

On the history of music education

Despite the ubiquity of the ABRSM exam system of music education in the Commonwealth countries (with its parallels of UNISA, Trinity, RCM, AMEB exams) it is worthwhile to bear in mind that the system is a fairly recent phenomenon in music education and far from a universal one. In this series of newsletters we will have a look at some other systems of music education, both current and past.

<http://youtu.be/MmM6TAFkBTU>

Some of the earliest extant thinking about the role of music education in society comes from the political philosophies of thinkers such as Plato and Confucius, both of whom believed that music must be controlled in order to preserve the moral rectitude of the citizenry. The root of this idea lies in the observation that music affects moods and the emotions. For Plato this meant that music needs to instil proper character of bravery and courage in the populace through the use of the correct modes (in this case the Dorian, which somewhat resembles the minor mode, which he thought would induce courage and bravery). For Confucius this meant aligning the music of the nation with the heavenly order, meaning roughly that the tuning system of the court should be based on sound physical principle (no pun intended).

<http://youtu.be/WsevwRvnI4U>

This idea of music having a basis in physical law is actually a very crucial to the ideas of Pythagoras, who is said to have discovered the connection of numbers to physical law by observing the harmonic series in the sounds of a blacksmith's hammer. Presumably before this time mathematics was seen as simply a method of keeping track of sheep and measuring the height of a pyramid, what Pythagoras realised is that that there is a deep mathematical nature to the laws of nature. Despite this, it is somewhat remarkable that, aside from the harmonic series, there is little in nature that actually explicitly "counts" until one encounters quantum spin states of fundamental particles.

This central observation is not only a key one in the history of ideas but also provides the reasoning behind the practice, which remained until well into the modern age, of studying music as if one were studying nature itself through the relationships between number as embodied by musical harmony. This explains not only why music was considered a central part of education but also why music was not necessarily studied to be performed.

<http://youtu.be/Lrb0dHKJBR4>

It is somewhat ironic that this notion was only overturned at the height of classical music's influence on philosophy in general through the works of first Viennese School (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven) where Beethoven could claim that "music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy (cf. Plato: "Philosophy is the highest music"). The unwinding of this idea was the result of many factors. One was the romantic notion of performance as the soul

of music, that the performer (or more specifically the virtuoso) was the centre of attention, and thus that music's essence lies in the emotional journey that a fine pianist or orchestra could make you follow.

<http://youtu.be/4QB7ugJnHgs>

This somewhat appealing notion was enhanced by two other strands of thought, the first of which was that music is essentially meaningless form. Although this idea was actually a precursor to the formalism that became so very influential as logical positivism up to the 1950's, its early adoption in musicology gave language the necessary push to elevate itself to the centre of "human" thinking in following the work of Darwin. The idea was that human beings are speaking apes, that language specifically was the thing that elevates us above the animals, the new "eternal soul" of humanity to replace the one lost to science.

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