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Music Appreciation Primer

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What is Music Appreciation?

Music Appreciation is a course that has different goals depending on the instructor, the department, and the school where it is taught. In general, though, it is designed to heighten your enjoyment of music by improving your listening skills, increasing your knowledge, and exposing you to new styles and forms of music.

Most courses concentrate on what is commonly known as "classical" music; symphonies, sonatas, chamber music, opera, and other forms of art music. Many courses, though, also introduce music from different parts of the world as well as more "popular" music styles like jazz, rock, or musical theater.

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Why do I need to learn about music in order to enjoy it?

The short answer is "You don't!" You have been listening to (and probably enjoying) music for years. However, music listening is a skill, and some kinds of music are an acquired taste. In a sense music is like wine. Your first few sips might not be enjoyable, but as your experience grows you find your palate growing more and more discerning. Eventually, you develop your own taste in wine. In music appreciation, your listening palate will become more discriminating as well. You may learn that you like some kinds of music that didn't previously appeal to you. You may also learn to hear much more in the music you already know and enjoy.

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What is the difference between listening and hearing?

An excellent question! Perhaps the easiest distinction to make is that hearing is an involuntary activity that requires no active participation on your part. If you're awake and your ears are exposed to the air you WILL hear the sounds around you. When you start to pay attention to those sounds, you move from hearing to listening.

Listening itself can happen at different levels of intensity. You may carry on a conversation with a friend while still listening to music or the television. However, the amount of information or satisfaction you get from either activity is directly related to the amount of focus you give to it. In the same way, listening to music can provide many different kinds of experiences. Listening to the radio as a background to study is much different than listening to a recording through headphones or attending a live concert.

It's important to realize that all of these different kinds of listening have value. But, as in the example above, your satisfaction with the experience will depend to a large degree on your own focus.

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What is classical music? Why is it called classical?

"Classical" is a term that has two different meanings when it comes to music. In the broadest sense, classical music refers to music of certain forms and genres (symphony, string quartet, sonata, etc.) for certain instrumental combinations (solo violin, symphony orchestra, string quartet, etc) and intended for concert performance. Like many other things in the today's world this definition has become increasingly less useful as other forms and genres of music contributed to and borrowed from the traditions of classical music. In general, though, it's as good a definition as any.

In a narrower sense "classical" refers to a specific period in music history and a specific set of stylistic traits. This is the dominant music style of the late 18th century in Europe as exemplified by the music of Haydn, Mozart, and the young Beethoven. The hallmarks of this style are balance, clarity, and proportion. These qualities reflect the artistic sensibilities of ancient Greece and Rome, the so-called "Classical" civilizations.

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What's wrong with the music I like now?

Nothing, and anyone who says differently is just plain wrong (even if it's your instructor). Music in all of its forms is one of the greatest expressions of our humanity, and it all has some value at some time in some circumstance. This is not to say that all music is created equal, or that all music is equally good by some kind of universal artistic standard. The point is that all music provides some kind of window into the experience of being human. It might give pleasure, provoke dancing, encourage reflection, promote relaxation, incite anger, or inspire joy.

There are as many varieties of musical expression as there are facets of human emotion. As your awareness of and appreciation for different musical experiences grow, you'll discover new worlds of sound, artistry, and meaning.

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I can't read music. Will I be able to get anything out of this class?

Yes! In fact, this kind of course is designed expressly for someone without the ability to read music. This course is about listening and understanding. While your textbook contains a number of examples of music notation, they are not essential. You'll be able to follow the listening guides and other text material perfectly well without them.

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