

A Place for Music Technology at a Liberal Arts Institution

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Five years ago I took my first college teaching job as an Assistant Professor of Music at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. I admit that when I first applied for the job, I had never heard of Transylvania University, which, I soon learned, was a “liberal arts college”. I attended all of my post-secondary schooling at large universities (Brigham Young University, University of Central Florida, and the University of Iowa), each with student populations over 30,000. I had not previously been exposed to a university setting with only 1,100 students and 70 faculty members. Moreover, while I was aware of the concept of a liberal arts education, I was not sure how this translated into the vision of a small private college, or how it would impact me as a professor at that institution. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the development of the study of music technology at Transylvania University within the context of the University’s Liberal Arts vision and goals. It is my desire that my experiences might be helpful to those at the ASCUE conference and others who may read these proceedings who find themselves in an educational setting where the study of technology may be considered by some to be contrary to broader educational goals.

What is a Liberal Arts College?

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica Concise* (Eleventh Ed., 2007), a liberal arts college is, “a college or university curriculum aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities, in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum.” Additionally, liberal arts colleges often place a major emphasis on teaching quality and life-long learning, and boast smaller enrollments, class sizes, and student to teacher ratios. Most classes are taught by full-time faculty members, many of whom have terminal degrees in their fields. Liberal arts colleges are generally private institutions which may or may not receive support through a religious affiliation.

Transylvania University aligns itself well with these definitions. Transylvania is a private college with a historical relationship to the Disciples of Christ, Christian Church. The student population of just over 1,100 and the school boasts small class sizes, and a 13:1 student to faculty ratio. Over 97% of faculty hold the Ph.D. or other terminal degree in their field. As evidence of a strong commitment to excellence in teaching, in the past six years, the annual award for best university teacher at any Kentucky school has gone to a Transylvania professor five times. Additionally, Transylvania’s stated goals align with the ideals of “imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities”. They are as follows:

- To develop students' intellectual and creative abilities.
- To stimulate the search for knowledge.
- To promote open and fair-minded examination and discussion of values in all forms of endeavor.

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- To encourage inquiry and conversation across the traditional academic disciplines.
- To stimulate in students an understanding of themselves and their relation to others in a diverse, ever-changing world.
- To promote opportunity for students to develop as independent thinkers and leaders.
- To foster a campus community characterized by compassion, respect, ethical concern, and social responsibility.
- To establish a foundation for graduate and professional study, and a variety of satisfying careers.

What is Music Technology?

By definition, technology is the “practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2007). In the case of music, technology refers to the tools that are used as one participates in all aspects of music, such as its creation, performance, production, and consumption. Currently, the term music technology often denotes electronic hardware and computer software, but technology has always been a part of music making. During the early 1700’s, for example, some in the musical world were concerned about a new instrument that represented “technological developments” they feared would negatively impact music making. Instrumentalists refused to play it, and composers refused to compose for it. Johann Sebastian Bach predicted its eventual demise, stating that the “notes were too soft to allow a full dynamic range.” The instrument was the piano. Today no one questions the use of the piano in music making, or the appropriateness of its study at the university, but current technological developments and their study are questioned. Futurist Alan Kay underscored this dichotomy when he observed, “Technology is ‘technology’ only for people who are born before it was invented.”

The Case for the *Study* of Music Technology

For many in the liberal arts community, it is felt that the study of music technology primarily consists of “skills training” that requires little or no creativity, new thought or deep intellectual exploration. This is the same kind of criticism that is often made of computer science programs. Many feel that this kind of training is best achieved at community colleges and technical or professional schools and has no place in the liberal arts college.

While vocational institutions that conduct this kind of skills training do exist for music technology fields such as recording and producing, the actual *study* of music technology goes far beyond simply acquiring the skills involved to operate hardware and manipulate software. Certainly it is important to learn these skills, but students of music technology must also understand its history and development. They must grapple with important philosophical and ethical issues. Music technology students also need to be good musicians, with an understanding of music as an art form and its history and development. They need to learn musical sensitivity and sophistication that is informed by and improved by their understanding of current technology. Beyond the field of music, students who wish to be involved in one of the many aspects of music technology as a career need to be readers, writers and thinkers. They need to be able to work well with people and be strong communicators. For this kind of education in music technology, a liberal arts college can be an ideal setting.

How We Do it at Transylvania

Transylvania University is one of a small handful of Liberal Arts Colleges to offer music technology as a course of study. Courses in music technology began being offered in the spring of 2004 with “Introduction to Music Technology”. This course was offered during Transylvania’s “May Term” as a special topics course, but was quickly filled and additional students wondered when the course would be offered again. By the Winter Term of 2005, the course was officially added to the schedule and has been offered nearly every term since. A second course, “Audio Recording Techniques,” was created and offered in Fall Term 2005, allowing students an additional level of music technology exploration and experience. In both of these courses, I worked to ensure that the students explored the history and philosophy of music technology as they developed technical skills.

As the music faculty members considered what Transylvania could offer to students interested in pursuing graduate work or a career in a music technology, we developed and proposed a music technology major. The major incorporates the two aforementioned courses in music technology, but also includes courses in music history and theory, four semesters of applied study on an instrument, participation in musical ensembles, study in music composition, and courses in computer science. In addition to these core courses, students culminate their study with a semester-long internship and a final music technology project. The requirements of the major include diverse offerings which go far beyond the limited confines of simple skills training. Additionally, Transylvania students benefit from the broad general education requirements for graduation that make up the University’s curriculum.

The music technology major was accepted by the university faculty in the Winter Term of 2006. During the first year, several students have declared music technology as their major. Additionally, plans are underway for the construction of a fine arts technology lab (see Figure 1). In this facility, students will have access to the latest developments in music and art technology.

Conclusion

There is an increasing demand in the academic and professional music world for liberally educated individuals who are not only fine musicians, but who are also trained in computer science and music technology. By offering a music technology major at a liberal arts institution, we hope to provide a learning environment that stimulates creativity, encourages the search for knowledge and inquiry, establishes a foundation for further study, and prepares students for a satisfying and exciting future.

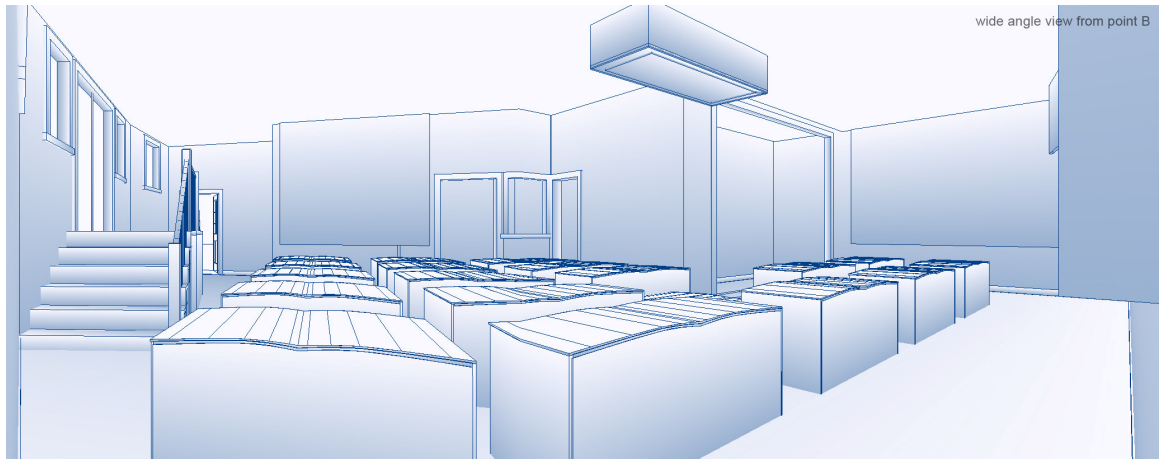


Figure 1: Future Fine Arts Technology Lab