Achieving the Aims of the Christian Liberal Arts College through Musical Study

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By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV)

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8, NRSV)

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists” and that “there is no God but one.” …Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (1 Corinthians 8:4, 7b-9, NRSV)

I

This paper will serve two ends. First I will articulate specific ways in which professors of music might help to achieve the goals of the Christian liberal arts college, both in general terms and with reference to my particular teaching tasks. Then, I will share how teaching in the context of a Christian liberal arts college informs, challenges, and enriches my work as a teacher of music.

I believe that we who teach in the general area of music, including the sub-disciplines of theory, history, literature, appreciation, performance, composition, and education, are ideally situated to help our students attain the goals of the Christian liberal arts education. What are these goals? While we continually seek to refine our answers to this question, it seems that all of us at the Christian liberal arts college – students, teachers, administrators, and trustees – do commonly agree on several aims. In his paper “Eight Hundred Years of University Learning: Two Pictures of the Liberal Arts,” published in A Conversation on the Liberal Arts (The Institute for the Liberal Arts, Westmont College, August 2001), Stephen T. Davis lists eight characteristics he feels graduates of a liberal arts college should have. The first four of the eight he describes as having “to do primarily with learning and character,” including intellectual breadth, intellectual depth, sensitivity to diversity, and character and integrity. The remaining four Davis describes as “skills more than items of learning,” including critical thinking skills, communication skills, technological literacy, and leadership and interpersonal skills. Although we who teach at a Christian liberal arts college might articulate our goals somewhat differently than does Davis, and would certainly add one or more in the area of Christian formation, I believe the majority of us who teach at Westmont College, where I work, and many other Christian liberal arts colleges would be largely willing to affirm Davis’s list. While the study of the various areas of music can contribute to all these aims, I think such studies are particularly helpful in
encouraging sensitivity to diversity, cultivating character and integrity, and developing skills in critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal relations.

My own institution has, in a variety of documents, published the aims we have for our students. Some idea of these aims can be found in a list of eighteen answers to the question “What Do We Want For Our Graduates?” found in the Westmont College 1995 Long Range Plan. An introductory paragraph states that “to aspire to be a college of excellence is to aspire to produce people of excellence,” asserting the value of a Christian liberal arts education and “the significant role such an education can play in transforming lives” and yielding “positive attitudes.” The list of qualities we desire for our graduates includes “tolerance and appreciation of differences,” and the ability to “function self-critically.” We also want them to have an “appreciation of worship,” and a “[large] vision of Christianity.” We feel that our students should be, at some times, “agents of transformation” and at others “agents of preservation.” We also hope that our graduates will make “choices that reflect a sense of wonder, delight, and appreciation of the marvels of the natural world and the treasures of human culture.” From these excerpts we can deduce that the goals of a Westmont College education include enabling people to be transformed into who God wills them to be: human beings with a healthy appreciation of and desire for excellence, who are characterized by positive attitudes, tolerance toward diverse people, ideas, and expressions, who are able to think critically and to be self-critical, with a broad view of Christian faith and worship, and who are able to find joy in the beauty of God’s creation as expressed through human culture. It appears that Westmont College sees itself as engaged in the process of fundamentally transforming students’ lives.

But to what extent can Christian virtues and positive attitudes be learned in the context of a college experience? How much of the student’s character is inculcated (or genetically programmed) long before she reaches her college years? These questions remain open, yet we who are committed to the mission of the liberal arts typically assert that building character is central to, and perhaps somewhat unique to, the liberal arts ideal. And it is precisely in this area of character formation and the development of Christian sensibilities and virtues that the disciplines of music play such a large role. I will turn first to some specific examples of ways the study of music can influence the development of character and the capacity for self-criticism.

II

To turn back to Davis’s list of the aims of the liberal arts college, above, we might consider the role of the Christian college in the development of character, specifically Christian character. In the book of Galatians, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In the “Christian Orientation” section of the Westmont report Combined Report on Learning Outcomes and Implementation Strategies (Westmont College Futures Committee, October 1997), we list other Christian virtues, such as courage, prudence, and hope. While conscientious scholarship in a variety of academic disciplines may reinforce such attitudes, it seems that the study of music performance, both individual and corporate, is uniquely equipped to do so.

Courage, self-control, faith, patience, and hope are all required of those who undertake to master an instrument, as progress may take place only over long periods of time and through prolonged effort. Students learn that prudence is essential to budgeting time for practice and rehearsal and to maintaining good health and adequate physical and mental energy. Their love for music is tested as they continue to discover over time all that is required of them to achieve
excellence. We trust that those engaged in the struggle will find increasing joy in the Lord, recognizing God as the source of all, including music. Participation in ensembles exercises other Christian virtues, as students are required to practice self-control, patience with their colleagues, and love for one another. Failings in any of these areas adversely affect the morale of the group and the quality of its performance. Students in performance also practice integrity by being responsible for their own work and success, which is relatively easy to assess in the context of composition and performance, when their shortcomings soon become apparent.

The study of music, particularly music performance and composition, nurtures the discipline of critical thinking and the capacity for self-criticism. I believe that who we are as musicians represents who we are as people, therefore how students behave in the musical arena, particularly in their practice and performance, provides them much opportunity for self-examination. The effective teacher encourages healthy, ongoing self-criticism, which enables students to teach themselves, continuing to evaluate their work and continuing to learn beyond their time in the studio.

III

Now, to my particular tasks in fulfilling the goals of the Christian liberal arts college. As a teacher of Western music history and literature, world music, music in Christian worship, vocal performance, and choral performance, as a performer, and as a worship leader, I see myself as ideally positioned to help in achieving these aims. In my work in the classroom, in rehearsal, in performance, in the vocal studio, in colloquia, and as a leader in community worship, I find myself often in positions to help the community – including students, staff, and colleagues – appreciate, celebrate, and critically assess the nature of excellence, to promote diversity and to discover and achieve excellence in the context of that diversity, and to critically evaluate what music, in its many styles and forms, means to us.

Particularly in my work as a teacher of music performance, I can help the community to articulate the value and meaning of excellence. In Philippians 4, I believe, Paul is exhorting us to dwell upon excellence in such a way that it becomes part of who we are. Here, I think it is important to know what Paul might mean by excellence, as opposed to how the idea is often defined. Excellence I take to be a relative term, dependent upon context and situation. We are called to dwell upon and to strive simply for excellence, not a “standard of excellence,” that is fixed. This attitude toward excellence is particularly helpful in the practice and performance of music, where excellence might mean to one individual or group something completely different than it does to another. Students of music performance are intimately acquainted with the task of striving for an excellence that is measured only by their own abilities and efforts. Thus, the practice and performance of music become instructive for the living of all of life, in which we are called to excellence that is defined only by our personal limitations.

This concept of excellence is particularly helpful when it comes to discovering what is “pleasing,” what is “commendable,” and what is “worthy of praise” in a diverse world. We are faced with tremendous musical diversity, so that it may seem a difficult task to separate the wheat from the chaff, to determine what is truly good and pleasing and not just what seems right to us and pleases us. Often, it is possible to determine what is excellent by observing the attitude of those who bring it about. Even without familiarity with a particular musical language or style, we can sometimes be made aware of its excellence by observing how it is performed. Of course, such observation often involves sustained interaction, which may, in turn, bring about the
capacity for the discernment born of increased familiarity. We may either take the time and make
the effort to become conversant with languages or styles of music foreign to us, which enables us
to appreciate diversity the more, or we may rely on the judgment of those steeped in other
languages or styles, enabling us to better appreciate a diversity of attitudes and aesthetics. In the
process, we become less prone to make quick judgments regarding certain music’s, because we
know that they are products of people creating with a variety of intentions, limited always by
their particular abilities.

Regarding the meaning and nature of music, it seems many of us are liable to fall into error in
attributing to music more power than it intrinsically possesses. Indeed, to some extent the view
held by the classical Greek philosophers still holds sway. They believed that certain kinds of
music, when experienced over a period of time, evoked not only psychological and emotional
changes in listeners, but also shaped human behaviors. While music may induce certain emotional
states, I consider our behaviors to be still a matter of choice. I believe music to be, on its own,
value-less, not possessing any inherent moral qualities, and that any power that music possesses
to move us to action, for good or ill, is power we allow it, typically by the association of certain
music with certain contexts. That is to say, music is itself (apart from texts which may be
associated with it, in the case of songs) morally neutral, simply sound organized in some way.
However, music does take on moral qualities determined by the things with which it is
associated, be they song texts, the lives and activities of those who compose the music, or
situations in which the music is heard. Music’s “guilt” or “innocence,” then, is guilt or innocence
by association only.

If we Christians fail to acknowledge this about music, we run the risk of allowing music more
authority than it deserves. Music is composed by people who are, whether they know it or not,
mimicking in some way the activity of the supreme Composer. But, rather than freely enjoying
the fruits of their handiwork, we sometimes become preoccupied with what good or (usually)
what ill it might bring to those who practice, perform, and listen to it. In a sense, we allow music
the status of an idol, a mere object that possesses the power to influence behaviors. However, as
Paul reminds us, in 1 Corinthians, “there is no God but one,” who has given us dominion over
idols, freeing us from their influence.

In the same breath, though, Paul reminds us that, as food offered to idols bears their stigma,
music associated with certain contexts retains associations that can prove problematic for some
individuals. Whether or not its meaning is determined by context, music can be powerfully
suggestive, sometimes evoking strong responses in us. For this reason, we take it for granted that
certain music is appropriate to certain occasions and for certain purposes, and it is here where
critical assessments can be made. We must remember that music is powerful, even though it is
we who allow it power, and that our “liberty” might “somehow become a stumbling block” to
others or, in our arrogance, even to ourselves.

While it is important to have a healthy perspective on music as we encounter it in all facets of
our lives, I think it is especially helpful to talk about music in these terms when we discuss its
use in our worship. Often, we encourage the use of or dismiss a certain sort of music in the
context of worship based on the associations it has for us. Sometimes these associations extend
beyond the music itself, even to the manner in which it is performed. As we talk about music in
our lives and in times devoted to worship, to the extent that it is possible to recognize music as
morally neutral, we may be enabled to free it from its associations, and evaluate it more
objectively.
And yet, what do particular types of music represent? To whom? Granted, musical sounds, in and of themselves are morally neutral, but what of the singing of God’s majesty in the style of soft rock? And, while we are to varying degrees removed from the practice of and unfamiliar with the aesthetic of Gregorian chant, might most of us, steeped in a culture governed by Western aesthetics, find in chant something of God’s mystery and “otherness?” Far beyond the issues of what sort of music students, faculty, and staff find appealing, or relevant, the questions regarding music’s culturally-derived meaning are those that need to be addressed in the context of the particular Christian community that is the liberal arts college.

IV

Finally, I will address how working at a Christian liberal arts college informs my particular tasks. Keeping in mind Paul’s exhortation to think about whatever is pleasing, commendable, excellent, and/or worthy of praise, I am motivated to enable all involved in the life of the college not only to consider what can be determined to have these attributes, but also to consider modes for thinking about them. I take Paul’s encouragement to mean not merely assessing, discussing, analyzing, or deconstructing, but also simply experiencing. Particularly in my classes, rehearsals, and private lessons, I am motivated to help my students contemplate excellence, not only in works of art that have come to us, but also in our rendering of them. I can guide students in answering questions such as: why does this piece of music sustain our interest? what makes this piece of music successful, insofar as we are able to determine its objective? and why does this music move us? Then, understanding something of how the music works, those involved in performing music can struggle with what it means to achieve excellence in performance. In a smaller way, I hope that something of this effort and struggle communicates to the larger college community something of that which is excellent, allowing us all to “think about these things.”

Clearly, music faculty at a Christian college such as Westmont can serve as resources for the chapel music program, not only as practitioners, but also as thinkers about what are the meanings of Christian worship and the role that music plays in that worship. Certainly these questions are considered in the context of classes and colloquia of various sorts, but the chapel venue can itself be a forum for broader understanding in these areas. However, I think it is best when the chaplain’s or campus pastor’s office and the music department of a Christian college retain their autonomy, even while influencing each other in matters of worship. While the music department will be oriented more toward the academic, the focus of the campus pastor’s office will be more on the pastoral. The interests of these two entities, while not antithetical, may tend toward different ends in the context of campus chapel worship. While they might influence each other in significant ways, a helpful balance can be achieved if the parties continue to hear and reflect upon each other’s particular concerns.

Working at a Christian liberal arts college, I am motivated to help students to become good citizens of the nation, of the world, and of the kingdom. To equip them to prosper in these three communities, I enable students to develop a more critically appreciative view of themselves and of others by helping them to effectively explore diverse musical cultures languages, and styles. By grappling with a variety of culturally-defined aesthetics, I hope my students become accustomed to seeing from other points of view, and more able to see themselves and their own culturally-informed presuppositions with new eyes.

There are some contexts in which students are able to experience modes of Christian worship different from those with which they are familiar. In both chapel worship and courses that deal
with music and worship, I hope that students will gain appreciation for these other styles, in some cases assimilating them into their own practice. In so doing, I trust that students at a place like Westmont College will continue to grow in their understanding of the breadth and depth of God’s family.