

Human Connection Through Music and Dance

Victor Hugo said: “Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that cannot remain silent.” Music in itself is very abstract and personal. It touches the soul in ways that nothing else can. Aside from the deeply emotional aspect of music, it is also used by people simply for fun. Many cultures throughout time and across the entire world have recognized the importance of music and dancing. The Regency era was no exception.

The culture in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was very much focused on status and wealth. Many people, who were not as fortunate as the Bennet family from Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”, had little money and were “on the verge of starvation” (Sheehan). Girls and women at that time were expected to “marry up” to attain wealth for their families. This is evident in the very first line in Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice.” It says: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” This is Austen’s humorous foreshadowing of the Bennet family’s (especially Mrs. Bennet’s) obsession with the idea of marriage. Dancing was a way for girls to show themselves off to eligible gentlemen.

“To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love...” (Austen 11). Dancing gave people a chance to get to know one another. A young man dancing with a young lady was known to start quite the gossip. In “Pride and Prejudice”, Mrs. Bennet says to her husband, “...Mr. Bingley thought [Jane] quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. Only think of that my dear; he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time” (Austen 14).

Dancing was not just important to the culture of the Regency era, but also to the plot of the story. Jane and Mr. Bingley's romance played a large role in the story and may not have happened, had they not had the chance to meet one another at a ball. Austen also used dancing to create some humor in the story, such as when Mr. Collins, the Bennet sisters' cousin, kept asking Elizabeth to dance. "Mr. Collins... gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was ecstasy" (Austen 89). A man dancing with a woman was significant at the time, but so was refusing a dance. When Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy first meet, it was Mr. Darcy's pride that caused him to refuse to ask Elizabeth to dance. "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*..." (Austen 13). His words caused Elizabeth's prejudice against him. This simple refusal to dance caused the main characters' greatest weaknesses to be seen and sparks a large part of the conflict between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth.

Although modern day culture is much different from the Regency era, music still has a large place in society. The formality surrounding dancing is gone. Instead of practiced, precise steps, we now have random, individualized movement. Today, it is still a way people meet and talk with members of the opposite sex, although the propriety that surrounded dances during the Regency period are, for the most part, long gone. Music has morphed from the classic, fluid sound of strings and operatic vocals to more carefree styles. Today, there are many types of genres, each of which having an entirely different sound. The music of different cultures are also more readily accessed. We know more about cultural music than we have before, from the improvisational music of North India to the repetitive patterns of "the mbira music of the Shona

of Zimbabwe...” (Garfias). The world has become more connected and music has a larger variety than ever before.

Music can have a more meaningful purpose than for mere fun. Music and dancing have remained a part of the human culture because it offers the opportunity for transcendence. As stated earlier, music is abstract and communicates through feelings more than anything else. The rich, full sound of a major chord gives quite a different impression than a minor chord’s stark, cold sound. Still, to this day, people use music to communicate ideas of heartbreak, joy and longing. Music has the ability to envelope one in sound and, for a moment, that is all that exists. It’s a feeling that seems to carry one away from all their worries. A line or phrase can bring tears to eyes and soothe souls. It gives an opportunity to others to connect, whether that be interacting during a dance or conveying those deep, strong emotions to others that simply, as Victor Hugo said, cannot be put into words.

“Cultural expression of absolutely any kind--loud or soft singing, painting circles and violets and dreams, tap dancing and leaping straight up into the air, even karaoke-- has the mysterious potential of all art: we can be elevated by its practice, and by its experience. Creation has its own enormous power to add joy and sorrow and depth and meaning to experience in a thousand unfathomable ways” (Cohen).

There are many different aspects of music, to suit the needs of all. It gives us the opportunity to connect with others, as exemplified in “Pride and Prejudice”. For some, it is a means of transcendence, as Cohen implied. The ability for people to express and transcend themselves is fulfilling. That is the reason music and dancing, as well as other styles of

expression, have lasted this long. It's a universal form of communication that doesn't have barriers of language or time. It gives life a much deeper meaning than it would have without it. As the character John Keating from "Dead Poets Society" said: "The human race is filled with passion... Beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

Citations:

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. N.p.: Penguin Classics, 2008. Print.

Cohen, Esther. "Why Roses with our Bread?" *New Labor Forum*.9 (2001): 139. *ProQuest*. Web.

29

Garfias, Robert. "Music in Cultural Context." *Music Educators Journal* 81.6 (1995): 6. Web. 18

May 2017.

Sheehan, Lucy. "Historical Context for *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen." *Columbia College*.

N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.