

# The Monastery Wall

A thousand years ago, knowledge, in the form of books and historical records, including the ability to read and write, the understanding of mathematics, and the theory and practice of music, was held in no small part by monasteries and the monks who tended them. Monasteries, protected by thick, stone walls, served as the center of intellectual and musical life for the villages around them. Monastic practice was particularly important in the development of music.

Around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, something truly miraculous happened. Monks began to venture out from the monastery into the villages around them, with the specific intention of sharing the knowledge, bringing teachings to the people around them. The wall became somewhat permeable. Monks would venture out into the village like guest lecturers, and people from the village, thirsty for learning, would gather to hear what they had to teach. There were even agreements between villages guaranteeing safe passage for traveling scholars. As the monks began to separate from the monastery, so too the profession of teaching began to separate from religious practice, eventually becoming part of the state rather than the church.

The word university comes from the Latin *universitas*, meaning a group of people associated into one body, a society. The early university was not a building or even a campus, but an affinity group, a collection of people interested in sharing knowledge. The universities of this time were not even limited to a single municipality. A university charter often incorporated a number of villages and towns.

Now: the wall. The monastery wall as a semi-permeable membrane is a miracle without which we would not be here in this room today. The wall was formed initially to protect information and learning that would otherwise have perished. The monasteries were fastidious about collecting and preserving written records, and defending knowledge against the ignorant, the violent, the barbaric, the enemies of learning.

Monasteries were largely about conservation, the word from which the conservatory descends, a place for the collection and transmission of valuables across time, from one generation to the next. Had the walls not been there, all of those valuables would have been lost. But had they remained completely impenetrable, no one would have ever benefitted from the knowledge; it would have remained cloistered among a very small, very educated group of people. The membrane had to be just right; the wall had to be porous enough to let the good stuff out but firm enough to preserve the traditions and protect the practices that carry it. We would not be doing what we are doing here today were it not for the perfect permeability of that wall.

Interestingly, there is teaching from mystics of the same time period, in answer to the question, should one's spiritual life be private or public? The teaching likens spiritual practice to keeping a blazing fire in a great furnace. The fire burns hottest if you keep the door closed completely, but neither warmth nor light escapes if you do that. What's the use of having a big fire if no one can enjoy it? If, on the other hand, you open the doors wide, everyone can warm themselves, but eventually the fire goes cold. The key to balance in spiritual practice, says this teaching, is to

keep things private enough that the fire burns really hot, while opening the doors just enough to warm the people around you.

So as a Dean coming into this community at this particular moment, and as a musician carrying my practice in the world at this particular moment, it strikes me that each of us, in each of our practices, might examine the permeability of our monastery wall. Or, if you're more of a mystic, how are the doors to your furnace? Yes, when it's closed and tight the fire burns hot, it's cozy and comfortable but it warms very few outside the discipline. And yes, if we throw the doors wide open for everyone, we slowly lose the fire we've been tending all these centuries. We lose community, identity, practice. Where's the middle, the place where others from outside each discipline can benefit from the heat we generate?

Many of us in the field of music, especially what has come to be called classical music, are hearing the call that, just like 800 years ago we need to leave the monastery and go out into the village. The fire inside burns hotter than ever: the standards for musical practice have never been higher, but we seem to be losing contact with the people in the village. For years the monastery we call the Metropolitan Opera sat in its fortress on the west side of Manhattan, and only those fortunate enough to afford the cost of a pilgrimage there could behold the treasure stored inside its walls.

But today, you can sit in a movie theater in Fredonia, NY, holding a bag of popcorn in your lap and watch high-definition close-ups of Renee Fleming singing live, a view you wouldn't have had from the most expensive seat in the house. This happens in HD movie theaters in small towns around the country. The monks of the Met have gone out into the villages. In countless small towns around the country, the Met now offers delivery service.

As I look out from high above the walls of the music monastery to the fortress of business, the kingdom of HSHP, the abbey of H & S and the Park dynasty, I see lawn space in between, and it looks to me a lot like the space the monks would have taught in 800 years ago. And that space interests me greatly. If we were to leave our monasteries just for a day, to gather people for a few hours in those public spaces, just as we did 800 years ago, what might we share?

Perhaps if we had gathered in the space between Music and Park, we'd have come up with the Met's movie theater idea before they did. Perhaps we'll come up with the next great idea for music and the screen. And what if we gather in the space between finance and music? For centuries, business and music have been like love and money; two things that some say should never be mixed, intentionally or accidentally. The part of our lives that we musicians seem never to have worked out, ever, is the money piece. Let's talk about where money and the soul come together; that's a conversation I'd love to have.

In HSHP there's a program that helps stroke victims recover; in Boston's Beth Israel Hospital there's an entire floor of the hospital where they use music to help stroke victims recover. The many ways in which music makes people well is a conversation that could fill the entire town square for many months. Thanks to neuroimaging techniques like fmri, we can just now demonstrate the profound impact music has on the brain, with applications from autism to

Alzheimer's, stress relief to stroke recovery.

But the most intriguing conversation, for me, would explore the question of how a college that put so much effort into building a core experience managed to include all of the liberal arts except one. We hold that every student, every major, at Ithaca College shall be able to read and write, grasp quantitative skills, and have an exposure to the sciences and humanities as part of a required core experience here. That's great. You've hit six/sevenths of the liberal arts. You nailed the trivium and got three quarters of the quadrivium. And you're not alone.

Why do Americans consistently omit the seventh liberal art, music, from what we consider the core of education? Why not omit math? Why not writing? What kind of liberal arts college prides itself on six out of seven? And by what rationale have we identified which one to exclude?

I'm not going to take any of your buildings by storm; I'm more monk than warrior, although in truth I'm a little of each. But I do want to suggest that our monastery walls need selective permeability, that just like 800 years ago, we should let each other in, and get ourselves out among the people. We should gather in the village greens between our buildings. If that seems daunting, remember that if we hadn't done it 800 years ago we wouldn't be sitting here. Remember too that the first universities weren't limited to a building or buildings and often spanned multiple villages and towns in the quest to gather learners and teachers together.

And finally, I want to challenge the predominant belief of our culture that in terms of core preparation for life, six out of seven is close enough. I don't believe it is.

I want to suggest that whether the engagement with music be curricular, co-curricular, or extra-curricular or non-curricular, whether it's classical, pop, or jazz, experiential or theoretical, acoustic or hi-tech, individual practice or group engagement, the education of every student in every major at Ithaca College would be enhanced and transformed if a conscious, intentional engagement with music were part of their time here.

Paradoxically music is one of the most ancient of all the disciplines we carry at the college, but it's also something we are just beginning to understand in terms of its impact on the brain and its power to transform human experience. This is a profound time of discovery, research, and innovation in our field, and I look forward to exploring many of these things with you in the weeks ahead.