

The Evolution of a Music Student

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I have been a student of music all my life – though not in the traditional sense. Until this year I had never had a music lesson. I had no idea how to read notes on a staff, let alone play an instrument, so when I decided to begin the next phase of my academic career studying music, I felt intimidated by this lack of knowledge. Although I had never studied music theory, I had always had a strong passion for music that began when I was a child. I remember falling in love with the power of songwriting when I discovered my parents' folk albums from the '60s and '70s. I had already been exposed to various musical genres through my dance classes, but these songs were different. I was captivated by their vivid lyrics and the way in which the piano or guitar created a rhythmic pulse that reflected their weight and emotion. From the moment I learned how to place the needle on the record groove, I began viewing music as not only a vehicle for artistic expression, but also as a reflection of the culture of the time. I was riveted by the stories behind the songs, the identities behind the legends, and the truths behind the myths. As I grew, I fell in love with music history, the evolution of genres and musical trends, and the ways in which they had influenced the music that was being produced by my generation. I continued to absorb music history and popular culture and eventually realized that my childhood fascination had evolved into an adult academic passion.

As I began my studies in music, I believed that, although music is a universal phenomenon, its theory is not. More specifically, while I think the enjoyment of music comes naturally to many people, learning music theory is like learning a new language. Its rules must be taught, either through methodical application or through enculturation in a musical setting. With no practical music training, I felt hindered in my ability to pursue my studies of music history and popular culture. I decided to delay my Master of Arts degree and enrol in a post-graduate certificate program in music studies in order to expand my theoretical knowledge. These courses, accepting of students with no prior musical training, were to be my preparatory education before beginning intensive studies. I enrolled with the expectation of learning the basics of music composition; what I didn't anticipate was how I would learn analytical techniques that would greatly invigorate my passion for music analysis and broaden my appreciation of diverse musical genres.

Elements of music theory such as rhythm and meter came to me naturally from my years of dance

training. While I was able to identify the meter of a piece of music, I occasionally struggled with determining whether a song had a homophonic or polyphonic texture. Although a composition might have had more than one melodic line occurring at once, I was drawn to the rhythm of the piece and would therefore doubt whether it was an example of homophony or polyphony. This challenge appeared in my first course, *Introduction to World and Early European Music*, which was offered on-line. My first experience with learning musical theory was made much more difficult because of the on-line format. As an engaged and participative student in the classroom, I learn best when I have the ability to clarify ideas and speak directly to the professor. Learning completely new concepts such as how to identify textures, fugues, and the structures of a symphony or sonata were very tough in an online setting. However, once I began the *Introduction to Classical Music* course, which took place in a classroom, I excelled in understanding these once confusing concepts. In a classroom setting, the identification of musical elements with the use of audio examples was easier. This applied teaching method of dissecting a composition and identifying elements as a piece was playing allowed the students to fully understand musical terms and encouraged students to identify such components independently in the future.

Analyzing musical examples has unquestionably been the most valuable method of learning various musical elements for me. In the *Popular Music and Culture* course, we analyzed many genres. The analysis would consist of complete student participation with no answers initially provided by the professor. By searching for the answers independently, students had the ability to actively analyze each song and become self-sufficient in their analysis. Textbooks also provided a similar method of learning through listening analysis charts that were paired with songs on audio CDs, helping us to practice independently. I was especially inspired after completing the popular music course due to the teaching style and organized presentation of material throughout the term. Each new musical genre included a lecture on the culture of the time period in which it originated, musical characteristics distinctive of that genre, information on prominent musicians and songwriters, as well as in-depth musical analysis with songs that demonstrated the genre's musical traits.

In addition to song analysis, practical demonstrations of instruments or techniques by professors

served as a powerful teaching method. In both the *Traditional Musics of the World* and *Global Guitar* courses, this approach was especially effective. With a professor whose musical background included traditional Japanese music, the Traditional Musics of the World students witnessed performances on foreign instruments. The class learned about picking and playing styles, the construction of the instruments, and tone qualities directly. In the Global Guitar course, the professor focused more on practical instruction. The inclusion of practical playing not only proved to be a significant challenge for those who were new to the instrument, but I also believe it was difficult for the professor. As he led the class in strumming and chord changes while naming fret or string numbers, those who were experienced with the instrument would quickly become under-stimulated and impatient while those with no previous training would become lost and frustrated. As one of the inexperienced players, it was hard for me to keep up with the tempo of the group while simultaneously trying to remember the notes of each string, conquer fingering positions, and learn chords. In a group of such varied levels of ability, this outcome seems impossible to avoid. Ideally, a class that incorporates practical playing should consist of musicians of near calibre so that an organized syllabus could cater to goals spaced at achievable intervals for the appropriate skill levels. This way, both the novice and advanced students would be provided the opportunity to efficiently improve as musicians. A class geared towards teaching basic chords, scales, tetrachords, and picking styles might be redundant to experienced guitarists, but is necessary for beginners who want to put musical theory into practice.

In contrast with the few challenges I experienced due to my lack of prior musical knowledge, I have had several rewarding academic achievements. My ability to theoretically articulate my musical opinions and analyses is by far the most rewarding knowledge I have gained as a music student. I now have the ability to not only deconstruct a composition and analyze its musical complexities, but also do the same for entire genres. The concepts of musical timbre and

texture, as well as the identification of techniques such as crescendos, call and response, or the movements within a symphony are among the elements of music that are no longer foreign to me. The extent of my musical knowledge has also grown to include playing styles and techniques, practical experience with the guitar, and the classification of instruments. The exposure to various cultures that I had never previously explored inspired my desire to learn new genres of traditional music and the roles it plays in their societies. I was surprised by the way in which I connected with traditional Native American music. The distinctive use of rhythm and vocables was intriguing to analyze, but what most captivated me was the culture behind the music. The prominence of ritual and how it is used as an oral teaching method to pass their stories and beliefs to younger generations is fascinating to me.

As I complete my first experience as a music academic, I have expanded my understanding of the study of music and the way in which it intersects with the study of culture, history, politics, and gender roles. I have always viewed songwriters as the poets of their generation. With the study of the poetry comes the ability to view the societal norms of that musical period and culture. As time passes, American popular music is becoming more and more of a historical subject. With popular genres such as punk and alternative music being over twenty and thirty years old, we can now begin to analyze them from an historical perspective. As a popular culture and music history lover and student, I hope to instruct and inspire future students and musicians to expand their knowledge of cultures and musical styles. As a music student, with guidance and knowledge from my professors, I was able to evolve from a music lover who was infatuated with the history of popular culture to an analytical musical academic with an educated musical ear.