

Why Music—Unlike Other Forms of Free Expression—Thrives in Our Universities

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(Americana One, 28 June 2020, available online at URL = <http://sun209.com/americana-and-country-artists-take-a-stand-for-the-first-amendment/>)

The arts, taken as a whole, quietly govern the metaphysical heritage of our Western tradition. (Gadamer, *Theory, Culture and Society*)

Words are the gods living within a convention, but tones are the daemons. (Goethe, 25 February 1870, *Cosima Wagner's Diary*, 1: 193)

Music thrives across our nation's universities because the students themselves create it. It is entirely owned by students regarding choice and style, and it is a skill and instinct that is strictly independent from any institutional claim: it cannot be controlled either, by institutional rules: music is the ultimate free speech act. The "Chicago Principles" even crumble and dissolve under the power of music: words may be subject to laws or policies, but musical tones and pitches cannot be.

What is truly remarkable about American music and music education is its systematic integration across our entire university and college industry. Whether it's the private music academies like Juilliard in New York, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, the Hartt College of Music in Connecticut, or the New England Conservatory in Boston, or in all of our state universities such as Michigan, Florida, Illinois, California, Indiana, Texas, and many more, music education and performance is not just present, but alive and vibrant.

American music education may be one of our most important disciplines. Even at more traditional academic institutions MIT, Stanford, Chicago, Princeton, Columbia, or Yale, music is an important integral part of their identity. MIT offers a B.S. in Music, and a combined music and engineering degree, while Stanford operates a "Music, Science, and Technology" program up to the Ph.D. At UChicago, it is not unusual to find a chemistry major playing in orchestra, or at large public universities like Texas, a marching band member majoring in petroleum engineering; at Vanderbilt, students combine music performance in Nashville, with medical research in cochlear implants; or the study of music's role in the development of social intelligence. The University also hosts the Vanderbilt Music Cognition Lab. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign combines music, technology and engineering through a B.A. degree option, or a B.S. in computer science and music, among other inspiring combinations.

While the faculty and staff make up any music department's operational and pedagogic organization, they generally function in a way somewhat different from their peers in other disciplines, where research is held out as their core function and career path. In music, it's all about teaching and performance. Musicologists, music theorists, and acoustic engineers certainly produce works that conform to university academic research and publication standards, but their department trades mostly on performance, and performance is almost entirely created by the students, as soloists and as ensemble members.

In this way, college and university music majors are detached from much of the hierarchy and cultural conformity that characterizes other academic areas where faculty make themselves the center of attention and tend to dominate thought routines, language use, modeling, and theoretical designs. In music, the students dominate.

Unlike thought and belief structure, musical skill cannot be technically corrupted.¹ Music comes from the students' organic interests and talents, and of all the disciplines, it probably has the least to do with professors, administration, course bidding, grades, and all the rest of academic paraphernalia.²

The political class has always feared music. This is also why the political class has always feared music: They can't completely control it, and it transcends their manipulation of words.³ In a way, a university is a large musical itself, alive with innate human passion and interests, discipline, and creativity, which are most exemplified by music. It is organized like music, with solos, choruses, chamber groups, duets, trios, quartets, ensembles, bands, opera and orchestras, composition, conducting, theory, and history.

Music may be the inherent aesthetic ideal of the modern university. Music is also the natural antidote to social identitarians and ideology founded on division and opportunism. Music is too honest for this. As Jimi Hendrix said, "music doesn't lie."⁴

Music may also be a manifestation of the human mind itself; that is, the mind may be a music machine, one that thinks in music⁵—it may also be a quantum machine, or there may be a synaptic quantum mechanism, which raises a provocative consideration as to how both may be related.⁶ And while music is a sounding phenomenon, human music doesn't depend per se on the aural function for its production—as Beethoven and others proved through deafness. It is not dependent on sight either, as several 18th and 19th century composers and performers demonstrated including Tulou, Kuhlau and Jensen, or in modern times, Ray Charles or tenor Andrea Bocelli.⁷

Music as it turns out, might possibly be the most "natural intellectual" activity, if by "intellect" we mean a purely human, mental activity that integrates abstraction. It also may contain answers, or at least hints, as to how creativity and insight, in all the disciplines including physical science and engineering, are products of certain inspiration.⁸ Nietzsche said that "one should not conceal or denature, *the actual way* in which our thoughts have come to us." Music, as opposed to positive problem solving using linguistic and mathematical symbols, and with its own notation and theoretical rules, is one of those ways. Both are also related.⁹

Music also has a fascinating similarity to what we call history. If we accept that man is a "historical animal," meaning that he alone has an active awareness of history and lives constantly in a historically defined dimension, it may be from the same powers of musical intelligence that historians can make the incredible leap into historical insight. History scholarship indeed rests on evidence, data, testimony, records, and numerous artifacts, but none of that by itself means anything until it is interpreted. And the act of historical interpretation and narration may be more of a "music" intelligence of kinetic intuition and discernment of signals than it is a strictly analytic and inductive/deductive act. The composer and the historian may draw on similar inspirations.

In so-called music “transformation theory,” tonal changes can be seen as mathematical sets. Our human ear and mind are highly sensitive to musical sounds, tones, and changes in tones, and seem especially drawn to orienting ourselves to pitches, where we have physical and mental sensations of directedness and attraction.¹⁰

Language, on the other hand, is entropic; that is, it has an inherent tendency to evolve toward a state of inert uniformity, much like legal language or even like computer code—this is why legal language, and AI, can create judgment uniformity, and behavioral conformity, which is central to forming ideologies (Andersson, 2023, available online at URL = <<https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2023/11/24/law-professors-hate-free-speech-and-embrace-control/>>). This is also why philosophy, which is language thinking about itself, ultimately becomes trapped in its language boundaries and is formally reductive. Music seems to escape this limitation.¹¹

Our university music programs and departments may hold the key to a new social and human awareness that is largely unnoticed or perhaps underappreciated as it competes with the dominant positive social-scientific methods. Ironically, perhaps, that method has been suspended in the last several years, as society has drifted into irrationalism or mass psychosis, where even the most essential tool of higher education—the statistical test of significance and all the applications that depend on it such as medicine, has been idled in favor of ideology (Dean, <https://d-dean.medium.com/biosecurity-and-politics-giorgio-agamben-396f9ab3b6f4>).

Music isn’t necessarily an antidote to the many cognitive distortions that trouble our campuses, but it has enormous latent power: music may even be that elusive path to the goal of theoretical physics, which, despite its dependency on the analytic and inductive, still cannot answer, and may never answer, the most fundamental cosmological or metaphysical question: why? In this regard, the philosophical idealism of an ultimate fusion of thinking and being may be correct in front of us in music. If so, our music departments may be the ultimate realization of all academic disciplines. In the meantime, music can be an ethical center of what is right and good, partly through the intelligence of *mens et manus* or the mind and the hand, working together.

Music, as Nietzsche said, is indeed in full bloom.

NOTES

¹ Although it can be corrupted aesthetically. See (Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; Scruton, *Aesthetic of Music* ; Patterson, *John Cage: Music, Philosophy and Intention*). Correspondingly, Heinrich Schenker notes that “The artist, in these grave and most grievous of times, may see how the political parties vying with one another for power, sin against art in general, and against his own art in particular, through ignorance and ineptitude” (Schenker, *Der Tonwille (the Will of the Tone): Pamphlets in Witness of the Immutable Laws of Music*, trans. W. Drabkin, vol 1).

² This is powerfully reinforced by the fact that most students who formally play music began taking lessons at a young age, often in elementary school years, or even earlier in some cases. Many parents, myself included, felt that creating a “music studio” at home with instruments and lessons was among the most important learning opportunities we could make for our children. By the time they reach college, many are already competent musicians. Their exposure to music may also have come from influential sources outside strict academia. Mine came at a young age from Connecticut neighbor and concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz. Later at the Watkinson School in Hartford, where I graduated from its Creative Arts Program with the Hartt College of Music, a Russian cellist, newly arrived from the Soviet Union, visited us for a “master class.” Little did we know that Mstislav Rostropovich had just come to town, with little more than a suitcase and a cello. That’s another thing about music and musicians: they are often natural entrepreneurs and great risk takers because they have to be.

³ “Political parties coined only a very small number of the words in their language—indeed probably none. But this changes the value of words and the frequency of their occurrence; it makes common property out of what was previously the preserve of an individual or a small group; it commandeers for the party that which was previously common property and, in the process, steeps words and groups of words and sentence structures with its poison” (Klemperer, *Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologists Notebook*).

⁴ It is fascinating to see the new “Obama Center” on the southeast side of the University of Chicago. Its solid block concrete structure is interrupted in its center, by a series of carved statements that are celebrated as “his words.” If there were musical notes instead, what would they be? Could there even be any?

⁵ There is an interesting space, arguably between language and music, that might be called “dialogicism” or “speech-thinking” that was advanced by Eugen Rosenstock-

Huessy, along with Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner, and Martin Buber, among others. See, e.g., (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rosenstock-huessy/>; and M. Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* [Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017].

⁶ I'm not suggesting that walking into a classroom, taking a seat, and solving a linear program, translating Russian into Chinese, preparing a financial accounting statement, solving hypersonic laminar flow, or arguing a motion on contract law defense, or a cross-examination, are lesser uses of mind, but rather, *they do not tell us how the mind works*. As Stanford theoretical physicist Leonard Susskind recently admitted, we still have no systematic grand theory, through the physical sciences, of how the mind actually functions even at a very basic level (nor even the organic brain). Interestingly, the act of aerial navigation and piloting, in addition to general spatial management, may provide some clues as to how the mind is oriented; and as with music, *it senses*. See (C. Kemp, *The Neuroscience of Navigation*, and <https://mitteldorf.substack.com/p/inverting-the-hard-problem>).

⁷ It functions rather by an "inner awareness of sound" by understanding melodic shape, dynamics, articulation and fluency, as the "first principles" of music. When combined with motivic patterns (repetition, sequences, and variations), this allows for the assimilation of continual, progressively complex technical skills. In this way it is like the traditional academic cognate disciplines. See also (Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005]).

⁸ Neuroplasticity and molecular growth may also be traceable directly to human music creation. Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to grow and change.

⁹ There are three other especially important elements generally stemming from music, and music training. One is aesthetics, another judgmental discrimination. Both of course are related. See (P. Valéry, *Collected Works* [Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970]; and E. Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*). Third is imagination. See (G. Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music*, 2004; see also R.L. Brett, *Reason and Imagination*, 1960). Brett's quite convincing central argument is that *imagination and reason are related; but more, that they are inseparable*. For example, literary language cannot be separated from discursive: "language is one and indivisible." I would include music in the set of language, along with mathematics. See (R.L. Brett, "The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination," and "An Exchange Between Gadamer and Glenn Gould on Hermeneutics and Music," *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 33, 3).

¹⁰ If this is true, it says much about how the human mind works, or at least how and in what ways it may function including "kinetic intuition." See (S. Rings, *Tonality and Transformation* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011]; R. Scruton, *Music as an Art* [London]

Bloomsbury, 2017], esp. the chapters on music and cognitive science, and the topography of musical space).

¹¹For example, concepts such as “truth,” and “disinformation,” are entirely dependent on *language control* in ways that music cannot be (see A. Giannakidou, *Truth and Veridicality in Grammar and Thought: Mood, Modality, and Propositional Attitudes*, 2021).