

For Anderton Music is Much More Than Entertainment

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“People like to say that music is the universal language. I don’t know if I necessarily agree with that, but I think every culture certainly has music in some capacity, and what it can reveal about the culture is why I find musicology so fascinating.” That is how Dr. Abby Anderton explains why she became so interested in looking at music as part of culture.

A native of Oil City, Pennsylvania, Anderton obtained her master’s and doctoral degrees in Historical Musicology from the University of Michigan. Today she is an assistant professor of music in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

One wonders whether the commercialization of music through all kinds of media risks erasing the music that has been so distinctive for many communities. “In my world music class, we talked about doing fieldwork, and I had my students write up sort of a mock fieldwork plan. If they could go to any country in the world and make recordings, where would they go and what would their methodologies be? The idea of capturing the sonic archive is something that I think students find really fascinating and really interesting,” says she.

Anderton has concentrated on studying the music of post-World War II Germany, and that may seem surprising. After the devastation of the war, one might imagine that there wasn’t much to study, but that is not what she found. “When I was living in Berlin, I became really interested in how Germans, post 1945, used their music to understand themselves and understand the world after the horrific events that had happened there during the Second World War. Based on her findings she then published a book titled “Music among the Ruins: Classical Music, Propaganda, and the American Cultural Agenda in Berlin (1954-1949).”

Among the things she discovered was that the US government employed “music officers,” who would monitor musical life, promote certain



Dr. Anderton at the piano.

Photo by Dr. Abby Anderton

American works, and make sure German music wasn’t misused as Nazi propaganda. “They brought in people like Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copeland (both Jewish), who they thought would promote ‘American democratic values,’” says Anderton. “They also reintroduced Jewish composers like Mendelssohn and promoted a group called the ‘Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra,’ made up of Holocaust survivors. This period is really rich in nuanced and different groups and peoples that you would think would be quite antagonistic to one another but were working together in the service of music.”

Anderton’s upcoming book is titled “Rubble Music: Occupying the Ruins of Postwar Berlin.” To what extent does she think that the Allies in general, and the Americans in particular, really had a clear agenda when they used music to de-Nazify Germany, and to what extent they were successful? “There was kind of a

tension in the American military about music as entertainment and music as culture. Some of the initiatives certainly fell flat, so they would try to put on concerts of Bach, Beethoven, and David Diamond, a fairly unknown American composer, and the German public responded in ways that were not always extremely positive.”

Anderton has also worked on music in films, particularly in American films made about the Holocaust after the Second World War. “I recently finished an article about these early documentary films about the Holocaust that the Allies made. You can imagine many of the images are quite difficult to look at, and at the time in 1945 this footage was unknown to people outside of a small circle. What I was recently working on is the way that this footage was scored,” says she.

Although many of us know very well how music is used today to convey emotions or

memorable sentiments, as in the case of movies such as “Star Wars” or “Schindler’s List,” this approach was used by the occupying military in Germany to emphasize the horror of Nazi atrocities. “What is interesting is that much of the footage is footage that appears in atrocity films, but each occupier used different music. So the Russians might use Tchaikovsky, the Americans might use silence, and the French might use Schumann. I’m thinking about why these kinds of choices were made.”

This is interesting because one thinks of the 1979 movie “Apocalypse Now,” in which a helicopter attack is accompanied by Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries.” In a way, it is making a connection between this war-like machine and Fascism. After all, Wagner was an anti-Semitic composer who was idolized by Hitler. Not only that, but the very same piece was used for the 1915 silent movie “The Birth of a Nation,” which exalted the Ku Klux Klan.

The scenes in those movies where that piece is played wouldn’t be the same without that music. No new piece of music could produce the same effect.

Anderton has a very clear opinion on this subject. “People have actually said that Wagner was the first film music composer, and I have to say I do agree with this, because whenever I hear his music in film, it’s so evocative. I think another example would be the 2011 movie ‘Melancholia,’ a film about the end of the earth, and they play the prelude from Wagner’s ‘Tristan und Isolde.’ It was very evocative as well.”

In addition to her research and publications, Anderton is now teaching a jazz course. “We are talking a lot about narratives of oppression or suppression, gender, race—all kinds of different things that can be rolled up and looked at through various angles of music.”

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