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EDRD 500: Content Area Literacy

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Interview with Aletha Jacobs Director of the Carolina Alive Ensemble

Me: What types of reading do you do in your profession?

Aletha: Obviously I read music, but you know we read the poetry, cause we're singing songs, we read the text, we read the background of the tune and then you apply the feeling, and the mood of the poetry with that, just like we create scenes in our head when we're reading a story or reading poetry.

Me: What do you read about the music you're performing?

Aletha: That's what I was saying, I read the background. Even Wikipedia can be a good source. Very many times there are stories behind the music, case in point last semester Norwegian Wood, there was a big story behind that one that I actually wasn't aware of until a student brought it up.

Me: What kind of writing do you do in your profession?

Aletha: I do a lot of arranging, and writing and composing original music as well, and I'm a jazz musician as well so I compose original music every time I improvise. I take that just like an artist or something, honestly whenever I think of an arrangement, or something I've been inspired by or want to pay tribute to a particular musician or something, or these ideas just come to me same kind of way that a writer or something and then I develop and expand on it the same way we write a paragraph or a story with a central topic or idea. We're artists and we do all the same things all artists do, what is the story, what is the emotion, what am I trying to say.

Me: Who is your intended audience?

Aletha: Of course families, and other students. You want people to be interested in your music so you try to make it young and fun all at the same time. To quote Larry Wyatt "fast, slow, fast" you want to keep your performance interesting, and relatable to your audience.

Do you ever discuss what you've read or written with others?

Aletha: No, not a whole lot because I'm one of those people that don't like to co-write. I like to do my own thing, but a lot of people benefit from that, it's a good thing, I'm not saying it's a bad thing it's just not for me. Once I get an idea in my head I have to go with it, it's mine. Even with lyrics I have to say what I wanna say.

Me: In what ways do you use spoken or digital literacies?

Aletha: With technology, you can do so much on just your iPhone. One of the greatest things is how we've been singing along with recordings, I mean that just takes out so many steps. You are getting so much just from hearing the people who already know the tune, so you're getting the little nuances that otherwise would take us a lot longer to get, so I love technology there. And also to compare and contrast you know like this person sang this song this way, this person interpreted it this way, and how do I want to grow from that.

Me: What skills and strategies do you employ when working with music and in the creative process?

Aletha: Well in this context (jazz) the improv is the special strategy and the special skill that you can get from this. Obviously I go over techniques involved in helping you to become a better singer, like knowing the rhythm and melody and the harmony and what to do and how to have some fun with it, but also you know stylistically you don't remove yourself from your proper quote on quote training, and proper technique, you just use it differently. How for example bopping the end of a phrase and making the last note louder, you wouldn't do that in a traditional music setting or even when you're singing Schubert or something. There are just stylistic changes, with jazz being its own language.

Reflection:

I interviewed Aletha Jacobs, the director of the Carolina Alive Vocal Jazz ensemble. She is a jazz pianist, writes for piano, and arranges choral music. From the way she talks it is clear that she is passionate about music, and I thought she would have an interesting perspective about how literacy relates to music, particularly jazz, and how traditional literacy skills are applied to music. I think the hardest part of this process is understanding and articulating what literacy is, since it's not as simple as people may initially think. Mrs. Jacobs seemed a bit stumped by some of the questions at first, and if I were to do this again I think I could have worded my questions a bit better to help her understand these concepts. However, she still had some interesting things to say about music, and the skills required to write and understand it.

She talked about her experience with the basic tools of music literacy, such as reading and writing music. She also said that improvisation is a form of writing music, which is

something I would not have thought of. Though it is not writing in the sense that you directly notate the lines on the page, it requires you to be creative, and in some ways it is even more difficult than traditional composing since it is completely on the spot, but still requires you to have an understanding of the harmonic and melodic contour of the music you are improvising to. Because of this, she is required to have extensive knowledge of music theory, and jazz theory, and be very familiar with the chords and techniques that are used in these practices.

I also thought it was particularly interesting how she related music literacy to traditional literacy, such as reading a story. She talked about how when she is analyzing a particular song she thinks about the lyrics and the melody, and what they are trying to express in the same way the people analyze poetry or stories. She thinks about the mood, the tone, what the author or composer was thinking when they wrote this, and what the character or the piece itself is trying to say, just like we would do in a literature class, or when reading a book or a piece of poetry. In addition, she often uses traditional forms of literacy in her profession. She has to read and understand the poetry, and the lyrics of the songs she performs. She also does research on the artists she likes, and the background of the music, as that gives her a better understanding of the piece as a whole and could influence the way she performs. This is because music from different time periods, and by different composers may be performed with different techniques that are not always notated on the score, so as a musician you have to do research to find out what these techniques are and how the composer intended the song to be performed. Knowing the background behind a song can also influence the emotion you put behind it. For example, I am currently working on a song from the musical *She Loves Me* about a girl who is stood up on a date, however, if I hadn't done research on the story I would not have known that that was the scenario she was singing about, and would not have sung the song in that way. I would incorporate this into my classroom by introducing the background behind a song before

teaching it to the class, and discussing how that will influence the way they will perform the song in ways such as word stress, and the emotion they portray in their voices and on their faces as they sing.

Another way Aletha expressed her use of music literacy was through listening to recordings and comparing different performances of the same piece. With technology we have access to so many resources that weren't available to us before. You don't have to buy a ticket and go to a recital hall to hear a piece of music performed, it's right there at your fingertips. Since in music the music itself is our text, just listening to music on our phones is a way to build our literacy, and expand our knowledge of a piece of music. Mrs. Jacobs talked about how it is easier to learn the notes, and gain insight about the music by listening to it, and since aural skills are very important to music literacy this can really speed up the learning process. This idea can be incorporated into the classroom by playing a recording of a song before teaching it to the students so that they get an idea of how it will sound, and the overarching structure of the piece. I can also use it to test their aural literacy by asking them questions about what they heard in the recording after it is played.

The last form of literacy she touched on was communication. She said that jazz is its own language, and like any language it is used to communicate ideas to others. In a performance you are trying to share an idea or a feeling to the audience through the music. That is why studying the background, and understanding the poetry is important in music, so that you can take that knowledge and incorporate it into the way you play. When leading her jazz ensemble she also has to communicate these ideas about the music to the other performers. This requires her to be able to articulate her feelings about the text and the story to them, as well as let them know what musical techniques they should be using, and lead them in that as they learn and perform. This will be important to me when I am a teacher because I will have to

research and really understand the music I am teaching, and articulate those findings to my students through both my words and my gesture.

Overall there are many different skills and techniques that go into music literacy. As a musician you have to understand the theory and the motivation behind a piece of music to perform it authentically, and as a teacher this is even more important because you have to be able to convey those ideas and techniques to your students. Performing a piece of music requires more than just knowing the notes on the page. If every piece of music was sung note for note with no accents, phrasing, dynamic distinction, or emotional motivation behind it, music would lose its meaning. It is these unique differences and use of musicality that allows a song to come to life, and makes music a universal language that can convey a feeling to anyone who listens regardless of their differences. That is why being knowledgeable in all aspects of music literacy is important, because it informs those decisions in a performance that make the piece unique. As a music educator it is my job to make these decisions, to share them with my students, and to share with them the tools to make great music on their own.