Clair Walters

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Dr. Swanson

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Integrating Music Into a Primary Classroom by Utilizing *Clair de Lune* by Claude Debussy

**Abstract:**

A quality primary education is essential in order for a person to be successful in life: this, in turn, makes sense as a statement, however, the definition of a “quality education” is often questioned. Although numerous studies of child development have tried to pinpoint one specific characteristic, building an education is a never-ending process. As for teachers, the only aspect they can provide for students is the seed that sparks intellectual growth. Studies have shown that classical music heightens focus, and therefore enhances learning. Thus, classical music could be referred to as the catalyst for educational growth; it is the push that moves the process forward. “Clair de Lune” by the late 19-century composer Claude Debussy contains a simple yet captivating structure that may be beneficial to utilize when teaching. It is pertinent to unravel the inner workings of the song and Debussy himself to ultimately determine if his song could indeed enhance the learning of an Elementary School classroom.

**Music and The Brain: Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences**

Prior to detailing about the works and life of Claude Debussy, it is important to understand the theories behind childhood development. Particularly Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. According to the documentary, *Music and Early Learning*, every child is born with the potential for all 7 of Gardner’s multiple intelligences, “Musical” being one of them. The more “intelligences” that an activity stimulates, the greater the learning experience for the child (Berkow 2007). Music acts as a gateway to incorporate a variety of intelligences. For instance, when a child is singing and dancing, they are stimulating not only their musical intelligence but also their kinesthetic, and linguistic intelligence (2007). Music is crucial in a classroom full of growing minds due to the area of the brain that it stimulates- it is opposite section that is stimulated by semantic learning (such as reading, writing, and grammar concepts.) When combined, the brain is able to make a deeper connection while simultaneously using both sides (right and left) (2007). In turn, music is beneficial to any learning environment, based upon the chemical reaction it provides to its listeners. Thus, providing an optimal learning situation.

**Claude Debussy:**

“Claude Debussy is one of the most highly regarded composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is seen as the founder of musical impressionism.” (Bio.com Editors 1) Debussy was born in Saint Germain-en lane, France in 1862. His personality mimics his musical writing style: unique and ambiguous. By the age of 9, Debussy had a manifest talent for playing the piano. Although he was bread by a poor working class family, he found himself under the patronage of Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, who happened to be a mentor for Peter Tchaikovsky as well (Lockspeiser 3). Despite this, they did not have many encounters. In fact, neither of them particularly cared for the other’s music (Betuw 4). While he was in the company of von Meck, he fell deeply in love with a beautiful married woman named Blanch Vasnier (Lockspeiser 5). However, upon moving to Rome, their relationship ceased to exist (Betuw 6).

While in Rome, he stayed in the Villa Medici; it was intended for him to utilize Rome’s ambiance to pursue creativity (Lockspeiser 3). Despite this, Debussy found it to be very appalling in each and every aspect (Betuw 2). The academy that Debussy was attending was not fond of his music and claimed it was “bizarre, and quarting the unusual” (2). Thus, he returned to Paris to dabble more with his love life. One could say, after examining the details of his relationships, that Debussy was quite self-absorbed. In fact, two of his lovers were suicidal, one even actually making a failed attempt. Her name was Rosalie Texier, and prior to her attempt, she had been married to Debussy for an extensive period of time. Behind her back, he was having an affair with another woman, Emma Bardac, for whom he had his first and only child with, Claude Emma, or “Chou-Chou.” (Betuw 10). Claude Emma was a pertinent inspiration for Debussy; he dedicated his work “Children’s Corner” to her. For years prior to Claude Emma’s birth, Debussy had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer (10). After years of battling, he passed in 1918- in the midst of the first great World War. Due to this, his funeral service and even burial were very lowkey, as France was involved with the war (10).

Those that knew Debussy classified him as very short tempered and sensitive. There was even a time when a pupil that admired him threw a party in celebration of Debussy’s works, and he did not show up (Betuw 13). Although he was considered to be a high-strung and irritable brute, Debussy created a brand for himself and his pleasantly unique music. Some of his most notable works were *Ariettes oubliées (1888), Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1892),* and *Pelléas et Mélisande (1895).* However, the work that is most prized and recognized amongst listeners is the peaceful and melodic *Clair de Lune* (“Moonlight”) (Lockspeiser 8).

**Clair de Lune Analysis:**

Although often people misconceive this work to be a solo piece, it is actually a portion of a piano suite known as *Bergamasque* (Convo). *Clair de Lune*, meaning moonlight, was loosely based off of a poem by Paul Verlaine:

Your soul is as a moonlit landscape fair,  
Peopled with maskers delicate and dim,  
That play on lutes and dance and have an air  
Of being sad in their fantastic trim.  
  
The while they celebrate in minor strain  
Triumphant love, effective enterprise,  
They have an air of knowing all is vain,—  
And through the quiet moonlight their songs rise,  
  
The melancholy moonlight, sweet and lone,  
That makes to dream the birds upon the tree,  
And in their polished basins of white stone  
The fountains tall to sob with ecstasy (“Clair De Lune by Paul Verlaine: Poem Samples.”)

The poem and the song truly do compliment each other well; while Verlaine’s came first, his words perfectly describe the essence that Debussy was attempting to capture with his piece.

I should like to see the creation-I, myself, shall achieve it- of a kind of music free from themes and motives, or formed on a single continuous theme, which nothing interrupts and which returns upon itself -Debussy (Betuw 3)

In *Clair de Lune*, an experience is made rather than a story to be told (3). Despite the piece being tonal with a cadence, a story is not being told but rather a simulation is being created. For instance, one might compare it to the difference between the following experiences: reading a story with a beginning, middle, and end (traditional tonal music, Mozart, etc.)-and riding a roller coaster. The experience of a coaster takes you through various different altitude and velocity changes, however, it too, comes to a satisfying stop.

When listening to *Clair de Lune,* and Debussy in general, it is imperative to comprehend that the dissonances present do not take away from the beauty of the pieces. While this is sometimes the intention, for this circumstance, Debussy is attempting to capture the feeling of a somber yet peaceful mood. The outlandish concept can be better described in the last two lines in the first stanza of Verlaine’s poem:

That play on lutes and dance and have an air  
Of being sad in their fantastic trim (Bertuw 7).

It is a bit of an oxymoron to contain the words sad and fantastic in the same line, yet that is what the song allows you to feel. The spirit of the song itself is sullen, however, it simultaneously provides you with a fantastic reminder that you are human, and feeling this way is a work of art in and of itself. “In reality, the love of art is as difficult to procure as it is to explain.” -Debussy

**Ideas on Incorporating Debussy into an Elementary Classroom:**

When incorporating music into the primary core curriculum, there are a variety of different subjects that may benefit from the pairing; however, according to *Music and Early Learning,* learning occurs most frequently when music is paired with language. Thus, due to *Clair de Lune* being poetic in origin, it may be optimal for educators to use the song to teach Language Arts.

***Lesson Plan Example***

**Grade Level:** 5th  **Subject:** Language Arts

**Virginia State Standards:** 5.5 d) Describe the characteristics of free verse, rhymed, and patterned poetry.

**Lesson Aim/Objective**: Comprehension is a necessary skill for Language Arts. In order to enrich the learning experience for students, they will be expected to utilize music in order to describe/comprehend and write a poem.

**Materials**:

*Clair de Lune* by Claude Debussy

Short Poem Examples

Drawing Paper

Crayons/Markers/Watercolors

**Motivation:** In order to engage students, it’s important to include an activity that will spark imperative brain activity. To start this lesson, begin by playing *Clair de Lune* by Debussy to the students. Suggest that they close their eyes and imagine that they are somewhere else besides a classroom. Once about a quarter of the song has played, ask students to describe the experience they were feeling. Write keywords from the discussion on the board to use as a reference for later.

**Instruction/Procedure:**

1. Pass out the examples of a few short poems to students. Have them read them silently to themselves, then discuss with their neighbor what they believe the poems mean, and also discuss which they liked or didn’t like. Finally come together and discuss their findings as a class.
2. Split the class into three groups for each of the sections of *Clair de Lune.* Explain that as a group they will write a short poem based on the part of the song that they hear. Afterward, encourage them to draw/ decorate a picture that might represent both the song and the poem. Show an example of an impressionist painting. Provide at least 45 minutes.
3. Return as a class and encourage groups to share their work. Are the poems similar? Do they possess one particular theme? What are the differences? Ask students why they think certain parts of the poem are similar and why other parts might be different. Have students share why they chose to decorate their picture the way that they did. Briefly explain how music follows a pattern, much like a poetry rhyme scheme: ABA.

**Assessment Activity:** Collect each of the poems and display the artwork. Check the poetry for mechanics and structure, grade according to effort and whether the participated in the musical concept.

**Follow Up:** The next morning, have students listen to the song briefly again. Ask them to think about the atmosphere it brings them to. Have them guess what “*Clair de Lune*” means in English. Refer back to the poems and compare how they interpreted the song in comparison to Debussy may have intended.

***Research and Justification***

Merryl Goldberg, a music education Professor at Calfornia Sate University, exclaims that when music is added to the story, it adds the opportunity for students to make it personal through the connections of words to sounds (Goldberg 66).

“Poetic form is often more suited to thinking and writing of children than prose; it is spare, yet rich with sense impressions. It is a medium in which the images of wonder, curiosity, and analogic thinking which so often characterizes children’s thinking can flourish” - Karen Gallas (1991) (67).

Therefore, the lesson above is an excellent way to encourage children to express their inner thoughts while simultaneously learning to comprehend poetry. The addition of Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* inspires them to *feel* rather than to simply recite.

Aside from the teaching benefits of using music to learn poetry, there are also emotional and kinestheitc benefits for the children. Research shows that when students write poetry, they are more relaxed, and they are more self confident. This is primarily due to their ability to explore (68). Music, especially the cool and collected sounds of Debussy’s *Clair de Lune,* also tend to be particularly relaxing and peaceful in nature. Thus, when the two are combined, it leads to an immensely relaxing learning experience.

**Conclusion:**

Although it is often forgotten about upon the busy schedules of educator’s lives, integrating the arts into learning is an extremely affective approach to teaching. “Students can learn *about* the arts, learn *with* the arts, and learn *through* the arts” (Goldberg ix). It is one thing to learn about the arts, which is imperative for a primary education, however, the application of knowledge that incorporating the arts allows is priceless. Utilizing Debussy’s unique, creative, and impressional music is just one way to approach integrating music into the Elementary Classroom. There are multitudes of combinations to be created of combining the different subjects, musical genres, and even other art mediums such as the visual and performing arts.

In order to adhere to the findings of this research, it is encouraged that educators try the following lesson with another modern composer or artist, at first again with Language Arts, but then continue on to incorporate the arts with subjects such as Math, Science, and History. In turn, Debussy’s desire to create music that was “ free from themes and motives, or formed on a single continuous theme,” donated a medium for children a century later to express knowledge that, like his music, is liberating, creative, and prominant for a quality primary education.

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