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“From a Vibrant City to a Warzone”: Shostakovich’s 7th Symphony as a means to foster historical understanding through empathy

Anthony M. Pellegrino^{a,*}, Alex d'Erizans^b, Joseph L. Adragna^c

^a The University of Tennessee, United States

^b Borough of Manhattan Community College, The City University of New York, United States

^c St. Scholastica Academy, United States

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long pointed to the power of music as a primary source in instruction for bringing past actors into sharper view and engender deeper connections with the past. By employing Dimitri Shostakovich's 7th Symphony, composed amidst the Nazi siege of Leningrad during the Second World War, we sought to explore, more precisely, the nature of how music, as a primary source, enhances the study of history among students. Through the formulation, execution, and assessment of a two-day lesson with students in five secondary history classes, three of which listened to the symphony and two of which did not, we found that the incorporation of the symphony resulted in students' enhanced empathetic understanding of the past. Implications include details regarding profound opportunities for, as well as challenges to, cultivating historical empathy through the use of music as a primary source.

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Introduction

Recent research in social studies education has called attention to the considerable potential of music as a primary source to enable enhanced historical thinking. In classroom research, music has been shown to engender the humanizing potential of history (DeLorenzo, 2003; White & McCormack, 2006; Wineburg, 2001). Waller and Edgington (2001) used songs from the U.S. Civil War era to demonstrate how the people viewed the conflict, noting that “what students do retain is information that is meaningful, authentic, and relevant to their lives, and music helps to emphasize that relevance” (Waller & Edgington, 2001, p. 148). Baker (2011) investigated the use of music in secondary history classrooms in North Alabama. The methods for this study included both interview and observation of six secondary United States teachers to specifically analyze their use of music as a teaching tool. Teachers reported that music deepened students' understanding, improved student engagement, and affected positively student test scores. Baker further reported that music effectively communicated the human experience, and therefore, enhanced student interest and academic achievement. In his pedagogical work on the Dust Bowl era, Lovorn (2009) observed that, through the use of primary source music, students cultivated a more profound understanding for how “ordinary folks” lived history. Whitmer (2005) articulated the essence of this work in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: apelleg2@utk.edu (A.M. Pellegrino).

reporting that music has the potential to capture the emotions and feelings experienced during a historical occurrence, and by doing so, enable students to eschew presentism that ultimately clouds attempts at understanding the past.

In this paper, we, a social studies teacher educator and historian specializing in modern European history, contribute our voice to the above scholarship by investigating, more specifically, why music proves so effective as a teaching tool. We share the findings from the formulation, execution, and assessment of a two-day high school history lesson in which Dimitri Shostakovich's 7th Symphony, composed amidst the Nazi siege of Leningrad during the Second World War, played an integral part. In so doing, we argue that empathy proves a useful concept to explain how music, employed as a primary source, bolsters students' historical understanding of the past.

Empathy and historical understanding

A burgeoning body of scholarship has argued for an empathetic historicizing of the past, for empathy and historical understanding ultimately go hand-in-hand (Colby, 2008; Dickinson, 1984). Scholars and educators need to “keep antiquity accessible, while stressing its ineffable strangeness. Such understanding requires not only empathy with the past, but awareness of its unbridgeable difference” as well (Lowenthal, 2000, p. 74). Empathy, therefore, serves as a reminder that “diversity constitutes the core of history...every past was uniquely unlike the present” (Lowenthal, 2000, p. 74; Yeager & Foster, 2001). Empathy renders “what is alien about past mentalities sufficiently recognizable to the contemporary reader for him to accept them as his ‘own’,” but it does so “without reducing their distinctive and diacritical features” (Shemlit, 1984, p. 44). For the historian, empathy “merits specific attention,” for the former must bring it to inquiry in order to analyze the events, actions, and words of key figures in the historical record....In the construction of historical meaning, empathy for participants in historical events is central” (Yeager & Foster, 2001, p. 13). Empathy enables one “to give sense to actions and of social practices and institutions in terms of people's reasons for doing or believing what they did,” so to say “that a student has empathized is to say that he or she is in a position to entertain a set of beliefs and values which are not necessarily his or her own” (Ashby & Lee, 1987, p. 23). Ultimately, then, an empathetic perspective entails balancing a careful awareness of distance to the past with a determination to achieve a more intimate understanding, and indeed humanity, of historical subjects, a complex endeavor indeed.

With its emphasis on promoting humble and critical connections with past subjects, so as to gain more historical understanding, the concept of empathy speaks to the careful approach one must take when investigating, as well as writing about, the past, for which no coherent and ordered narrative exists, or, arguably, ever did exist (White, 1973). The National Council for the Social Studies' (NCSS) College, Career, and Civic (C3) Framework for curriculum fosters such an approach through emphasis on historical inquiry skills, key concepts, and dispositions which “guides— not prescribes—the choice of curricular content necessary for rigorous” historical investigation (NCSS, 2013, p. 6).

For researchers, empathy remains a problematic and contested term in regards to the extent to which it epitomizes a cognitive or imaginative skill (Foster, 2001; Yilmaz, 2007). Shemlit (1984) considered historical empathy to be a cognitive activity, for imagination could ultimately propel one to pose fantastical, fictional accounts of the past based upon emotion, rather than on the careful study of the evidence. For other commentators, however, to empathize means ultimately to imagine. Martha Nussbaum has noted, for example, that “empathy is an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience....” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 302). In the end, “imagination opens up the possibility of feeling like someone, involving the discovery that emotions can be similar and therefore shared,” (Assmann, 2016, p. 5) forging a bond of normalcy that bridges time (Colby, 2008). Helping students conceptualize this facet of empathy is an important part of a learning environment in which historical inquiry is valued (NCSS, 2013). As an “emotional contagion,” empathy involves understanding others by making sense of their actions and reconstructing their intentions and meaning. The experience of empathy, wrote Alison Landsberg (2009), requires “a leap, a projection from the empathizer to the object of contemplating, which implies a distance between the two...” (p. 223). Stéphane Lévesque argued that “the only possible way to understand more about past actors is to mentally recreate—to imagine—what it was like to be in their position, even if historians may (and often do) lack some of the keys to the past” (Lévesque, 2008, p. 147). Dominick La Capra emphasized the role of the imagination as a vital social resource, offering the term “empathetic unsettlement” to discuss an “affective response which he considers most appropriate in regards to the reception of another's traumatic history” (La Capra, 2002, p. 438). Barton and Levstik (2004) further noted that, beyond reconstructing historical perspectives, empathy “invites us to care with and about people in the past, to be concerned with what happened to them and how they experienced their lives” (p. 212). Instead of suppressing such sentiments, an investigator of the past, whether that be a historian or student, must maintain a balance between caring and efforts aimed at perspective recognition (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2009).

For many scholars, empathy ultimately refers to a combination of complex intellectual and imaginative capacities, which is fostered through the development and practice of historical thinking skills related to interpretation of evidence (Barton, 2012). Davis Jr. has argued that “empathy constitutes one of the essential elements of historical thinking and rigorous historical inquiry that result in deepened understanding within context. For the most part, it is intellectual in nature, but certainly it may include emotional dimensions.” Empathy is “robust, tough, and insightful even as it is imaginative, and it is always based upon available evidence” (Foster & Davis Jr., 2001, p. 3). Empathy should not be simply an exercise in imagination, but must be “a considered and active process, embedded in the historical method” (Yeager & Doppen, 2001, p. 97). An empathetic understanding does not constitute imagination, for the former relies on the “cautious inquiry and close

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