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STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY



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STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

A key component at the beginning stages of learning is the desire to comprehend what is observed. In the field of music, Ethnomusicologist Benjamin Brinner asks a basic question that any appreciative observer of a master musician considers, “How do they do what they do?”¹ If cultivated, this initial wonder leads the way for studying.

In my past four and a half years of teaching at Southwestern Adventist University I have sought to recognize and cultivate the initial wonder that every student brings with them to the classes and activities I teach and facilitate. This begins with an affirmation of the excitement to learn they feel as they enter my class for the first time, followed by a challenge to recognize that the learning they will do should exist on a three-part continuum of imitation, assimilation and innovation.

This continuum is at the heart of everything I teach, and it is the standard to which I hold my own preparation and scholarship. It is also what motivates me to continually seek out new methods and resources for presenting the canon of knowledge which forms the

¹ Benjamin Brinner, *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan And The Theory of Musical Competence And Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.



heart of my craft and discipline with integrity. Imitation, assimilation and innovation should be found in all aspects of academic music scholarship. Whether by applying the conventions of performance practice, mastering the technicalities of music theory and compositional form, or contextualizing the cultural and historical nuances through musicology, all successful musicians must balance respect for the history and integrity of their craft with creative and relevant public performance.

IMITATION

I believe the first step of all learning is imitation. From our observations we become inspired to be able to also do what we have been inspired by. Once this occurs and a student is committed to the process, the natural impulse is to connect with other practitioners they can imitate. Brinner's introduction to his book highlights the importance of outside influence for developing musicians specifically:

A person may study and practice alone for hours on end, but certain aspects of musical practice can be absorbed and developed only through interaction with other musicians as a student, a peer, a follower or leader in an ensemble, even as a rival in a solo tradition.²

² Brinner, 3.

On the surface this is perhaps the easiest and most natural element of the continuum because it requires very little of the teacher aside from being someone worth emulating. In the field of music, however, it is especially important for recruiting students for private instruction and is the primary reason we must stay active and elite in our performance area.

I have recently begun recording solo and collaborative performances at a much higher rate. This has helped hone my skills and cast a wider net for my contributions to the study of organ performance at Southwestern. The benefits are many including increased awareness for the organ as an instrument, publicity for the university, connection with potential student recruits, and the elevation of my pedagogical level. My goal in the next few years is to maintain a rigorous recording pace to continue to move these benefits forward.

ASSIMILATION

Assimilation is the natural result of imitation. In my case, my improvisation teacher, Sietze de Vries, presented a method of instruction which provided a framework easily transferred to any music. The system begins by strictly harmonizing melodies in four parts to gain proficiency in that musical language and its rules. From there the expert gives basic modeled forms that must be imitated exactly in length and progression, but are transposed and harmonically adapted to different melodies. Finally, the student must find compositions to break down through analysis. The goal of this process is to



assimilate a set of tools in the given style that can be utilized during the course of an improvisation.

Another way of describing this process is to compare it with learning to read a language. A person first learns the alphabet and then how the letters are combined to form words. Next they are able to create words that describe things, and eventually they learn to combine many words in various ways to communicate unique ideas.

Assimilation is an obvious goal of education, and where most teachers spend the majority of their time. For the past several years I have focused on establishing best practices towards this goal for my private instruction, classroom instruction and laboratory environments such as ensembles and collaboration. I have made it a priority to not simply rely on existing texts and semester lesson plan outlines, but to pull together a variety of resources in each subject area which work together in reinforcing the depth of understanding for my students.

Going forward I plan to continue to focus on assembling resources and approaches that guide students towards fully assimilating knowledge and skills which can then be channeled towards achieving their personal plans and aspirations. Furthermore, it is my goal to provide them with as many outlets for practical application as possible, both on campus and in the larger community. I want them to fully understand concepts and ideas in such a way as to translate them into tangible and useful action within their field.

INNOVATION

The final element of my educational philosophy is innovation, whereby knowledge gained is used to imbue a unique character to the perspective and output of the individual. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect to achieve because it requires extra time and investment on my part to help each student feel confident and empowered to discover and express their unique ideas. Continuing to find ways to unlock this freedom in students is my primary teaching goal, and is absolutely crucial to my definition of success as an educator. Simply put, I feel my pedagogical purpose is to teach students how to teach themselves. To that end, my primary goal over the next few years is to intentionally increase the amount of time I invest in teaching the skill of improvisation across the

curriculum in my field. No other skill comprehensively draws on all three elements of imitation, assimilation and innovation simultaneously in the ways that improvising does.

Steven Blum reinforces the power of learning to improvise in his description of a Near Eastern definition of musical art which reinforces the results of the progression from observation to innovation. The fourth-century approach in al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabir* describes a three-stage progression that incorporates relationships between sense perception, imagination, and reasoning in each stage.³ In al-Fārābī's model, the third and highest stage of musical competence is innovative and is comprised of musicians with an ability to give not only imaginative performances but also to be "capable of stating their reasons for each decision." Such abilities are only possible when the players have complete physical and intellectual control over their music making through the diligent and comprehensive study of all aspects of music scholarship.



³ Stephen Blum, "Recognizing Improvisation," in *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33.

In conclusion, my goal as an educator is to help each student I encounter connect the initial wonder that brought them to my classroom with a comprehensive process towards becoming a complete and actualized learner.

Modern musicians should first draw from the countless ideas and techniques preserved in our vast heritage of composition through the practice of imitation. They should then seek to assimilate the particulars of notational language, form and historical context to inform their performance. And, most importantly, they should learn how to use all of these resources in innovative ways so as to enhance their musicianship beyond a rote interpretation of a printed page.

The most important contribution I can achieve in my teaching moving forward is to continue helping my students bridge the gap of preserving the important cultural legacy of their academic discipline while simultaneously maintaining creative independence and self-reliance.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Devon Howard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, looped 'D' and 'H'.