days, but I have to say it turned out to be a great coping mechanism in that moment. What's sad, though, is that Meg, inventive as she was, may have taken away LESS from the course, rather than more, if in fact she had been role-playing a familiar scenario that she found "cool" in lieu of exploring the creative possibilities of an unfamiliar genre.

Another couple of presentations passed, and I could see Homeland in the

distance. Mark was up last. He'd been a bit of a struggle to teach that quarter; he was convinced that everything he did was good, and all of the self-reflexive exercises we'd done somehow served to underscore his genius at every turn. He played guitar in a rave band, and he idolized a group popular in Denver called STS9, or Sound Tribe Sector 9.⁷ Both Mark's band and STS9 played music festivals, and he'd already written a paper claiming that drug use at the festivals was an integral part of the musical experience, that is was important to use drugs to appreciate the music, and it was important to be safe about it.

I'd told him the manifesto had to be different from the first paper, but that point hadn't sunk in. He began to rehearse his earlier thesis, showing concert footage and reading passages he'd written, including the prescriptions for drug use. He had none of the required tenets of the assignment. The presentation went on longer than it needed to, but not beyond the allotted duration. The students, who'd already heard his diatribes several times, began to pack up to leave, anxious to go to their own binge behavior, I guessed. There was no applause, no cat-calling.

It was monotonous, frustrating, and unnerving for me all at once. I'd said no to the project, and he had gone ahead and presented it. I knew him well enough to know that if I'd stopped him because he was out-of-bounds of the assignment, I would have gotten lots of flack, and no one there wanted to hear it. It's rare that I have encountered a student who is really unteachable, but Mark, set as he was in his path, really wasn't looking to learn anything from me. Beyond that, if I were to take issue with the presentation, it could appear that I was taking a stance against psychedelic drugs, which I didn't want to do during the last ten minutes of

⁷ <http://sts9.com/home/>

the course. I was aggravated—no learning was going on here, for him or any of the students. Mark left happy, though—in my worn state, I speculated (to myself) that he was glad to have had the floor to talk about himself.

Everyone left the room on a fairly low note. “Bye,” they said. A few music majors stayed behind to say thanks, but that was it. We’d lost the laughter and lightness from earlier, and I felt tired and a little defeated.

Controlled v. Canned

I’d lost control of the room at several points that week, or at least I’d felt I did. I’ve been teaching for a while, and it’s rare that I am unsure how to respond to something in the classroom. And while I am not sure how to handle controlled substances in a formal setting, here I’m more concerned with the loss of a potentially “teachable” moment, and how that might affect student writing.

The three students created manifestos that lacked certainly qualities that other student’s had embodied. For example, even though I’ve seen many college proclaim a hatred for Taylor Swift and her name often pops up in class, the manifesto that “Taylor Swift is the best of all musicians,” forced a student to put herself in the mindset of a starstruck teen and exaggerate those feelings, supporting her edicts with things like the Facebook page “I love Taylor Swift Awesome Voice,” which currently has 896 likes, and a poetic reading of the song “Teardrops on My Guitar.” In that context, when students recognize the absurdity of the situation, I can ask critical questions such as, “Is there a grain of truth in what’s being said?” Usually someone admits that there is, leading to a discussion of “How are the tween fans using Taylor Swift’s music to construct an identity?” and “What might make you like Taylor at that

age?” or “If you were going to create a new pop star, what qualities do you think she might embody in order to be as famous as Taylor, and what does that say about our society?” After we see a creative performance, the students’ brain is ready to take on more creative questions, and they are ready to write more interesting papers.

Jeff’s punk presentation, on the other hand, incorporated principles of the punk movement that are widely published, so his presentation did not take an idea or concept to its extreme. His creative contribution was simply shooting the beer. His final paper, as a result, was more like a research paper than a dramatic creation, and the students had fun, but they didn’t have much more to add.

Meg’s stoner PPT may have been timely, given the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, but she also didn’t say anything new, and, in fact, eating the brownie felt less innovative after Jeff’s PBR. And Mark’s diatribe was just that; it felt like old ground in our classroom, even if he thinks of these issues as a personal passion that channels his own music making. Both of these presentations had less direction than Jeff’s; they were more of a “state of being” than a statement.

The problem, then, was not so much the controlled substances, but the controlled, canned nature of the topics. Perhaps my disappointment at the end of the quarter might have been the same had students copied from Wikipedia or written research papers with pat, predictable conclusions.

I’m still not sure what to do about controlled substances in the classroom, but I think I may write an assignment next time that asks the students to think of an original topic, not one that has lots of play on the internet. I can use the punk movement and the “legalize” topic in class to show how issues that press certain accepted boundaries can, ironically, turn

into conventional, boring topics. If it's a good day, I might be able to get the students to understand that creativity begets creativity. Unexpected humor and absurdity can sometimes show us parts of ourselves, and of our culture, which deserve deeper examination.

That's what the course, "Music and Consciousness," is about, anyway. And I

have to say, as uncomfortable as my students made me, they did wake me up a little. These issues have stuck with me, and even after a weekend filled with twelve Homeland episodes (not to mention another quarter of teaching), I am still mulling them over.

Appendix

ASEM 2688

Musical Manifesto: FINAL PAPER/PRESENTATION Project

Presentations in class on 3/7 and 3/12

Write your OWN musical manifesto that expresses a **strong and biased** viewpoint about the one or all of the following:

- What music is meant to express
- How it should express emotion, or formal balance
- Whether or not it should express emotion
- How music should be built
- Values of that music should express
- Why Everyone should listen to this music
- Justification for the music
- How music should be composed, performed, recorded

While you may list TENETS of the music (basic principles), your paper/project should have an extended prose discussion of the musical viewpoint at hand. (Follow Stravinsky's *Poetics* as an example, or possibly .) Establish a particular tone for your argument (authoritative, rebellious, abstract, etc.) and maintain that tone throughout the paper.

Music videos are acceptable as well.

I offer the option that your Manifesto take the form of a **parody**. That is, you can exaggerate certain features for the sake of comedy, imitating another musician's view ironically. Often, parody papers are among the most successful; unless you have a truly unique and passionate