

## Romance

### Narrative Assignment

#### *Piece*

I had an epiphany in my office at home during the second year of my undergraduate studies. I always referred to it as 'my office' even though it was really just a spare room in my parents' house that I had crammed my computer desk and guitar equipment into. It took hours of reluctant practice until I finally played the opening phrase of Paganini's *Romance* perfectly and with an expression that I was happy with. This moment defined my understanding of classical guitar and shaped an appreciation for the classical genre; my perception had been assaulted at its core. Prior to this moment, I didn't 'get it' like I always had with electric guitar and metal music, and thus my practice routines transformed from an obligation to something driven from passion and personal interest.

My options upon entering the music program at McMaster were to study either classical or jazz guitar in the compulsory Solo Performance courses. I opted for classical study through an understanding of the symbiosis between heavy metal and classical theory, as well as a severe disinterest in jazz (which still exists to this day). I was initially apprehensive, disappointed, and frustrated with my experience as a classical guitarist; I detested the difficulties in learning a different right hand technique, the tribulations of growing fingernails for tonal purposes, and an apparent lack of enjoyable repertoire. *Romance* spoke to me through its melodies, sensibly positioned harmonies, and correlations to metal ballads I was already familiar with. At the time it was the most beautiful piece that I knew and it effectively reactivated a lot of my prior knowledge and skills that I had gained from studying the things that I enjoyed. I became determined to play this piece to the best of my ability and to communicate with my instructor, ensuring that I was able to gain similarly positive experiences from my repertoire to come. At the end of the year I was one of very few students to ever score the highest possible grade on the summative jury performance, and more importantly had developed a genuine interest in the repertoire and style.

The music program at McMaster, like many others, requires a successful audition for admittance. This consists of an ear training test, a playing test, an interview with the head of the faculty, and a written theory test. Upon my initial audition I was drastically unprepared and had considered not attending at all, but was convinced otherwise by all of my peers. My only shortcoming was in the written theory test which applicants are permitted to take twice. Without taking any music courses in grades 11 or 12, I was lacking the knowledge that I needed and sought help from my high school music teacher. My teacher, who I had done a co-op with in my post-grad year at high school, put me through a crash course of two years worth of music theory over the course of two weeks and had done so with her own resources in sessions that we had at her home. With her generous assistance, I was accepted into the program and was enabled to pursue my passion. The personal success that I gained through my experience with *Romance* was met with an equally as devastating loss when my teacher passed away from brain cancer. I intended to perform *Romance* at her funeral service as a tribute to her memory and her contributions to my identity, but was regrettably unable to attend due to the demands of my program and difficulties in balancing academic, work, and personal schedules. Since then I have worn my two favorite phrases from *Romance* on my arm, permanently tattooed into my skin as a reminder of my experience as a music student and of what my teacher did for me. The piece evolved from a figure of musical and personal development to a symbol, representing my experiences as a young adult and the potential impact a music teacher can have on their students.

### ***Analysis***

My epiphany illustrates the possibility of making personal connections with content that is seemingly unrelated to one's interests. This doesn't necessarily mean that it's always going to happen, but the chances increase when prior knowledge is activated and applied in exciting ways. At the time, I was unaware of the affect that classical music would have on my musical identity and I'm grateful for its impact. I also didn't understand why the style hadn't resonated with me before this time; this is something that I have learned to reflect on as a teacher candidate. It became important that I explore classical guitar with the same enthusiasm that I exhibited toward other genres, and I came to value diversity as an important trait of musicianship. This is a significant development for someone who fostered a very fixed mindset and a bias for a particular genre.

There's a copious amount of articles suggesting that a teacher must first take care of themselves before tending to the needs of students. The fact that my teacher did the exact opposite is what got me to where I want to be. In these particular circumstances, it could be fair to say that my teacher was actually compromising her own well-being by tending to my issues. As such, it's evident to me that teaching music must go far beyond a passion for the subject and a passion for students; it must derive from a passion for musical development and discovery. My teacher believed that my relationship with music would allow me to succeed and grow into a promising figure. I cannot say for certain if her beliefs were accurate, but I can say that music has a substantial role in developing every aspect of myself, and that I am driven by a passion of sharing that experience with others.

### ***Implications for Teaching***

A singular moment can drastically alter a student's perception. This can be in regard to a plethora of areas, be it course appreciation, learning skill development, or personal growth; my teacher's passing completely altered the meaning of my experience with *Romance* and shaped it into a philosophy of teaching, as opposed to just an appreciation for learning. It is vital to consistently strive toward planting positive memories in the minds of students and to foster growth, regardless of the cost.

I have often carried a sarcastic demeanor around with me, and have occasionally made the mistake of bringing it into my teaching. The solution is to allow my passion for musical development to consume my presence, both inside and outside of the classroom as my teachers did for me. Wasiak claims, "for *effective* music teaching and music making, passion is key" (2013, p. 55). I supportively claim that this is true for the teaching of any subject, and that the 'contagious' nature of passion is the most powerful tool for inspiring students. It was my teacher's passion that enabled mine to grow and I have already seen it have an effect on some of my past guitar students. I intend on fostering this mindset in my own future classrooms to instill a sense of wonder in all areas of musical study, and to pull my students toward their own understanding of musical identity. If I'm ever faced with difficulty or forget what this means, I only need to glance at my right arm.

### **Reference**

Wasiak, E. B. (2013). *Teaching instrumental music in Canadian schools*. Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press.