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Writing About Music: The Challenges of Teaching Students to Listen Critically

In the fall of 2010, I assisted Prof. Craig Bernardini in a course titled *Writing About Music: ENG 242*. Although students start to learn to read critically in elementary school, serious talk about music in a classroom is rare even though music is a big part of many students' lives. While musicologists use musical analysis to connect music to culture, Hostos students, as well as most college students, lack these skills. Instead, they resort to registering their mood when describing music. ("It makes me want to dance;" "It makes me sad;" "It is boring.") How can such an abstract art be written about beyond merely describing one's feelings and reactions? As Prof. Bernardini himself wrote in his blog, "It's not that the emotional response to music isn't valid. It's that they [the students] can neither describe these emotional states with any sort of nuance or depth, nor can they connect those emotional states to what is happening in the music."

The assignments for this course needed to teach students different modes of listening and the vocabulary to describe them. While the focus of the class was not on reading, we found examples of different kinds of writings done in the field that would expand the vocabulary and knowledge base of the students. These included descriptions of music pieces, performance reviews, CD liner notes, short stories and poems based on music, as well as readings that connected music with issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. The class's first few assignments emphasized describing pieces outside of their cultural context. Only after the students developed some language/writing skills did the class consider the performance context, and later started incorporating poems, stories, and music videos into the listening. On descriptive assignments, students were asked to pay attention to musical features such as rhythm, melody, and timbre, and describe what they heard using as many nouns, verbs, adjectives, and analogies

to other arts as possible. In order to come up with enough images and metaphors, they were also encouraged to make use of their senses (sight, taste, smell, touch).

In a compare/contrast assignment, students were asked to compare an original song and a cover of it by a different artist. The steps included were: 1. Listen to the original piece and write a paragraph describing your overall impression of it, 2. Describe the lyrics, instruments, and structure, and pretend you are a music critic figuring out what the intention of the composer or performer is in making his or her musical choices, 3. In a second paragraph, comment on what you think the overall impact or the most important meaning or messages of this song are, and 4. For a third paragraph, do some basic research about the artist and place the piece in historical context. Students then repeated these steps for the cover version of the song. After students completed this exercise, they were given three choices for the formal paper:

1. First Choice: Formal Compare-Contrast Essay

- a. Introduce both the original piece and the cover song (first paragraph).
- b. Compare musical features of both songs (two to three paragraphs). Notice changes from one to the other in lyrics, instrumentation, structure (verses-chorus), timbre of vocals, and anything else you find significant.
- c. Comment on changes in overall meaning. Some issues you may want to consider: How did the meaning change from the original song to its cover? Was the cover aimed at a different audience? Why do you think that the artists made those specific changes? How does each version reflect and comment on the time and place out of which it came?

2. Second Choice: Contrasting Reviews

Take the role of a music critic and write two short (two or three paragraphs each) reviews: one that likes the cover version, and one that dislikes it. Make sure to develop your (specific) reasons for either liking or disliking the cover in each case (the lists of points and questions under letters "b" and "c" above might help you).

3. Third Choice: Creative Assignment

Pretend you are the creator/artist behind the cover version. Respond in writing (one or two paragraphs each) to the following questions:

1. What made you decide to cover the original song?
2. Can you explain your reasoning behind some of the changes you made to the original?
3. Do you think the original artist would like your version? Why or why not?

Other assignments included the writing of a short story where students were encouraged to let the music guide them through a plot. Students also reviewed a performance, analyzed a music video in terms of a theme, or wrote a letter to the artist condemning the video for encouraging the sexual exploitation of women. Some chose to write from the vantage point of the artist defending his position. A final assignment, which was scaffolded throughout the semester, was the writing of program notes for a concert or the liner notes for the recording of a historically significant piece of music or album.

Ultimately, what this class showed me was the value of using a subject that students already were invested in to help them obtain critical thinking and writing skills. Whether students were previously aware of it or not, the importance of language and ideas in relationship to the experience of music is one that they engage with almost every day. By putting music at the center of their writing experience, and writing at the center of their music experience, I hope we began to show students the importance of writing as a *living* activity, not just something they need to learn in order to pass a test or get a grade.