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Teaching Disability History Through 19th Century Music and Personal Disclosure

I'm a disabled independent scholar with multiple sclerosis (PhD, Musicology, Cornell, 2014). I'm unemployed due to my disabilities. However, I often give guest lectures in humanities courses at universities around the nation (in person for Northern California universities, and on Zoom for more geographically distant ones). My interactive lectures sometimes teach disability history and music through self-disclosure. Consider the following pedagogical scene from my life as a guest lecturer:

I am teaching the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 132 (composed in 1826) in an undergraduate music history course. The students and I observe how the music oscillates between convalescence and strength. The titles of each section refer to convalescence, then strength, then convalescence again, and then strength. The students and I spend some time discussing what kind of illness or emotional state would produce these fluctuations, and how Beethoven expresses this oscillation in the music. Then I say, "This music speaks to me powerfully, because my own disabling condition follows this same pattern. I have multiple sclerosis. I often have flare-ups followed by periods of remission."

What am I doing here, pedagogically? Why am I doing it? The traditional view of an instructor is a disembodied vessel for knowledge. Why, then, am I bringing my disabled embodiment into the classroom? What is my rationale for drawing connections between myself and the music? In what follows, I will argue that what might look like oversharing is what I call a *disclosure-oriented pedagogy*. This

form of pedagogy, as I will propose, can make the course material more memorable, relevant, and connected to social justice. To this end, my presentation will explain how my guest lectures explore transhistorical resonances between my own lived experience of disability and the representations of disability in musical works.

I will begin by explaining my pedagogical theory in the context of some current literature about pedagogy, disability, and student-teacher dynamics. I will then describe specific ways in which I incorporate disclosure into my pedagogy. My case studies in this regard will be my guest lectures on Ludwig van Beethoven and Hector Berlioz. I will then conclude by summarizing the benefits, but also the potential risks and limitations, of my disclosure-oriented pedagogy.

Disclosure-Oriented Pedagogy: Theories and Contexts

Traditionally, instructors are expected to maintain a professional distance from students, to be a disembodied vessel through which knowledge is conveyed. I reject that notion. I bring my embodiment into the classroom. I do so in ways that align with some recent theories of pedagogy that challenge the notion of the disembodied and omniscient instructor. A particularly important recent contribution is a chapter called “Almost Passing: Using Disability Disclosure to Recalibrate Able-Bodied Bias in the Classroom” by Julie-Ann Scott and Kelly P. Herold.¹ Both authors have cerebral palsy. In their chapter, they explain how they “engage in personal self-disclosure for pedagogical purposes”² and Scott mentions how she extends her “privacy boundaries

¹ Julie-Ann Scott and Kelly P. Herold, “Almost Passing: Using Disability Disclosure to Recalibrate Able-Bodied Bias in the Classroom,” in *International Perspectives on Teaching with Disability: Overcoming Obstacles and Enriching Lives*, ed. Michael S. Jeffress (London: Routledge, 2018), 1-16.

² Scott and Herold 3.

as a strategic pedagogical decision.”³ Scott and Herold use their disclosures in their courses on disability in contemporary American culture.

In my disclosure-oriented pedagogy, I focus on transhistorical connections between my lived experience of disability and the representations of disability in 19th-century musical culture. Such disclosures are especially important in light of the underrepresentation of disabled faculty in academia.⁴ Many students have never interacted with an openly disabled instructor before. This is because of the ableist structures that prevent disabled people from getting hired or force them to hide their disability if they do get hired. Therefore, it’s especially important for me to disclose my disabilities so that students can learn about this often invisible topic. I offer my talk today in the hope that some of my strategies might be useful to other instructors, whether or not they are disabled. Perhaps my tactics could be flexibly adapted for other forms of disclosure.

That said, a disclaimer is important here about the potential risks of disclosing vulnerable issues in the classroom. Kathryn C. Oleson has offered “a series of questions that teachers could ask to determine whether to disclose particular identities.”⁵ One of these questions is whether you have job security. This reminds us that disclosure could be especially dangerous for untenured instructors. I personally don’t have to worry about losing my job, as I don’t have one in the first place! But that’s a potential danger to keep in mind for each instructor when weighing the costs and benefits of disclosing marginalized identities. In what follows, then, I’ll explain how I integrate disclosure into my pedagogical practice, while being mindful that not every situation would be conducive to these approaches.

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-neglected-demographic-faculty-members-with-disabilities/>

⁵ Kathryn C. Oleson, *Promoting Inclusive Classroom Dynamics in Higher Education: A Research-Based Pedagogical Guide for Faculty* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2021).

My Guest Lectures on Beethoven: His Disabilities, My Disabilities, and Cultural Attitudes Then and Now

Much of my disability-centered teaching revolves around Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). He experienced progressive hearing loss. He also had a number of other disabilities, some of which were short-term illnesses that left him temporarily debilitated. I often teach his music in ways that shed light on 19th-century attitudes toward disability, while drawing relevant parallels with the attitudes that I have encountered as a disabled person in our own 21st-century context. In this section, I will give some examples of how I structure these transhistorical lectures. Some of this material is based on my guest lecture at Valparaiso University in Fall 2021 for Professor Katharina Uhde's undergraduate music history course, an opportunity for which I am very grateful.

When giving guest lectures, one of my goals is to compare historical and contemporary forms of ableism, a term which refers to discrimination against people with disabilities. To this end, I often show the students a passage written in 1830 by the Belgian theorist François-Joseph Fétis, who wrote that “the natural disposition of his [Beethoven's] mind made him unsociable; a deplorable infirmity, the most complete deafness, a terrible misfortune for a musician....resulted in sequestering him from the world. Does the prolongation of this disability, lasting many years, result in making him forget to some extent the effect of sounds? This is what is likely, if we consider some of the harmonic successions that have been prevalent in his later productions.”⁶ I encourage the students to unpack the assumptions in this passage by Fétis. We talk about the ableist assumption that deafness is a “terrible misfortune.”

⁶ Quoted in Nancy November, *Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 36.

After the students and I have worked through the rhetoric in this passage, I bring myself in. I describe how I've experienced similar forms of discrimination almost 200 years later. As I tell the students, this often happens to me when I submit my manuscripts to book and journal editors. The editors, as I explain to the students, seem to assume that my writings will not be very good, because they're biased by knowing about my MS (which I have to disclose in advance in order to ask for accommodations). So, I suggest, in both Beethoven's time and our time, critics and editors seem to assume that a disabled person's work will be incoherent.

Beethoven's works, of course, are not incoherent at all. But they sometimes do represent disability in intriguing ways. Let's return to the example with which I began this presentation: the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132. Beethoven wrote this movement after recovering from a severe illness. This makes the movement an ideal vehicle for thinking about concepts disability, illness, and recovery in Beethoven's time. As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, this movement consists of two alternating sections. The first section is called "Holy Song of Thanks from a Convalescent to the Godhead." The second section is called "Feeling New Strength." The two sections alternate back and forth throughout the movement, creating a structure that we could call ABA'B'A". Let's listen to a bit of the A section - I've put the score in my slides for those of you who read music. Now let's hear a bit of the B section.

I offer the students a disability-centered reading of this movement. The movement, I propose, alternates between episodes of relapsing illness and periods of strength. The movement avoids the ableist idea of overcoming one's disabilities. Instead of the overcoming narrative, the movement embraces changes in mood and health as a part of life. I explain how this resonates with me on a personal level, as I

have a relapsing-remitting form of MS. Therefore, I help the students understand how I hear this movement as celebrating disability as part of the human condition, integrated into the natural flux of our bodies and minds.

In describing my reaction in this way, I am foregrounding my own situated position as a listener. I am inviting the students to understand that my embodiment shapes my listening. I encourage students to do the same when listening, but of course they aren't expected to share anything private in class. Through my disclosures, I model how to listen to music in a way that is historically informed and yet also grounded in our bodies and personal experiences.

Teaching Students About Berlioz's *Idée Fixe* and my MS-Related Anxiety Disorder

The French composer Hector Berlioz depicted obsessive thoughts in his *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). Berlioz wrote a somewhat autobiographical program for the work, in which he describes a protagonist who is obsessed with an unattainable woman. The *Symphonie fantastique* reflects Berlioz's own obsession with the Irish actress Harriet Smithson.⁷ The symphony uses a repeated musical idea to represent the protagonist's disabling obsession. Berlioz referred to this repeated idea as an *idée fixe*, a fixed idea. When I teach this piece, I draw connections between 19th-century views of psychological disabilities and my own MS-related anxieties and intrusive thoughts.

My lectures on Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* usually start with historical context about obsessive disorders as they were understood in early 19th-century France. I find it useful to assign the students some of Francesca Brittan's work, in

⁷ The extent to which the work can be read as autobiographical, however, is a matter of debate and controversy. Brittan notes that "[o]pinions on the question of autobiography in the *Fantastique* differ widely." Francesca Brittan, "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic: Melancholy, Monomania, and Romantic Autobiography," *19th-Century Music* 29/3 (Spring 2006), 233.

which she observes that obsessive thoughts would likely have been diagnosed as monomania in Berlioz's time.⁸ The students and I examine some primary sources relating to monomania, such as a 1838 case study that described monomaniacs as having "a nervous temperament and melancholy character."⁹ The students and I then listen to excerpts from Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in the context of these historical theories of obsession. Here's the first occurrence of the *idée fixe*. It returns many times throughout the five movements of the symphony. In the last movement, it is transformed into a grotesque parody of itself. This distorted repetition seems to suggest that obsessive thoughts can get out of control, which as mentioned earlier would have been connected to monomania in Berlioz's time.

After the students and I have talked about Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in its historical context, I then move into the disclosure portion of my lecture. I explain how Berlioz's musical portrait of a troubled mind resonates with my own MS-related anxiety disorder. This is the part of my lecture in which I teach the two topics-- Berlioz's psyche and my own--in tandem with each other. I disclose to the students that I have obsessive thoughts caused by MS damage in the anxiety centers of my brain. My thoughts are mainly about worrying that people might criticize me or my writing. Of course, this is not an exact parallel to Berlioz. My obsessive thoughts are not exactly the same as the obsessive love portrayed in the symphony. Moreover, the term monomania is no longer used as a diagnostic label. However, the intrusive experience of a disabling *idée fixe* is a similarity between my psyche and Berlioz's symphony. I have found that it is pedagogically effective to highlight that similarity to show both historical resonances and differences.

⁸ Brittan, "Berlioz and the Pathological Fantastic," 215.

⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 223.

Conclusion: Benefits and Risks of Disclosure-Oriented Pedagogy

As the above examples have shown, I disclose my disabilities in the classroom through identification with the course material. I show the students how I identify with the representations of disability in certain 19th-century musical works. As we have seen, these works include Beethoven's autobiographical portrayal of illness and recovery in Op. 132, as well as Berlioz's autobiographical depiction of an obsessively troubled mind in his *Symphonie fantastique*. Mark Evan Bonds has referred to "the nineteenth century's fundamental belief in the inherently autobiographical nature of music."¹⁰ Therefore, my own autobiographical disclosures are in the spirit of the material that I'm teaching.

However, a disclosure-oriented pedagogy could profitably be extended to other fields and topics, perhaps even extended to other disclosures beyond the realm of disability. As I've mentioned, though, moments of disclosure should be chosen carefully. Studies have shown that self-disclosure is most pedagogically effective when it's relevant to the course material.¹¹ Elly-Jean Nielsen and Kevin G. Alderson have reminded us that "a professor's self-disclosure remains a careful enterprise in hopes to avoid embodying unequal power and/or breeding risky impressions of closeness between teacher and student."¹²

In my experience, students have responded positively to my personal disclosures during my interactive lectures. In fact, students seem particularly eager to

¹⁰ Mark Evan Bonds, *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 161.

¹¹ Stephen Michael Kromka, *The Effects of Instructor Self-Disclosure on Students' Cognitive Learning: A Live Lecture Experiment*, Unpublished PhD Diss., West Virginia University, 2020.

¹² Elly-Jean Nielsen and Kevin G. Alderson, "Lesbian and Queer Women Professors Disclosing in the Classroom: An Act of Authenticity," *The Counseling Psychologist* 42:8 (2014), 1085.

engage with the music when they hear my self-disclosures. It is almost as though I have brought the music to life for them, by disclosing my own identification with the works and the composers. Some students even choose to share bits and pieces of their own identities, though of course I would never pressure them or expect them to do this.

At this point, though, I should acknowledge a potential limitation of my study and data. I don't have my own class in which I can develop ongoing relationships with the students. My only form of teaching is guest lectures, where I visit someone else's classes for an hour or so. Therefore, I don't have empirical data on how my approach might work across an entire semester.¹³ It's possible that too much disclosure could undermine the instructor's authority in that context. Hopefully instructors can be inspired by my ideas that strike them as useful, while modifying my disclosure-oriented pedagogy to suit their own classroom dynamics.

When the moment is right, disclosure-oriented pedagogy can be a powerful tool for amplifying marginalized identities such as disability. When I link my own disabilities to 19th-century works, I am offering the students an example of how to embrace disability-centered ways of being in the world. This can be an empowering model for disabled students, while encouraging empathy and allyship in non-disabled students. To return again to my opening example: I am doing important work when I tell students that "Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 132 resonates with my own disabilities." In these moments of disclosure, the knowledge that I am conveying

¹³ However, data from other disabled instructors suggests that self-disclosure can work successfully across an entire semester. Ashley Shew, for instance, writes compellingly about the benefits of disclosing her disabilities in the classes that she teaches: "What I've found in this approach is that students also open themselves up to talking about their disabilities, when it is relevant, without shame....The number of students who 'come out' during a given semester always makes me feel joyful: we can be disabled together." Ashley Shew, "Disability Disclosure in the Classroom," *Inside Higher Ed* 26 March 2021. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/03/26/benefits-professor-disclosing-disability-their-class-opinion> Accessed 22 August 2022.

could not necessarily be tested on an exam or cited in their term papers. This knowledge, however, carries implications for social justice that resonate beyond the classroom. It is the knowledge that disability should be named, represented, and celebrated transhistorically.