

THE THERAPEUTIC FUNCTION OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE ARTS

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In the fall of 1994 I was asked to develop new programs in the arts for the Faculty of Continuing Education at The University of Calgary. This area was in need of revamping and innovation; not many new courses had been added in recent years, and those that were still being offered on a continual basis had grown a bit stale and were experiencing declining enrolments.

My own training was in music and so I decided to look at course offerings in music as my initial project. Traditionally, music courses offered by continuing education or extension divisions have tended to concentrate on introductory courses in the basics of music theory or music “appreciation.” there were a couple of such courses already on the books such as:

Introduction to the Music of Tchaikovsky

An introduction to the masterworks of Tchaikovsky—with special emphasis on his orchestral and operatic works...and so forth.

Of course, the music appreciation course formula is tried—very tried— and true, and, I decided, boring. The basic idea of an introductory course in music appreciation was good, but I wanted to do something that would distinguish it from the shop-worn format where the instructor stands at the front of the room and plays excerpts from scratchy records while the students try vainly to follow the score in Joseph Machlis’s *The Enjoyment of Music*.

There were also some other important considerations. Like most extension or continuing education faculties, courses must operate on a cost-recovery basis at a minimum, and are often expected to be profitable. Registration numbers determine if the course will run or not. This was the case at my university. Secondly, as in most medium to large cities, ours was not the only game in town: continuing education programs in Calgary are also offered by three other colleges, two regional school boards and other community organizations like the YWCA. So the courses we offer not only have to be profitable, they must be profitable in the face of competition from similar courses offered by other institutions.

This is especially important when you are offering a course that people generally take for leisure enjoyment first, and education second. People typically enrol in an extension department’s courses in areas such as computer programming,

management or public relations for professional development purposes; it is not as likely that as many people will enrol in an introductory course in music appreciation to help them on their career paths. This, at least, was the premise I started with when designing new courses. It's often said that the adult education administrator must be something of an entrepreneur. (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982, 21). And basically I was faced with what in marketing parlance is the problem of finding a unique selling point to market a parity product. What would distinguish my music appreciation course from all the others?

I began with the thought in mind that I would test the assumption mentioned above that people who enrol in arts appreciation courses do so for enjoyment as well as for education. Obviously, one's enjoyment of music could be enhanced attending a concert as opposed to simply listening to a recording (Glenn Gould would of course object to this; I'll deal with that later). I contacted the marketing director of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and we worked out a discounted price for a block of tickets for two fall concerts which were part of their "Baroque Experience" series. The idea was to include the concert tickets as part of the course package, which would run for ten consecutive Wednesday evenings. I ensured that the two concerts were the same night as the regular course night. I also arranged for a couple of guest visits on other course evenings by members of the orchestra, when they would provide informal talks/demonstrations of their instruments. I titled the course "The Baroque Experience" to tie in with the Calgary Philharmonic's marketing of the series.

The course description emphasised that the concerts were included as part of the course fee, and that the course sessions would focus on the pieces to be performed in the upcoming concerts. I had arranged with the Calgary Philharmonic to set aside a block of 40 tickets—and so set the maximum enrolment at 40. The fall calendar for the Faculty of Continuing Education was mailed out in mid-August. By September 1st the course was sold out.

It certainly seemed that the format was a good idea. The assumption that people would enrol as a social activity was supported as soon as I saw the class list: out of the total of 40 students 14 had the same last names—a third of the class had enrolled as couples of one sort or another—as it turned out "couples" included husbands/wives, same sex partners, and parents/children. Once the classes began, it also turned out that the couple enrolment was higher than the 14 initially suggested by the names on the class list, since there were several couples with different last names.

While some of the couples were spouses, other pairs were close friends, such as two women, close friends, who had taken the course as their “night out” together away from their husbands and kids. Incidentally, it’s one thing to be responsible for someone musical education, but surely it’s on a much greater order of magnitude to be responsible for someone’s only “night out” during the week!

At any rate, it was obvious from the beginning that participants in the class were there to enjoy the social aspect as much as the educational aspect. And while some had enrolled as couples others had enrolled as singles and enjoyed equally the social opportunities afforded by the class. This, of course, included the concerts. I was struck by the sense of occasion that the concerts had for many of the class members. In fact, at the first concert I was slightly embarrassed by my attire—not informal but a bit casual—when I encountered so many members of the class wearing suits, evening gowns and otherwise glitzy concert apparel. I don’t want to give the wrong impression here, they were there to appreciate and enjoy the music I’d prepared them for in the preceding weeks, but they were also there to enjoy the social rituals of concert-going, ironically, the very aspects of public music making eschewed and in some cases despised by professional composers and performers.

After the course had ended, I was intrigued by the apparent motivations for taking the course that I’d noticed in my informal discussions with the class. I had intended to ask the participants to evaluate the course anyway, so when I sent a note out to the members of the class asking for their impressions of the course, I also asked them to let me know of any specific reason—other than for educational purposes—that had prompted them to take the course.

Some of the responses—such as the previously-mentioned two women looking for their “night out” together—were expected. But most interesting was the high proportion of people who had taken the course for what can only be called therapeutic reasons. Here are a few examples: a woman in her sixties had recently experienced the death of her only daughter, and the course had been given to her by her family to help get her mind off things. Another couple, both professional engineers, found their careers were putting a strain on their marriage—especially since they were in the same profession—and took the course so they could participate together in “something else, for a change,” to quote them. Another woman had recently been reconciled with her daughter after a long-standing dispute and they had taken the course together to help them get reacquainted.

While some peoples’ responses were not as dramatic as these, they nonetheless demonstrated that they had taken the course to help fulfil a social need: two people stated they had taken the course to help them meet people, three others said

they had taken the course so that they would feel more comfortable talking about music at social functions, and several others fell into the category of those who wanted to combine an educational experience with a night out.

Analysis of this data indicated that twenty-three of the thirty-two class members who responded to the survey—a good two thirds of the class—took the course for what can best be described as therapeutic reasons, to help them cope with personal or family-related stress ranging from mild social anxieties to grief therapy. Most gratifying to me personally was the fact that all of those who replied indicated that the course had helped them in this capacity. A similar survey is currently being conducted for the class members of the winter session of the course. All the responses have not been received at the time of this writing, however, my preliminary findings show a similar trend.

The therapeutic uses of music in clinical situations are well known, including hospital programs where music therapy functions as a branch of occupational therapy, the use of music therapy to help in the treatment of people with psychiatric disorders, the use of music to help in the treatment of autism and stroke patients, and in other psycho-therapeutic procedures. What this informal survey suggests is that adult education in music—and perhaps in the arts generally—can also provide this benefit, but in a more tangential way. Those of us involved in adult education need to keep in mind that many adult learners take arts courses to satisfy a need which may not be primarily educational—it may be social or emotional. We can help meet this need through the structure of the course. In the early 1960's research carried out by Houle developed a typology which identified three "types" of adult learners, which he describes as follows:

"The first, or as they will be called, the *goal-oriented*, are those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives. The second, the *activity-oriented*, are those who take part because they find in the circumstances of learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or announced purposes of the activity. The third, the *learning-oriented*, seek knowledge for its own sake." (Houle, 1961, pp. 15-16)

The participants in my class fit largely into this second category, ie, *activity-oriented*. The "content or announced purposes" of my "Baroque Experience" course was to give people an introduction to baroque music through informal seminars, guest appearances by symphony musicians and attendance at two

Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra concerts. I wonder how many students would have registered if the calendar copy had proclaimed: “save your marriage through music?” Or: “Lonely? Maybe your seat-mate can become your soul-mate!”

At any rate, what attracted many of the students to this course was primarily not the content—the history of baroque music—but the attendant activities: a night out, informal socializing during and after the class seminars, the social aspect of concert going, and so on. What made this course particularly attractive was the inclusion of the two concerts, which emphasised activity orientation. Interestingly, there were a few people in that class who had different objectives (ie, *learning or goal-oriented*) who sometimes got impatient when class discussions drifted too far (in their opinion) toward amusing composers’ biographical trivia in which many felt comfortable in participating, at the expense of more arcane discussion of fugal expositions, which tended to put a damper on unfettered discussion. In other words, the *learning-oriented* preferred an instructor in lecture mode while the *activity-oriented* preferred course content that facilitated more discussion/socialization. It is important for us to strike a balance when teaching these courses.

Music is an inherently social activity, and recently there have been many attempts to articulate the view that musical meaning resides in its function as a social symbol. (Shepherd, 1991, pp.13-14). The symphony orchestra, of course, has recently fallen into disrepute as a dinosaur that represents archaic 19th century values, which has precipitated a crisis in orchestral attendance and audience attitudes. Pierre Boulez rages against this in his essay, *Orchestras, Concert Halls, Repertory, Audiences*:

“A plague on this sleepy audience that goes to concerts simply in order to relive a time when they were less sleepy!...That is very different from the way that I regard our musical ‘heritage.’ In the case of the most familiar works we have to bypass our memories and use our imaginations to discover new potentialities. Nothing is more frigid, so dull and so repugnant as to regard the masterpieces of the past as so many inert blocks congealed in the historical process. What interests and attracts—even fascinates me—as a performer is the incandescent glow of these masterpieces, a glow that can always made to burst into flame again.” (Boulez, 1986, pg. 469)

Glenn Gould, too, railed against sleepy audiences in particular and the whole public concert scene in general, to the point where he decided to abandon his concert career. For Gould, recording technology could allow for the perfection of

the performance and interpretation of a piece that could never be achieved in a live, public performance:

“I discovered that, in the privacy, the solitude and (if all Freudians will stand clear) the womb-like security of the studio, it was possible to make music in a more direct, more personal manner than any concert hall would ever permit.” (Payzant, 1978, p.36)

For Gould, the sooner audiences also jettisoned the social rituals of the concert hall in favour of solitary mediated listening the better: in 1966 he published an article in *High Fidelity Magazine* entitled “The Prospects of Recording,” where he proclaimed that new technology would soon obsolete the concert hall and usher in the era of the New Listener (Gould, 1966, pp. 46-63) who would experience the music directly through recordings. All of those in my “Baroque Experience” class represented Gould’s “New Listeners:” many of whom had listened to recordings of Baroque Music for years but had never attended a live concert with all its attendant social rituals. For them—ironically—it was the opportunity to combine the social with the musical experience that allowed—to paraphrase Pierre Boulez—the incandescent glow of music already familiar (but perhaps not fully experienced) to “burst into flame.”

As a composer, I too have complained about the difficulties in getting new music performed by established orchestras, and worried about the apparent gulf between contemporary music and society as a whole. At the end of my most recent symphony course I was chatting with a number of the students about what they liked best about the course. One of the more popular sessions had featured a symphony clarinetist who, after demonstrating the basics of the clarinet and going through some of the passages of the Mozart Clarinet Concerto (the featured piece for the next symphony concert), filled up the remaining time by demonstrating extended techniques used in contemporary music (key slaps, multiphonics, flutter tonguing, etc.). As it happened he was preparing for an upcoming concert for the local new music society of which I’m the President, a fact he humorously alluded to. The class was fascinated by those extended techniques and wanted to know the details of the upcoming contemporary music concert. “*That’s* the kind of concert I really wanted to go to,” said one of the class members, a man in his 60’s. “But I took the Baroque course since that’s all that was offered. Modern music is so much more interesting when you’re there in person,” said his friend. “Why don’t you offer a course in contemporary music like your Baroque course?”

Why not, indeed?