

A Foundation for Music Appreciation...

then the thematic and historic study of music, as mentioned above, readily connects music to their other studies. This also enables the exploration of music history in the context in which it occurred.

With regard to frequency, as an integrated and necessary part of the curriculum, music should be returned to its rightful place of equality with the other disciplines. Music appreciation, music making, reading skills, and theory should form a regular part of the daily class schedule—or at least as frequently as math, science, or Latin.

Guide for Selection or What to Appreciate

God calls His people to worship Him in Spirit and Truth and to do so skillfully. In cultivating worshippers, instruction in music—in order to worship skillfully and with discernment—becomes as necessary as teaching someone to read that they may understand God’s Word. Music orders the mind, strengthens the heart, and soothes the spirit. As such, music has historically held a prominent and integrated role

in curricula. Music instruction is not enrichment, extracurricular, or optional but a core component of the path to wisdom.

—Gregory Wilbur, Statement on Philosophy of Music Education

Part of any education is the training of students’ affections—which is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification. As such, Philippians 4:8 provides a curriculum of the heart. When we replace the idea of music appreciation with cultural enrichment, the study of music becomes a far different thing. Training affections to apprehend the reflected Beauty, Goodness, and Truth of God’s creation moves students to the point of thinking about and understanding God’s nature and character.

We must not lightly ignore the wisdom of the church fathers and medieval scholastics—the democracy of the dead—with regard to the seven integrated liberal arts. This approach to understanding music fashioned 1000 years of plainsong and developed composers such as Palestrina, Schütz, Handel, and Bach.

The end goal of music appreciation, and music studies in general, is to develop discerning and active worshippers. Students will always hear music around them, but giving them the tools to actually *listen* and evaluate what they hear reveals the bounty and goodness of our Creator who has given such wonderful gifts to His children. Consequently, as our hearts respond in worship, we should desire to only bring the best as a sacrifice of praise—that includes music as ordained by God, not what we prefer. This desire can only be achieved by submitting ourselves to the tutelage of God’s instruction in His Word and the manifestation of His glory in His creation in order to truly understand and appreciate music aright.

NOTE: This article is an excerpt from a paper detailing more specifics about music appreciation that will be presented at the Classical Christian Fine Arts Symposium in Lancaster, PA, in March 2010.

From the Dark Woods to the Light

by G. Tyler Fischer

Selva obscura . . . so begins one of the greatest books. It begins in a dark woods with a lost, middle-aged man. How lost was he? He was so lost that it would have been fruitless to preach the gospel to him. He was not listening. He had lost sight of the Truth. This man was the poet Dante. As he is confronted by his sin and finds himself powerless in the dark

woods, he has one thing in his favor: others are looking out for him. Others are sending him help.

Who would you send to win the heart of a man lost in darkness? A preacher? A theologian? A saintly man or woman? He would not have listened! God does not send a philosopher or a minister to Dante, instead He sends a pagan artist—another poet who stirs the

heart of the wayward Christian to long for more—to long for true beauty. As Dante languishes in the woods he sees a ghost and he cries out for help. The shade turns out to be the poet Virgil—the greatest of Latin poets. Virgil is one of the greatest characters of *The Comedy*. He symbolizes human reason and serves as Dante’s guide bringing him almost to Heaven. In the poem, he also is simply what he is. Virgil is a poet and his poetry calls Dante to again look up—above himself and

G. Tyler Fischer has been the headmaster at Veritas Academy in Leola, PA, since 1997 and is a member of the ACCS Board. See <http://www.veritasacademy.com/>.

From the Dark Woods...

his fortunes (which are headed toward exile and despair). This upward glance eventually leads Dante to see the love that “moves the Sun and the other stars.”

the hands of pagan artists. The art and music they produce—instead of calling us to long for Truth, Beauty and Goodness—too often drives us deeper into

works like *The Oath of Horatii* and *The Death of Marat*. These paintings demonstrate great talent and they have an end. The end, however, is not Truth because the leaders of the French Revolution rejected Christ and Christianity. David’s purpose was to win the hearts and minds of the people to embrace a new vision of reality without Christ. His work brilliantly stirs up the romantic sentiments of the people calling them to support the new radical, “enlightened,” revolutionary state. This power eventually asks people to carry their fellow men off to the guillotine. Later, Hitler tapped the power of artists and musicians to bolster Nazi ideology and dehumanize his victims and enemies. Today, every ideology under the sun uses the arts to subtly draw us into their philosophy drawing us towards their ends. Unbelieving artists continue to use it to their best advantage to produce songs, films, music, and marketing jingles that sway our hearts and siphon off our money. Sadly, Christians have too often rejected the arts unnecessarily or used the arts ineptly, hardening hearts rather than softening them. We could call this reaction fight or flight.

For millennia this power in the West has been in the hands of Christian painters, poets, and musicians. Their art has been imperfect—as all art is—but it has consistently unveiled and inspired generations to follow after Christ, to embrace His symbols and people, and to love life.

The Dark Woods We Now Inhabit

Today, we find ourselves in a similar shadowy forest, one in which it would be easy to give way to hopelessness. Our culture races toward death and destruction. Christians seem to be along for the ride as horrors like abortion, homosexual marriage, and euthanasia whip by like stops on a Manhattan express train. Our situation is worse than Dante’s. What poets or artists are coming to help us begin the trek to heaven? What help would Pollock, Schönberg, Kurt Cobain, or Thomas Kinkade give?

Today, fine arts still contain great power, but this power pulls people away from Christ. They shape our tastes, our discourse, and our vision of the future. For millennia this power in the West has been in the hands of Christian painters, poets, and musicians. Their art has been imperfect—as all art is—but it has consistently unveiled and inspired generations to follow after Christ, to embrace His symbols and people, and to love life. Today, this power is mainly in

despair, further into the dark woods. Our culture suffers because Christian art is often a ghetto.

The Place of the Arts in a Secular Post-Christian Culture

As our culture has turned from Christ, it has looked to the arts to supply it with meaning and hope and has unwittingly made the fine arts into a high-brow quasi-religion for the sophisticated. In a righteous culture, art reflects and glories in God’s Truth. It borrows its symbolism from Him. It reflects His meaning. It presses us toward reality—which is His reality (even when, like Virgil, it cannot grasp all of His Truth). Modern pagans long to find Truth without Christ. This, of course, will not happen. Christ is the center of all Truth and Wisdom. No center can hold without Him. This attempt is displayed throughout history—from the ridiculous to the high handed. One example of this neo-pagan attempt to use the arts can be seen in the art and music produced by painters and musicians of the French Revolution. Jacques Louis David painted powerful

The Christian Reaction: Fight and Flight

The first popular Christian reaction is *flight*—running away from the arts wherever we find them. This reaction is understandable. Many times, debased examples of modern art make our stomachs turn—and it should. This response fails to grasp the nature of the battle or the power of rhetoric. We never tend to run far enough away.¹ We

From the Dark Woods...

somehow imagine that our children will be protected from wicked art when we engage with a culture immersed in it and produce no winsome art of our own. Too often the tastes and ideas dearest to our children are not a result of family worship, but instead are carried by images, tunes, and lyrics from Hollywood or New York. We have paid a devastating price for our incompetent retreat.² We fail to remember that our rejection of the arts does not cause them to lose their power to win the hearts of our children and to subtly form or “reform” their worldview. Running away has not protected us or them.

Our *fight* has been as wretched as our *flight*. When we attempt to engage culture and produce art of our own, the results have too often garnered laughter—and deserved it. Too often modern evangelical Christians, when they have used art, use it *only* to convey the gospel message. Our films—like our services—end with thin, shallow altar calls. Our music gets shunted off into genres that begin with the adjective “Christian.” We have our own Grammy Awards (Doves), our own art galleries, and our own films. We effectively wall ourselves off from culture, create art as if unbelievers were going to come and engage it, and then we go and watch it over and over because we want to prove the popularity of our niche group. Sadly, when the adjective is Christian, and it has to do with art and music, typically the synonym is “less talented.”³ We too often unthinkingly adopt the forms of our popular secular opponents and simply reduce the talent levels and wonder why our children eventually cannot taste the difference between our worldview and the world’s. Both *flight* and *fight* have failed.

The Classical Christian Reaction: Marginalizing Art

While classical Christian thinkers have sought to engage the culture and to retrain our tastes, the results have not been stellar. This fact was brought home to me at the 2008 ACCS Conference in a workshop presented by New Saint Andrew’s Fellow of History, Chris Schlect.⁴ The workshop unveiled data garnered from people who had been involved in classical Christian education for more than five years. Its findings varied greatly concerning the humanities, math and science, and the fine arts. Concerning the humanities, classical Christian folks knew why they were teaching it and had strong and committed convictions concerning whatever curricular choices they had made. When it came to math and science, classical Christian folks did not know why they were doing what they were doing (i.e., they did not know how the study of math and science fit into the broader aims of classical Christian education), but we justified whatever we did by pointing out that our standardized test scores were better than those of other schools.⁵ When it came to the fine arts the results were even more shocking. We not only did not know why we were doing what we were doing, we also did not see the work as essential to our mission as classical Christian schools. We sharpen our rhetorical knives to write great speeches hoping, of course, to hone our skills of winsome persuasion, but then we shun some of the most important and culturally powerful rhetoric. We wonder why our speeches fall on deaf ears. From these chilling findings, the need for a clearer vision for the fine arts in classical Christian

schools should be evident—a fearless, forward-looking vision committed to a classical Christian methodology and to Christ’s supremacy over all of life.

The Need for a Path Forward

The poet Dante traveled with Virgil through Hell and over the Mountain of Suffering before his vision was clarified before the face of God. We also have a long way to go, but the following is my outline for some of the *sine qua non* commitments that we need to have as we approach the fine arts.

We must approach the fine arts in a manner that is true to our classical Christian methodology. Our method of education can be applied in all fields including the visual arts and music. We need to discipline our students’ tastes and abilities to both appreciate and produce excellent art and music. We start doing this by teaching the basics, showing relationships, and by finally teaching them to critique and create art. Any methodology that pulls us away from the skills of observation and analysis which eventually result in persuasion and production should be set aside.

Also, we must find a path that brings all art to kneel before Christ, recognizing that He is Lord over *all* of life. Christ’s glory is especially seen in the gospel. Christ’s dominion, however, is over *all* of life and over all creation. We can create art that celebrates all of creation. This means that the themes of our music and art need not be stilted or bent toward some false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. God made the world. It is now horribly fallen (our art and music must recognize this or be exposed as syrupy and unrealistic), but it still bears the marks of its Creator. It will bear His glory. Our art, our

From the Dark Woods...

music must celebrate all of this.

Our vision must also be fearless and forward looking. It must be fearless because if Christ is Lord of all, then there is nothing—not in the arts, not in science, not in history—that cannot be explored. All Truth is His. Our path forward must not be, cannot be, a recapitulation or hope of returning to a simpler and more sentimental time. This does not mean that everything from the Victorian era or classical period was bad—so much was laudable, excellent, and is still enjoyable today. The truth is that we *cannot* go back to those eras.⁶ Everything that we produce in hopes of reaching back to those times is anachronistic—it simply does not fit with our time. We can build on the insights of former times, but the most interesting truth is on the edge. We have to use the insights of the past and the present to build art and music that speaks to and challenges our age with timeless truths.

But how can we be fearless and forward thinking if we are lost in a dark woods? If we are to find a good path forward we must do so by pooling the wisdom that we have and by beginning with hopeless impracticality.

Toward the Light

When we find out that we do not know all that we should there is a temptation to press for the practical. This is a terrible and often irreparable mistake. Once practical track is laid and everyone starts building their lesson plans, things get harder to change—sometimes much harder. First, before we get practical, we need to get impractical—we need to get philosophical. We should find a time to get our best philosophical minds together—minds who both

appreciate classical Christian education and have thought through how their implications should play out in a curriculum. We need to watch them wrestle with the ideal and be balanced by each others' criticism. We need to get our philosophy straight before we attack the practical.

Many of you might already be trying to pool as much wisdom to expand your vision for the fine arts. Keep at it. Our progress in this area is critical, I believe, if we want to push back against the present rip tide of our culture's artistic nihilism. Dante's curriculum was a long path (ours will be too). It took him to the center of the earth; it took him to the Earthly Paradise; it brought him past all the planets and the stars to see the Love that moves them all. It began with the beauty that he saw in the face of a young girl and the wonder that he experienced in the poetry of a Virgil.

ENDNOTES

1. That is, of course, with apologies to my Amish friends here in Lancaster County.

2. The statistics are breathtaking, but the trend has been going on for a while. The children of evangelicals simply are not buying the faith of their parents. Here are a few online sources: <http://www.youthministry.com/?q=node/5029>, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>.

3. This, of course, is not true of all Christian artists, painters, or poets. I have found, however, when I have the privilege of interacting with excellent

Christian artists and musicians, they readily admit that as they interact with other artists they have to work harder to be taken seriously because the name "Christian" is attached to them.

4. At the time of the publication of this material you could listen to Mr. Schlect's talk online at: <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=8329>.

5. If you find this horrifying, you should. As I have reflected on the findings (and quite frankly my own thinking), I am struck by the fact that sometimes we can juxtapose arrogance and ignorance (submitting to standards in one area that we would abjectly reject in another related area simply because it favors us). This is a deadly combination and it cries out for some more thinking, discussion, and listening to our best minds when it comes to our approach to math and science. Were we to apply these standards to our judgments about the fine arts (i.e., whatever standard garners the respect of the world defines our goals and objectives) the results would be disastrous.

6. James Jordan's work has blessed me by pointing this out. Many of us are prone to the mistake of the audience of the Hebrews. We want to go back. We must, however, press forward to what God is doing today. For more on this, see Jordan's *Through New Eyes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999).