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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

“Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop.”
—Clifford Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System”

Geertz’s statement points out that artistic understanding is culturally situated and that, at least in art, one of the best ways to learn is to learn by doing. Along with this, I believe that a meaningful relationship with music can only be built through personal musical experiences. I hope to guide students in activities that help them build deeper awareness about music they value and like to listen to, particularly active listening, artistic openness, and good written expression. It is important to me that my students encounter music they have not heard before, learn to express themselves about it in speech and writing, and gain familiarity with new cultural aesthetic values. Because music reflects a way of thinking about the world, I also hope to show my students ways that music relates with other fields they are studying and why it is an important expressive form.

Active listening is a central concept in the way that I teach musical knowledge and understanding in introductory courses. For further musical learning, it is crucial to develop vocabulary to talk about and articulate the listening experience. Listening is a skill and challenge, even to many advanced musically trained students, and is particularly important in musicology courses, which do not regularly include a performance component. Learning to be a perceptive listener is a skill to be practiced and studied, perhaps akin to learning a language.

In my teaching, I use varied methods to encourage students to begin learning about music on their own. In lecture and discussion formats, I try to present or play musical material before discussing it so that students may form their own impressions first. After hearing musical excerpts, I seek student responses, either through in-class discussion or short writing responses in order to assess what they’re hearing and responses to the sound. In addition, I often assign weekly listening journals to ensure that students are engaging with material outside of class as well as to assess their progress and listening skills throughout the course. In journals, I ask students to find for each piece at least one interesting or enjoyable element that catches their attention, and to answer the question, “What is there to like in this music?” I distribute a handout with questions that students should address in their journaling assignments. As with the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words,” seeing and interacting with a live musicians can teach more in one class session than any lecture or discussion. To accomplish this, I try to invite active musicians to perform in class.

It is important to assess what musical experiences students have coming into classes. To assess student preparation, I usually assign an essay on the theme of “Music and I” that takes the form of a one- or two-page musical autobiography. This allows me to gauge student involvement and preparation with course material, thus making it easier to tailor the course to student needs.

Music can provide insights into how people communicate with each other, how different cultures interact, and as a way to feel and experience firsthand how other people approach, perceive, and interpret the world. When possible, I encourage students to share their own music with the class (often in a segment at the beginning of class) and discuss in similar ways to the pieces in the rest of the course; in upper-level courses, I use similar but more structured and

targeted assignments. Students bring in a favorite example and briefly present it to the class in the first five minutes. This not only creates an open and inclusive classroom, it validates student aesthetic responses and musical choices. It also helps students realize ways in which music functions as aural presentation of their cultural values and ideas. Through journaling assignments, they can explore how this idea may work in unfamiliar music.

After finishing my courses, I hope students engage with music more deeply, are more involved with the world of sounds around them (whether on the radio, on a CD, at a concert, or on the street), can express their musical experiences more articulately, and have developed skills to share their listening experience with others. They can also learn about how music affects the world around them, how to find new and more extensive information about music if they choose to pursue it, and form their own aesthetic judgments.