



# Teaching Music with the Humanities

with Dr. Junius Johnson

## Lecture I: Music in Western Culture

### Outline:

Our society separates music and literature in a way that would have been foreign to the past.

- As late as the 19th century, musical knowledge and basic performance skills were considered essential elements of an education.
- The trend towards the specialization of classical music in the 20th and 21st centuries cuts us off from our musical traditions.
  - This has occurred despite the introduction of recorded music which makes great performances available to anyone.
  - The proliferation of recorded music has not made us more musically sophisticated but less.

Comparing a typical public performance of Mozart's time with our own highlights the historical differences in musical appreciation.

- In Mozart's day, concert goers sat in a fully lit room, ate and conversed together, and occasionally made requests. It was a raucous affair.
- Beginning with Gustav Mahler, the lights were turned down to force viewers' attention on the performers and restrict conversation. This enhances the performance but it comes at a price.
- Concert music performed today increasingly retreats from everyday life and becomes a "fine art," i.e. refined and esoteric. Like great literature, music is now treated as the specialized study of the few rather than universally part of a meaningful life.

The concept of *harmonia mundi* (harmony of the world) can be applied to the 3 types of music described by Boethius in his *Fundamentals of Music*.

- *musica mundana*, or music of the spheres
- *musica humana*, or music of the human being (i.e. our bodies and souls)
- *musica instrumentalis*, or music made by instruments and singers

The first two musics are created by God, with the soul serving as the first site of their harmonic correspondence.

- The harmony and integrity of the human body represents the harmony and integrity of the heavens in microcosm.



- In turn, the body has its harmony as an external expression of the soul's harmony.
- Thus the healthy soul results from the proper arrangement and disposition of its parts so that it resonates with the celestial harmony.

The third music is made by humans out of our encounter with the first two.

- These encounters shape our existence before we become self reflective, and permeate our inner and outer worlds.
- Therefore all of our musical composition conforms to pre-existing music to which we belong and the co-existent music that we are.

Although one can argue that popular music still forms the bedrock of our lives, music as a liberal art has to do with the Great Conversation, connecting us with the generations before us.

- This music tends to be classical because of its ability to convey the cultural meaning found in the literary, philosophical, and theological texts of its day.
- Classical educators should be concerned with the recovery of classical music as part of a complete liberal education forming students in the habits of living and being.
- It is arbitrary and novel to treat the fine arts as a different category of culture than literature, philosophy, and theology.
  - To understand the culture, its music must be learned and appreciated as well.
  - However, we can't simply "jump back" to a former state of affairs because we don't have the same cultural access.

The goal in these course lessons is to hone students' ability to extract what a particular musical piece is saying to the wider culture.

- No special musical training or knowledge is needed.
- One needs only to be willing to listen closely, patiently, and repeatedly.