WHY STUDY GERMAN?

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There are a few of us professors of German literature who entered into the field through the study of music. We do not come from German ancestry. We did not initially learn German because we were exposed early in life to travel abroad. Our first love was music, and we came to learn the German language because it was important for our study of music. I am one of those people who followed a circuitous route to my profession and career. I took piano lessons since childhood. As a teenager, when I began to learn music history while studying at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto (my teacher was John Kruspe, who also was on the faculty at the University of Toronto), I soon became enthralled with the beauty and intensity of lieder (“art songs”) and German opera. I then took classes in German at high school, continued to study it as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, and went on to Princeton University to receive my MA and Ph.D. in German. One of my first German literature classes at the University of Toronto was on German Romanticism. At Princeton, I wrote my dissertation on Novalis and Hildenbrandt, and, after several years and various books, I have returned to write on the era around 1800. My current book is on how homeopathy is intellectually intertwined with German Romanticism and German Idealist philosophy.

My understanding and appreciation of music is inseparable from my knowledge of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Whenever I teach German Romanticism, either at the undergraduate or graduate level, I make sure to include a couple of sessions on music of the period. I have taken students to the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto to see The Tales of Hoffmann, discussing Rats Krepels and Der Sandmann in class beforehand. Last year, a group of students and professors from the University of Toronto who had rented a bus for a trip to see Trist, I lectured beforehand on Lekemotrice, while a colleague spoke about the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Some of our graduate students have never experienced a live opera. Most of my undergraduates have no knowledge of instrumentation, the difference between major and minor keys, let alone sonata form. I think it is as important to aid in their musical literacy and historical literacy as it is to advance their linguistic competency. Above all, I want to be able to share my experience with them, and how these composers have a love of Mozart, Schubert, and Mahler. Above all, I want to be able to share my understanding and appreciation of the field through the study of music. I think it is as important to aid in their musical literacy and historical literacy as it is to advance their linguistic competency.

In particular, the opera students and I discussed their performance of Jacques Offenbach’s The Tales of Hoffmann, an opera that, to put it mildly, has a strange and convoluted libretto with a succession of embedded narratives. It helped the students to become familiar with the stories by the German Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, even if their German was brought important to them. Think in this context, too, of Schubert’s setting of “Wanderers Nachtlied II” (“Über allen Gipfeln”), a short poem by the mature Goethe that breathes serenity, dignity, and resignation. Being able to grasp the nuances of such a poem made the difference, in the students’ words, between art and reproduction.

I recently gave a lecture at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. While there, I met with music students at the UNC School of the Arts, many of whom were MA students in the Fletcher Opera Program and were studying the German language with my colleague, Hans Gabriel. Much of what I have to say here is indebted to their comments. Let me start first with what the opera students had to say. Understanding the texts in German was important for the performance and development of the roles they sang. They had to understand the words they were singing in order to stress them. Without that understanding there was little interpretation. In singing comic roles, they had to understand the jokes. It was critical in singing to know how to put sentences together, for phrasing is crucial: they had to have a feeling for the cadence of sentences. Above all, as singers their goal was to tell stories through song. To be able to tell these stories and understand what they were singing made their performance more musical. When singing lieder they recognized that poetry cannot easily be translated, and they hated to rely on translation for this understanding. They knew that they were interpreting poetry set to music, and that they had to have an intimate acquaintance of how each individual poem worked in the original language. They appreciated the emotive associations that came with words and rhyme. All too often, people think that German is a harsh, rough sounding language. These students knew far better why should students of music learn the German language? What would German literature and culture offer them? Wouldn’t their time be better spent perfecting their performance technique? With all the time they have to spend practicing, should they be expected to take classes in German in addition? Such a view pits language against music study, placing them in competition with each other, rather than seeing them as mutually enhancing. My own thoughts on the matter are that, if there is no foreign language requirement, there is yet another excuse for a student not to learn a language that will open doors to him or her. Yes, you do not have to have background knowledge of German as a music student, but you should. And because you should, you must. If you know only one language, it makes your world smaller. If you learn another language or more, it puts your whole world into perspective. Learning German as a music student opens new avenues for you, in terms of the nuances you can bring to your music performance as well as in terms of future employment opportunities. In short, it can be considered a key component of the professionalization of a music student.

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It certainly made performing more fun! Students playing in the orchestra pit between acts could have been asked to understand what was transpiring onstage. Piano students who were accompanying the lieder grasped that they had to comprehend as deeply as possible the poetry, including the context in which it was written. How else could they accompany effectively? Drawing out such depth can mean a more meaningful experience. One student I met was an organist, and he expressed that, in a recent trip to Germany, upon seeing the ornate Baroque architecture of Bavarian churches, he recognized better the ornamented baroque music that was performed in them. He valued better the contra-puntal complexity and ornamentation of Baroque music. Sumptuous organs were built into an architecture that matched them: in his words, music and instrument were part of the architecture. I mentioned to him that the luminous tenor, Ian Bostridge, has a degree in history from Oxford and did postgraduate work at Cambridge University, during which time he studied on witchcraft in the 18th century. In order to attain Bostridge’s level of sophistication in performance, I would maintain, the truly expedient musician requires such wide-ranging command of European history. The students I met with were on right path, and it was enormously exciting to share their experiences of learning about German culture.

This cross-disciplinary interchange can be developed in so many directions. I once directed a Masters thesis on the concept of absolute music in Novalis and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. I have written a book on writing a Ph.D. dissertation on absolute music in the novels of Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. Indeed, the reflections on music in Novalis, Hoffmann, and Mann help contextualize intellectually the rise and prominence of pure instrumental music and the forms of the sonata and symphony in Germany in the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Music for these writers was the epitome of pure artistic expression, to which the literary and visual arts needed to aspire. Not surprisingly, my graduate student also had training in playing the piano, and brought her knowledge of music history to bear on the trajectory of German intellectual history. Another example: a colleague of mine in German studies who plays violin for the Des Moines Symphony pointed out to me that, in order to perform lieder and chamber music, one needs to appreciate the cultural context in which this art form came to perfection in the 19th century, the intimate, personal setting of the bourgeois home. The performers in such settings were amateurs of art, people who believed that learning an instrument or vocal lessons were a key component of their Bildung, or individual growth and development. This concept was developed in the unique German lied tradition, and I was able to share these lessons with my students.
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literary genre of the Bildungsroman. The increasing chromaticism of 19th-century music, meanwhile, reflected the German Romantic values of intensity and longing, first expressed in poetry and novels.

What is the status of Bildung today—of an all-rounded personality and education? The cross-disciplinary, interrelated endeavors I have been talking about need to be recognized and encouraged as much as possible by university teachers and administrators. But all too often our separate fields become isolated from each other and strictly compartmentalized. Only on rare occasions have I taught music students in my 30+ years of teaching German Studies, a situation that truly saddens me and for which reason I very much respect the endeavors of the Fletcher Opera program which students spending time abroad, to share in the experience of the Germans they meet, they too need to understand classical music and its tradition. But I would also like to remind students from other disciplines and their parents that, if you choose to study German at university there are many opportunities for study abroad, as well as the generous financial support to enable it. The Waterloo Centre for German Studies, for instance, has an endowed half-million dollar travel fund for University of Waterloo students, not restricted to discipline. For all students, study abroad enriches lives and opens doors to future job prospects, but particularly for...