

Music as Literature

“But when you get music and words together, that can be a very powerful thing”

-Bryan Ferry, English singer-songwriter

I was an active member of my high school marching band as well as a semi-proficient pianist growing up. But once I graduated high school, I packed my trumpet up and left it securely in its case in the back of my closet four hours away from me. However, the musical knowledge I had gained from my eight years of music programs did not remain locked up in my closet. Being educated in the arts is more than playing an instrument or singing. In my high school specifically, there was this atmosphere of acceptance and inclusiveness that made my experience a little different than most. Unlike every other high school in the area, our marching band did not hold auditions; all you had to do was sign up. This made it so we had students of every skill level playing together every day after classes on the practice field. It was a really great experience for me as a student. Growing up with an inclusive program such as this taught me that music is something that is meant for everyone, regardless of whether or not you can perform it. From the supermarket speakers to the guy whistling next to you on the subway, it is everywhere. Music is a phenomenon that can be related to any number of things, and I am going to argue that it can even relate to my work as an English major.

As late as the 18th century, literacy was something reserved for the white, educated, and wealthy man. It was uncommon to be able to read, as that was a privilege reserved for those who had the money to spend their days learning to read and write rather than working to support themselves and their families. While literacy rates today are still low considering the resources we have as a nation, the written word is no longer considered inaccessible to the majority of

Americans. From newspapers to blogs to text messages to classic literature, the written word has penetrated the surface of the elite and has slowly trickled down to the masses.

When it first began, opera was an art form used exclusively by Italian nobility.

Composers and librettists lived in the court as paid employees of the king and queen, writing specifically for those in power. Audiences were small and consisted of nobility who were well-versed in the myths that were so often the basis for these early operas. These productions would only be made open to the public much later in the 18th century. Today, however, there is not the same level of accessibility with this musical performance as there is with the written word. While it is true that anyone can buy a ticket (there are technical class barriers), they are expensive. It is not as easy to pay for a ticket if you come from the lower-middle class. Also, there are significantly less English operas than non-English operas, which would be an obvious barrier to mass acceptance. However, translations and the use of familiar fairy tales and myths as the plot are always readily available during performances to negate this issue. Ultimately, opera has not achieved that same level of dispersion to the masses as literature, which is an interesting notion to consider.

This is especially interesting given the many similarities between literature and music. At its most base form, opera is an epic poem. The text, or libretto, can be read like a book. There is a plot, conflict, resolution, magic, and characters in every opera. Most importantly, however, is that the composer and librettist, like an author, make deliberate musical choices to illustrate certain themes and motifs. In a book, when the mood is sad, the author can describe a rainy day. In a song, when the character is sad, the composer can use minor key. What separates opera from the classic American novel is that the librettist works together with the composer to make that text come alive with music. This auditory component adds a dimension to the opera that simply

cannot be achieved through a novel alone. However, because of these deep similarities, I am convinced that opera can achieve the same status as the written word has with the majority of Americans today.

This project will find me using myself as a sort of test subject to illustrate that music is much more relatable to us than we think. Music is a language. It is something that is more than simply being born with talent. It takes practice, rigor, and intelligence to be able to comprehend it enough to perform and appreciate it. Just like learning to read takes years and years to perfect. The difference is that music is optional in schools while literature classes are not. Thus, growing up reading puts the written word on a plane above music. Many people think of music as something they can never understand or learn; it is too elevated or out of their reach. But at the same time, they are adamant that anyone can learn to read. This divide between the accessibility of the written word and music is going to be the central focus of my project.

However, the project is not to propose a solution to a problem within society. The lower emphasis placed on music literacy in this society is not necessary detrimental, but it is interesting. This project is an exploration, not a solution. Ultimately, it is a way to explore the relationship between music and literature. There is an undeniable discrepancy between the amount of people who can read and who can read music. I find this interesting (not problematic) because the two are so deeply intertwined and related on many different levels. Like I said before, strip an aria (song within an opera) of its rhythm and pitch and you have the same text that fills libraries. So I am proposing a journey to educate myself and others on the similarities between these two arts.

If taking away the musical elements of a song or aria creates plain text, then in order to illustrate the connection between music and literature, a sort of dismantling needs to occur. This

technique is the same one that I use to analyze literature as an English major. You take a book or poem and pick it apart line by line, sentence by sentence until you can see the intricacies and nuances. Then you make your argument. Thus, I plan on using the classic literary analysis essay to explore and reveal these connections. The skills I would use to close read a piece of text for an academic essay are precisely the same for any musical composition. By picking apart a piece of music in the same way that I pick apart a passage of a book, this project will provide a glimpse into the skills composing and performing a piece of music requires. Additionally, this process will break down a piece of music into more understandable segments, both for myself and the audience.

The project itself would consist of three parts. First, a performance of the piece I am analyzing. Ideally, the performance will consist of my correspondent for this project, a soprano, singing an aria from an opera other than *Carmen*. There are arias from *L'elisir d'amore* and *Rusalka* that I am considering. The purpose of this first part will not only add a multimedia component to the project, but to have a visual representation of the performer's interpretation of the text, which is another important part of music. The performance will be a video rather than simply an audio recording, in order to document the performer's facial expression and physical movements as they perform, which are just as important as the music itself.

Second, a copy of the sheet music/score that I am analyzing will be attached. It will bear my annotations and markings, just as every one of the poems or novels I have read for class do. There will be copious marginalia indicating and analyzing various elements of the text and my interpretations of them.

Finally, my "literary" analysis of the sheet music in an essay format will round out the project. This last part of the project will be written using prose and will be the central piece. It

will be a standard 6-8 page analysis, written in the same format as the majority of the literary analysis essays. There will be a central thesis and evidence from the piece, both melody and text. However, like music, this project will go beyond the text. The product as a whole will be diverse and engaging, yet presented in a relatable format.

As alluded to in the previous paragraph, I will not be working alone on this massive and complex subject that I am not completely confident about. There is an entire music school here and the University of Michigan that is very good at what it does. It happens that I am familiar with a few instrumentalists because my job is located on North Campus, so many of my coworkers are involved in the music school in some way. They possess a degree of knowledge about classical music that will be immensely helpful to the completion of this project.

Additionally, I know a great deal of the senior Vocal Performance majors because of my relationship with one of them. My connections at the music school leave me with many options to help and guide this project as it grows from this proposal to an actual entity. Additionally, the professor of my Musicology 130 class this semester is a great resource, especially from a historical standpoint of this project. Her office hours would be an extremely helpful tool in my research.

Ultimately, this project is meant to be didactic. Not in a way where I talk down to my audience because I am much more musically skilled and informed than they are. The point is that I am learning as well. The miniscule amount of knowledge I have on the topic allows me to pursue the topic at all because without being able to read music, this would be an impossible project. This prior knowledge simply enables me to accomplish my goals and learn more about the way in which musical composition relates to novels or other written texts. I hope to use the skills I have acquired so far as an English major and Writing minor in an unfamiliar, yet relevant

setting. This will open up the world of music to me, as well as my audience. As I said, everyone listens to music. This project will illustrate opera as a more accessible genre by comparing it to an automatically more accessible genre, literature.