

Music and the Quadrivium

Music was part of the old Quadrivium, the four studies that followed the Trivium (see page 27) of language accomplishment. Indeed, the four disciplines of the Quadrivium were: astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

To modern eyes, this may seem a curious collection of studies. We regard astronomy as a very particular sub-discipline of the natural sciences, not necessarily a major dimension of becoming educated, but to the Medievals, astronomy was, of all sciences, the essential one which directed the student to the contemplation of “the heavens” — of apparent infinity. That was in the days before our modern observatories, manned by students who could not, on a camping trip, identify the Pleiades with the naked eye and who have never thought about either infinity or philosophy.

Now, too, we view arithmetic and geometry primarily as elementary disciplines; calculus, number theory, and set theory are the studies of the advanced mathematician, and many achieve an advanced education without any of these latter studies. Even our education in geometry rarely includes the logical rigor of Euclid. But in the past, arithmetic was the discipline of number and pattern and advanced studies included much that we would still consider advanced. Geometry was partly about math in space and partly the discipline of logic.

I certainly include Math in the list of essential disciplines, implying all these studies, and have sought to encourage the use of curricula which will produce a student who has a genuine sense of number and pattern, not just the ability to use a calculator.

But music is distinct.

WHAT IS MUSIC?

It is a right combination and a rhythmic sequencing of notes or tones in a harmonious manner to support some thought or image, some movement of the human heart. Music has the power to encourage thought – or discourage it. It has the power, through its physical and intellectual beauty, to bring

a fruitful quietness to the soul or to disturb the soul so that prayer and even thought are difficult.

Music differs from all other disciplines in its comprehensive manner of addressing the human person. It is at once mathematical and artistic, often literary and religious, occasionally historical and philosophical.

In various ways, therefore, I have accounted for the other members of the Quadrivium, but the fourth deserves special mention. Although “higher education” is often pursued entirely without music, Shakespeare spoke wisely when he called the love of music the mark of the trustworthy man.

Good music turns up in all sorts of places, in ceremonies and celebrations, in both military exercises and courtly dancing, in therapy for the emotionally troubled, in neurophysiology as a healer, in brain development for the infant, and as “praying twice” for the saints. Wherever men are intensely engaged in human life, music is there.

CLASSICAL MUSIC:

What is “good” music?

Let us first ask “What is classical music?” Is it enough to be “old”, or music written by well-known composers? I cannot think that mere age qualifies anything to be considered valuable. As for what is “well-known,” that too, is mere fashion. After all, Shakespeare and Bach were once new and unknown.

Classical music is a mathematical fantasy, – particular wavelengths of sound, particularly shaped by bells, tubes and strings, particularly timed, and well-developed for the service of the human soul. Historically (and implicitly) music began in the service of the human voice and for the expression of spiritual values, especially worship and love. Music does not begin with gongs and tympani, or with roaring, but with lullabies. Sounds that are not within range of the human voice are always experienced as uncanny and often as threatening. On the other hand, even remembered or imagined speech, or the intuitive undercurrent of loving speech, may do powerful things within the heart of man; music develops this.

Like no other discipline, music is an extraordinary union of body, soul, and spirit; of intellect, memory, and imagination; of the conscious and the unconscious; even, apparently, of the differential powers of the two hemispheres of the brain. Education must include this discipline, leading students to become familiar with great music and pursue at least one instrument – or preferably two, counting the human voice – to gain an understanding of the principles of music, but also to engage its power and to find the interior spaces it reveals within them.

ANTI-MUSIC?

Yes, there is anti-music. It should be obvious that the versatility and power of music carry the potential for damage as much as for grace.

When it is particularly raucous, we may call anti-music “noise,” but the problem is more serious than mere clatter, for today we are actually dealing with the widespread production of music which is attractive, which draws the listener in, while it is also anti-human and anti-cultural in character. Rock music physically damages the ears (and the vocal chords if you sing with it) and disturbs the body and emotions in ways that are not fully understood, but are well-documented. Furthermore, it adequately and appropriately supports lyrics that are anti-cultural in ways I need not explain, yet there remains a very deep concern even when pro-cultural lyrics are used with this anti-cultural music.

We should carefully consider the meaning of the musical genre which is called Christian Rock. First of all, rock music is physically harmful, and as such, it raises Fifth Commandment issues about our responsibility for our bodies, no matter what the lyrics are. Second, just because the lyrics are religious doesn't make our saying of them a prayer, for the character of rock music draws us to the periphery of our spiritual consciousness, not to the center. Third, it needs to be considered that years after a performance, strong and disturbing auditory mem-

ories of Christian rock music will remain associated with the mysteries of our faith in a manner that may disrupt the flow of meditative or contemplative prayer.

For these and similar reasons, many claim that there can be no Christian Rock. I do not know. Jesus, born in a manger, has no pride mixed with his love and is certain to meet his children wherever they are when they turn to him. I offer my cautions and leave it at that.

I must mention one other program, not because I have used it, but because it expressed thoughts I had long believed and it was inspiring and helpful to me to pursue it as far as I could on the internet. It is called Transformational Voice Training, and the founder of the Institute, Linda Brice, has been teaching and coaching voice at a very professional level for 30 years. A personal experience took her in a more interior direction, and she is now engaged in teaching voice to professionals and complete amateurs together in relation to a single vision of the spiritual dimension of the human voice. Her work is fascinating; look her up on line.

I found her work because I was taking Buteyko training for health problems that affected my breathing and my ability to sing. My instructor had met Linda Brice at a Buteyko workshop.

Everyone can sing; find Justine Ward's work or visit Linda Brice's site until you believe that. Then go forward gently.