

ACCS Distinctive Schools Series

Training student aesthetics affections in Music and Fine Arts

Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace. —Plato

There are some things, then, which are to be enjoyed, others which are to be used, others still which enjoy and use. Those things which are objects of enjoyment make us happy. Those things which are objects of use assist, and (so to speak) support us in our efforts after happiness, so that we can attain the things that make us happy and rest in them. We ourselves, again, who enjoy and use these things, being placed among both kinds of objects, if we set ourselves to enjoy those which we ought to use, are hindered in our course, and sometimes even led away from it; so that, getting entangled in the love of lower gratifications, we lag behind in, or even altogether turn back from, the pursuit of the real and proper objects of enjoyment. —Augustine of Hippo, (On Christian doctrine, Bk. 1Ch. 3)

The united influence of music and gymnastic will bring the reasons the passions into accord, nerving and sustaining the reason with noble words and lessons, and moderating and soothing and civilizing the wildness of passion by harmony and rhythm. — Plato

Music is the joy that a soul takes takes in counting without realizing it. — Gottfried Leibniz (Co-founder of Calculus)

And someone who cannot sing particularly well will nevertheless sing to himself, not because it is pleasant for him to hear what he sings but because it is a delight to express certain inward pleasures which originate in the soul, regardless of the manner in which they are expressed... How does it happen that when someone hears a pleasant song with his ears and mind, also his body involuntarily responds with some motion similar to that of the song? And how does it happen that this same person can enjoy some melody

he has already heard merely by recalling it in his memory? Thus from all these examples it appears to be beyond doubt that music is so naturally a part of us that we cannot be without it, even if we so wished. — Boethius (De Institutione Musica, Book 1)

It is by this middle element [the heart] that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal. —CS Lewis

It is these (grades K-2) teachers of the young who make the first deep and lasting impression on the souls of children— tuning their hearts and training their bodies, engaging them in a holistic and essential musical education, and educating them in wonder that teaches passions more than skills and content. It turns out the classical primary teachers are the exalted ‘wonder-workers’ of the school. —Clark and Jain

We should realize that if something untrue or immoral is stated in great art, it can be far more devastating than if it is expressed in poor art. The greater the artistic expression, the more important it is to consciously bring it and its worldview under the judgment of Christ and the Bible. The common reaction among many however, is just the opposite. Ordinarily, many seem to feel that the greater the art, the less we ought to be critical of its worldview. This we must reverse. — Francis A. Schaeffer

The aphorism “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is similar to “All men are created equal” in that it is almost universally accepted as true. The reality is that many ideas

take up residence in our being without a thorough critical examination. “All men are created equal” might be true with regard to dignity and worth and inherent value, but it is not true with regard to ability and giftedness. In like manner, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” should be scrutinized, because the underlying assumption is that all aesthetic judgements are subjective and relative. In other words, what is beautiful to one person might be ugly to another, and that is okay.

Objective Truth, Absolute Goodness, but Relative Beauty?

Classical educators are *contra mundum* when they claim that absolute truth and goodness exist, but they are often unwittingly or even worse, cravenly, *pro mundum* regarding the issue of beauty. Perhaps because of obvious difference of musical and artistic tastes, and how viscerally people react against what they dislike, it is easier to fudge on this seemingly ephemeral issue and tacitly deny that absolute beauty also exists.

This repudiation is most obvious in music and fine arts programs where its outworking is seen on walls and heard in concert halls, but its miasma is first detected in the youngest classroom. CS Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*, “I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of elementary text books.” Not only book selection, but how we ask students to interact with the texts will teach even the youngest student about the relative authority of the author and his reader. Lewis gives an example where students are taught to treat an author’s writing about the aesthetic qualities of a given idea or object as mere subjective assertions about the individual’s emotional state rather than objectively valid statements.

Lewis describes the impact of relativizing beauty, “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate, and bid the geldings be fruitful.” In other words, a classical Christian school culture without value judgements and void of aesthetic judgements of beauty will produce a generation of clever devils at worst and uncultivated students at best. John Dewey (1859-1952) was the most important modern

education theorist and he valued process over content which marginalized beauty to the realm of subjective and individual preferences. Therefore, a declaration about the value of certain art or music is no different than a stated preference for mint chocolate chip ice cream.

So, dear reader, before you read further, realize that your sensibilities may well be challenged. We all, more than likely, grew up with many of the aesthetic appreciations that will be confronted here below. We are all caught in the vortex of modern American heresies, and, as Francis Schaeffer argued, the arts are at the epicenter.

Musical Education in Lower School

Cultivating student affections to love great music and fine art begins in the lower school through “a holistic and essential musical education.” Music is one of the four Quadrivium liberal arts. Clark and Jain write in *The Liberal Arts Tradition*, “Coming for the same root word as museum, the musical education was an education in wonder. It formed the heart and the moral imagination of the youth... It is not subject matter so much as it is the poetic mode of knowing that distinguishes musical education from later study.” Musical education in Lower School is pre-critical knowledge and pre-analytical knowing that sets a foundation for future study. Similar to early gymnastic education, musical education, teaches proper passions more than it teaches skills and content.

Songs should not be confined to music courses, because they have a way of training the affections that is foundational for both moral and intellectual virtue. Plato taught that music would bring the reason and the passions into accord. For children in the lower grades, laws and rules may have less of an impact on the formation of their affections than songs and rhythms do. This is similar to the common appeal to the Grammar Stage in Dorothy Sayers’ understanding of the Trivium in which students enjoy songs and memory as they acquire the building blocks of understanding. Clark and Jain write, “The body and the soul are united in such a way that failure to cultivate the capacities inherent in either is futile to cultivate the whole person.” Musical education is not just for the ear but also

for the eye and the whole body. A truly Christian *paideia* must take this into account.

Clark and Jain write, “Musical education is soul craft. The songs we sing, the stories we read, and the art we make and admire form our souls.” The implications of this for lower school students are endless, but here are three practices to consider.

Practice 1: Hang beautiful curriculum-specific art in the lower school classrooms. Most classes are filled with alphabet posters, calendars, clocks and timers, lists of student jobs, and cartoon animals. The lower school curriculum is grounded in truth and goodness but the visible curriculum is so often void of beauty. It is okay that the classroom is functional, but utilitarian aesthetics are insufficient for the classical Christian classroom. Encourage teachers to reduce the quantity of functional items and increase the number of beautiful portraits displayed. For example, Egyptian art is quite common in second grade or even a wall-sized mural of the pyramids. If one end of aesthetic spectrum was a dining room and the other was a *Chic Fil A* play place, the Lower School classroom should feel more like someone’s home with lamps, portraits, and rugs. Think less Daffy Duck and Mickey Mouse and more Da Vinci and Caravaggio.

Practice 2: Memorize rhythmic songs and poetry and incorporate chants for learning to memorize the books of the Bible or specific poems or passages. This is already widely practiced in most classical Christian schools as evidenced by the many chants, songs, and sayings on the ACCS Member Resource Center. It is always a delight to see a 1st grade class recite a poem at assembly in front of the whole school and watch the 4th grade students recite it as well, because they still remember it.

Practice 3: Read books that form the moral imagination of your students and avoid what Charlotte Mason calls ‘twaddle and riffraff.’ Dr. Dan Coupeland of Hillsdale College writes, “The issue of ‘character education’ goes much deeper than the latest ‘techniques.’ Character education is really about cultivating the moral imagination, a process that takes time, patience, and the right kinds of experiences.” Children need to be immersed in stories where the right virtues are made to be appear

beautiful in the lives of the characters; these stories form the pre-critical musical foundation that will later awaken the analytical and moral capacities for study.

Sir Phillip Sydney, the English poet, courtier, scholar, and soldier who is remembered as one of the most prominent figures of the Elizabethan age is reported to have said, “if a man were permitted to make all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of a nation.”

Dostoyevsky wrote, “Beauty will save the world.” A foundational love for beauty must begin to awaken in lower-school if the goals in the subsequent stages are to be achieved. If beauty is so central to the formation of a healthy civilization, this means that musical and aesthetic education, must not be considered optional add-ons in the overall curriculum of a classical Christian school.

Principles for School Ethos: Music and Fine Arts

Every school has an ethos — the characteristic spirit of a culture. Does your school feel more like a library or a college basketball game; does it feel like a garden, a museum, or a busy bus station? While a whole host of factors impact a school’s overall ethos (manners, procedures, decorum), a school’s approach to music and fine art can impact them all. Here are some principles to guide decisions related to music and fine arts.

Principle 1: Scheduling and Planning: Evident in your approach to music and fine arts will be history, theory, appreciation, as well as performance/production. Littlejohn and Evans write, “Music is thoroughly arithmetical, from its tones and octaves to its use of rhythm and time to its harmonic frequencies. Further, it is well understood that facility in either math or music facilitates ease of learning in the other. Such facility for the two is best gained simultaneously...Listening to certain music has been proven to increase the precision of surgeons during an operation.” Although smaller schools may have more limited offerings in music and art, plan incremental steps towards a more robust program. Musical and aesthetic education has a way of illuminating the various colors and shapes of the other disciplines of learning. These teachers also know every student in the school and have ways of

shedding new light on students that homeroom and discipline-specific upper school teachers might miss.

Principle 2: Families and Fine Arts: While it may be common to hang the student art of cotton-ball snowmen, this is not high art that elevates the aesthetic appetites of students and parents. It also may be popular to play contemporary Christian music at an event or while students are working, but this does not necessarily cultivate the affections for higher forms of music. As with all art, the qualities are determined by suitability to a purpose, and whether that purpose is high or vulgar (common). For example, while rock and roll is suitable to some purposes, and it may be well done by the Beatles or The Beach Boys, or may be of poor quality like a junior high garage band, it serves a vulgar (common) purpose. In other words, it is not suitable for higher purposes. This is a point often missed.

Students get plenty of pop music, younger children are saturated in Disney songs, and, most get an excessive dose of contemporary “worship music,” popular in most churches today. But it doesn’t stop there. Just about every form of modern music targets base affections— country, rock, jazz, choral, Broadway, etc. These forms of music are most often, to lesser or greater degrees, designed to appeal to our base humanity— our fleshliness. It’s why we naturally find them attractive. Higher music takes cultivation. It points to the divine, which makes it less accessible, but more valuable as we grow to love it. Previous generations believed higher (transcendent) affections were to be cultivated because they were not natural. Thus, they referred to classical or other forms of high music as “getting culture.”

When it is suggested that it is better to train in some music and not others, resistance is automatic. Modernity has taught us that all art is subjective, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. However, if our goal is to recover the Western classical and Christian tradition, and it is, we must reconsider how we treat all art, particularly music, and seek to cultivate affection for high, transcendent musical taste. Teachers offering parents ideas on books to read, films to watch, and music to listen to will help them bring classical Christian education into the home so that the cognitive dissonance that students may feel between school and home addressed. Principle 3: Beautiful Uniforms:

Wearing uniforms is not the eleventh commandment in Scripture, but it is part of our overall approach to form unified communities that share aesthetic affections. While parents might push back if the cost is too high, it is certainly worth it, for example, to see upper school students in their jackets, because it has an elevating effect. Students naturally have poor tastes and enjoy inferior forms of style, but we want to cultivate in them an enjoyment and a taste for that which is objectively admirable.

Principle 4: Concerts and Performances: Many schools will stage concerts around Christmas and Easter. Being aligned to the church calendar makes sense, and is an opportunity to show a wider constituency your approach to our Faith, music, and art. Choose venues that highlight transcendence like a sanctuary at a traditional church (think Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Anglican). For performances, the annual staging of *Antigone* and/or a Shakespearian play digs deep wells of shared community experience and a love of both serious and comedic drama.

Mortimer Adler wrote, “We think that education should result in the formation of a virtuous moral character, one that desires aright or chooses as it ought with regard to good and evil. To carry this one step further, from the spheres of truth and goodness to the sphere of beauty, we need only say that education should result in the formation of good taste so that the individual comes to enjoy that which is admirable and to derive more enjoyment from objects that have greater intrinsic excellence or perfection.” Our goal in classical Christian education refines this sentiment even further—education should result in the cultivation in our students of a love for what God loves and a hatred for what God hates.