



Creating an Undergraduate Study Abroad Program in Music

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No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience.
John Locke (1632-1704)

Introduction

Study abroad experiences are usually under the domain of the university's academic structure, run either by one or more directors or, perhaps, assigned to faculty members who have significant knowledge and experience in overseas study. Owing to that common, tantalizing dream of backpacking through foreign countries, meeting total strangers and potential soul mates, engaging in meaningful discussions in youth hostels and on trains, and, along the way, discovering one's true self, undergraduates with a sense of independence and adventure take that brave, first step into the unknown. And, oddly enough, it is precisely this "realm of unknown" in which students gain the experience and knowledge that build their self-confidence and self-esteem by providing them the opportunity to live in a culture, complete with its citizens and societal norms, beyond the confines of the classroom and all that is comfortable to them. The faculty's role is to provide the structure of the experience—creating courses of relevance to location, securing guest lecturers from the host country, arranging field trips that will intrigue, and, of course, designing an educational experience that fits within a student's four-year plan of study without delaying his or her graduation. Naturally, summer programs and performance tours are practical in



the sense that they do not disrupt the students' ensembles, lessons, and other courses required for graduation.

But are such experiences long enough or in depth enough to allow students the opportunities to gain a clear sense of another culture and society and build meaningful relationships with foreign peers and hosts? Public education, through efforts in multicultural education, is striving to promote understanding, appreciation, and positive attitudes of cultural differences in the schools. Bruce Mitchell, Professor Emeritus of Multicultural Education at Eastern Washington University, and Robert Salsury, Professor Emeritus of Education at Eastern Washington University, in their book, *Multicultural Education*, give the example of the state of Washington that created the following multicultural education goals: "The process of education should emphasize that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences contribute positively to our nation's future." And, "As a result of the process of education each student should interact with people of different cultures, races, generations, and life styles with significant rapport."¹ The authors conclude their book by stating that gang activity, racist organizations, and extreme political and religious views have led to unspeakable hate crimes, all of which could possibly be ameliorated with the teaching of American pluralism.²

Michael Laubscher, Director of the Office of Education Abroad Programs at Penn State University, writes in his book, *Encounters With Difference: Student Perceptions of the Role of Out-of-Class Experiences in Education Abroad*, based

¹Bruce Mitchell and Robert E. Salsbury. *Multicultural Education: An International Guide to Research, Policies, and Programs*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 340.

² Ibid., p. 333-34.



on his interviews of 30 Penn State students, of whom only four had spent an extended period of time in another culture, who had returned from a semester or full year abroad in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East, Africa, and Australia: “Participants in education abroad programs have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a “living laboratory” that forces them to become actively involved in the learning process on every level—intellectual, psychological, and emotional. This holistic dimension is what makes education abroad uniquely suited to promoting an appreciation for cultural differences in today’s interdependent global community.” Laubscher goes on to write that students came away from their travel encounters with a “heightened awareness of concrete and often significant differences among nations and cultures,” that the students developed the ability to be more tolerant of differences, and that the students gained a heightened sense of appreciation for what was available when they returned to their homeland.³

In a study in 1988 conducted by Jerry Carlson, Professor of Education at the University of California at Riverside, and Keith Widaman, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Davis, comparing self-assessment questionnaires of students who spent their junior year abroad versus juniors who did not, they concluded that there was a greater increase in international political concern, cross-cultural interest, and cultural cosmopolitanism among the juniors who studied abroad.⁴

³Michael R. Laubscher, *Encounters with Difference: Student Perceptions of the Role of Out-of-Class Experiences in Education Abroad*. In *Contributions to the Study of Education, No. 105*, Paul Pedersen, series adviser. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994, pp. xiv, 75, 79, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.



But perhaps former Senator J. William Fulbright stated it best in his book, *The Price of Empire*: “The vital mortar to seal the bricks of world order is education across international boundaries, not with the expectation that knowledge would make us love each other, but in the hope that it would encourage empathy between nations and foster the emergence of leaders whose sense of other nations and cultures would enable them to shape specific policies based on tolerance and rational restraint.”⁵

Where to Start

Music education professor Dr. Janet Robbins of West Virginia University, in her book chapter, *Crossing Borders: Building Bridges for an International Exchange in Music Teacher Education*, where she describes the formation of the music consortium, Music Alive!, between four universities (two in the United States and two in Brazil), writes, “For pre-service teachers, cultural exchange and a semester-long study abroad program in music can lead to more culturally responsive teaching.”⁶ She goes on to describe the process of creating curricula that will enable exchanges between students and faculty from both the American and the host institutions to require the following: 1) identifying a cluster of courses that will satisfy requirements at both institutions, 2) developing cultural-immersion opportunities and independent study options that are unique to each institution’s program and regional culture, and 3) incorporating language

⁵J. William Fulbright, *The Price of Empire*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1989, pp. 199-200.

⁶ Janet Robbins, *Crossing Borders: Building Bridges for an International Exchange in Music Teacher Education*. In *Alternative Approaches in Music Education: Case Studies from the Field*. Edited by Ann C. Clements. Published in partnership with The National Association for Music Education. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2010, p. 271.



training.⁷ Selecting the participants is also discussed by Dr. Robbins. For example, at the University of West Virginia, students applying for the Music Alive! program are required to submit a short application, to write an essay on why they wish to study in a particular country, and to submit their transcript. Selections are made based on a student's academic progress, readiness to study abroad, and the recommendations of the faculty.⁸ At the University of Colorado at Boulder, music majors are encouraged to complete a semester- or year-long study abroad experience during either their sophomore or junior year, with the understanding that it should not interfere with the sophomore review process, degree recitals, and practicums that cannot be satisfied abroad. The students are encouraged also to save non-music elective requirements for their study abroad experience.⁹ Of course, not every institution can afford to send faculty overseas for an entire semester, especially if it requires hiring a replacement.

Michael Laubscher, of Penn State University, mentions that organized field trips in the host country are a great way to make learning come alive, as opposed to simply reading and discussing in a classroom, and that independent travel by the students can also provide valuable learning experiences. However, travel did not have as much of an impact on student learning as did their observations and personal interactions with members of the host country.¹⁰ Laubscher writes that students undergo three categories of learning activities, requiring them to establish a rapport with members in the host country. One, they

⁷ Ibid, p. 272.

⁸ Ibid, p. 273.

⁹ *Study Abroad for Music Students*. In *University of Colorado Boulder Study Abroad Programs*. <http://studyabroad.colorado.edu>.

¹⁰ Laubscher, p. 66, 74.



take on two roles: a direct participant in the social life of the host culture and also an observer of the host culture, requiring them to be both an “insider” and an “outsider” at the same time. Two, the students engage in personal interaction in the host country, either focusing on in-depth conversations with an individual or conversing with a broad range of individuals, limiting the depth of their discussions. Laubscher states that asking relevant and revealing questions that focus on differences is the key to getting meaningful information. And three, travel is necessary to expose students to other languages and customs, helping bring to light differences that may exist within a geographical area, and to helping students develop a sense of independence and self-reliance.¹¹

Of course, universities also strive to help their own students on campus gain a greater understanding and tolerance of diversity by sponsoring activities, events, and organizations. A study of 20 American colleges and universities representing a diversity of enrollment and mission, yet each with a record of student success and institutional performance, was completed in 2002. Known as DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice), the project included Alverno College that sponsors a weekly roundtable when students, faculty, and staff come together to discuss local, national, and international current events, of which topics of multiculturalism and internationalism are discussed.¹² The participating institutions with the greatest proportions of students studying abroad include the University of Miami, Wofford College, Gonzaga University, and George Mason University. Students in the DEEP project who studied abroad

¹¹ Ibid., 98-103.

¹² George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt and Associates. *Student Success in College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005, p. 224-25.



described their experience as “transforming,” “life-changing,” and, “the best experience of my life,” and they brought back with them experiences that enriched the learning environment of their home institution. Of these 20 DEEP institutions, Ursinus College, Wheaton College, and Wabash College allow institutional aid to travel with the student, regardless of whether or not a program is affiliated with their institution, increasing the number of students who can afford to study abroad. Institutions sometimes offer shorter study abroad experiences, such as three-week programs or perhaps spring break, to accommodate older students, part-time students, students with families, students who have to work, and students who simply have never lived away from home for an extended period of time.¹³

Results of Exchanges

Milton Bennett, Ph.D., co-founder of the Intercultural Communication Institute and director of the Intercultural Development Research Institute, lists six stages that a student experiences while studying abroad. His study was based on the premise that a study abroad experience helps students progress from the first three steps (ethnocentrism) to the last three steps (ethnorelativism):¹⁴

1. Initial denial of cultural differences—includes isolation and separation stages.
2. Defensive state consisting of denigration, superiority, and reversal stages in which the reality of cultural differences is finally acknowledged.

¹³ Ibid., 226-28.

¹⁴ Laubscher, 4-5.



3. Cultural differences are minimized in realizing that one culture is not superior over another.
4. Acceptance of cultural differences.
5. Empathy and a sense of pluralism.
6. Difference becomes integral to identity.

In a case study by Michael Laubscher at Penn State University, American students found that their peers at the host institutions were generally more serious about their studies but that there also was a great emphasis on personal intimacy and interaction. They also commented on how helpful strangers in the host countries were to help them and that the most significant learning experiences tended to be a result of unplanned activities, chance occurrences, and unexpected events.¹⁵ Laubscher mentions that close relationships between the student and the host can provide highly personal insights into both the culture and the host, but that such relationships may not necessarily be indicative of the culture as a whole. He recommends that intelligent probing be used to get to a deeper level of thought and perception.¹⁶

In the case of the West Virginia University students, musicians not only observed and studied in their host institution but also gained musical experiences through performing with local musicians. As stated by Dr. Janet Robbins of West Virginia University, “Students were witnessing the influence of community on music making and coming to understand that informal learning outside of a university setting can be as powerful as the formal learning taking place in the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 34-5, 60.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63-4, 110.



academy.”¹⁷ Moreover, once her students returned home, she observed that 1) the musical vocabularies learned in the host country (Brazil) were stimulating creativity and openness to assuming new roles as a musician, 2) music taking place outside the university played an important role in their experiences inside the university, 3) learning from and with others in a collaborative fashion is what makes music come alive in classroom and rehearsal settings, and 4) music making is an inclusive rather than exclusive experience that often “just happens.”¹⁸ And of particular interest is that the students and professors who participated in the experience came back to the university and participated in performances and workshops, placing the students in the capacity as teachers.¹⁹

From a personal perspective, Laubscher notes in his book that study abroad separates students not only from their parents but also from their culture, challenging their abilities to cope. He quotes one student as saying upon his or her return to the United States, “Things just seem boring. Like I know what to expect. Whereas there, everything was an adventure.” And of particular impact is the student comment, “We’ve learned how to be risk-takers.”²⁰ Laubscher states that the participants in his study felt that they had made significant gains in maturity, independence, self-reliance, and tolerance of ambiguity.²¹

Where to Go from Here

There is an organized push to help American universities catch up to their European counterparts in providing international experiences for university

¹⁷ Robbins, p. 277.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 279.

²⁰ Laubscher, p. 79, 92.

²¹ Ibid., 105.



students. Started in 1988 by the Advisory Council for International Educational Exchange and supported by the National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad and the Liaison Group for International Educational Exchange, these organizations have adopted the goal of 10 percent, the same as ERASMUS (European Regional Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), of the undergraduate enrollment having participated in a significant overseas experience by the time of graduation.²² When the experience abroad has ended, it is important to find out from the participants what aspects of the experience resonated with them the most. As Laubscher writes, “By listening to the students describe and discuss their out-of-class activities, international educators can learn from the students’ first-hand experiences and use the insights gained to generalize about what constitute the most salient categories of activity for complementing the educational process abroad.²³ Laubscher recommends that the experience begin at the home institution, requiring a course that gives students a broad understanding of the culture and society in which they will be working. Once at the host institution, the curriculum should consist of an independent study course, including a reflective term paper, and periodic discussion sessions or seminars under the tutelage of a faculty member at the host institution. Upon return to the home institution, students should take a final course that will allow for discussion and prepare them to write their final paper.²⁴

²² Ibid., p. xiii.

²³ Ibid., xv.

²⁴ Ibid., 113.



In discussion with the director of international studies at Christopher Newport University, Amanda Work, regarding the possibility of developing ongoing study abroad experiences for CNU music majors, the author was told²⁵:

1. It is difficult to find exchange programs with well-established institutions abroad, for most are at full capacity and are not accepting new partner institutions.
2. The cost to American students can be expensive--nearly \$20,000 for one semester and \$6,000 for one month for select IIE programs taught in English.
3. The courses must be taught in English, limiting severely the choice of countries.
4. Exchange programs can be difficult to keep running if there is not an adequate number of students from both the home and the host institutions who are able and wanting to go abroad each year.
5. Many foreign students are used to paying little or nothing for their education and housing. Even if they are not required to pay tuition, the costs of housing and meals at CNU may be expensive, if not prohibitive, for them.

Such obstacles are undoubtedly found at other small universities whose student body is diverse in cultural experiences and financial capabilities. With approximately 5000 students, Christopher Newport University introduces many of its music students to international travel and the attendant immersion in music, education, culture, and society through ensemble tours, participation in parades, and invitations to festivals and other such music events abroad. Music majors are encouraged also to attend workshops and festivals and to seek applied music study on their own. In addition, CNU hosts foreign conductors, composers, and ensembles and continues to partner with Sister Cities of Newport News to host

²⁵ Conversation on January ?, 2014, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA.



international delegates and to travel to these partner cities, engaging a wide variety of business, education, and arts leaders from both Newport News and the partner cities. Many of these music trips, whether they be CNU travelling abroad or CNU hosting international musicians, have involved homestays, an invaluable experience for the visitors and the hosts in providing a realistic view of how each culture lives its daily lives.

A long-term goal for the Department of Music at Christopher Newport University is to identify institutions of higher learning abroad that are both affordable for CNU students and that offer a curriculum in which students studying an entire semester could enroll without putting at risk the completion of their music degree in four years. The junior year of study appears to present the least number of possible conflicts. The first two years of a college music degree include fundamental courses in theory, aural skills, and applied music that normally are considered to be particularly challenging owing both to the importance of mastering fundamental knowledge and skills in music and to the fact that underclassmen are still adjusting to the high standards and expectations of the faculty. The senior year involves a senior recital or capstone project in addition to these students preparing auditions for graduate school admission. Summers and the junior year, therefore, would appear to be the least problematic periods for music students desiring to study abroad for an extended period of time.



In a Nutshell

A liberal education is holistic, transcending lectures and examinations by introducing students to, perhaps even immersing them in, cultures, societies, behaviors, and values compatible, or perhaps at odds, with their own. The most meaningful experiences and memories tend to be the personal interactions and unplanned moments in the host country—spontaneous, unforeseen, and engaging. It is no surprise that study abroad promotes understanding, empathy, and tolerance of differences while serving also to strengthen a student's appreciation of his or her own culture and environment. Students return home with knowledge, first-hand experience, a passion for learning, a strong desire to share information, and a heightened sense of self-confidence from knowing that they grew musically, intellectually, and socially by having taken the risk of leaving the comfort and security of their own culture. Such life-transforming experiences can occur in a period as brief as spring break or as long as a year, depending on the financial situation of the student and the flexibility of curricula and institutions. These interactions can be experienced in music tours and interaction with visiting artists, scholars, and ensembles or through individual endeavors such as attending an international conference, participating in a festival, or just taking a music lesson. There may be challenges that delay or even preclude an institution from establishing an ongoing exchange program, but regardless of the formal structures, students benefit beyond measure from study abroad and other such learning opportunities that bring peoples and cultures together. As Mark Twain wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice,



bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."²⁶

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Work, Amanda. A conversation with the author on January 7, 2014, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA.

²⁶ Mark Twain. *The Innocents Abroad and Roughing It*. University of Cambridge: Press Syndicate, 1984, p. 521.