

Of Melody and Memory: An Afternoon in Joe Pixley's Music Class

Imagine the Santa Barbara-based Braille Institute's social hall suddenly alive with sound, its green expanse transformed into a sublime concert hall showcasing musical strains of all varieties – rich Latin rhythms, soulful jazz, Beach Boys and Pink Floyd classics, cleverly-rhymed Broadway selections, Amr Diab's pulsating Egyptian pop, and grand performances by the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

This is the scene that unfolds every Thursday afternoon in Santa Barbara, when Joe Pixley, Braille Institute (BI) volunteer for 20 years, leads his Music Appreciation class. Joe, who has a background in management and employment development, first launched his popular course in the mid-1990s. He also serves as one of several teachers providing piano instruction for BI students.

After Joe's brief introduction of the day's playlist, the hall is suddenly infused with bold and absolutely soaring melodies that envelop the senses. The space is rapidly transformed – pulsing now and alight with rhythm, vibration, crisp melodies, and an embracing spectrum of sound.

As the music fills the room, class members sit quietly – some swaying, some nodding, nearly all tapping a foot or a hand – each listening attentively as senses are inundated and activated by one of the most sublime sound systems in town. We sit in stillness, quietly transfixed, absorbing bold marimbas, daring percussion, curious xylophones, resonant trumpets, soft snare drums and cymbals, gently tinkling bells, and complex chording. There is an air of reverence to this scene, and every participant is aware of the heightened awareness that this class bestows.

I have been privileged to visit Joe's class for several months, and each time I am struck by the immense impact his selections have upon listeners. At the same time that the music moves us physically, these songs and their associated rhythms spark memories and inspire reminiscence. The class clearly serves as a portal to something far more nuanced and thoroughly captivating, and reverie is a part of this experience.

Music is evocative for all ages, and in this class, where participants range in age from 28 to 95, deep engagement is the norm. In discussions that follow,

class members speak of being transported in time and space: reminded of their experiences of sitting on sofas in childhood homes, listening to parents' or siblings' early recordings; recalling key moments in youth and early adulthood; reflecting on profound moments of discovery along the life-span path; and musing on memories that often go untapped during their daily routines.

This transformative effect is entirely what Joe has in mind. His instructional goal is consistent with the Braille Institute's mission of helping visually impaired people to live fulfilling lives. "I see smiling and happy people in this class, and spirits that are elevated," says Joe. "I try to be light, and still keep the content and the focus on entertainment. What I'm doing, at the core, is lifting students' spirits. Music is a very effective way of bringing people out of the doldrums and back into the mainstream of life."

During this mid-June visit, we sit entranced with the eclectic musical fare that spans six decades. The set begins with a gently rhythmic piece by El Chicano, a US-based rock and soul band, then transitions to the vibrant Southern-rock sound of the Marshall Tucker Band, then, soon, to the silky voice of Elvis performing his "American Trilogy" ... and later, we are privy to a captivating South American marimba/xylophone selection, followed by Stephen Sondheim's wistful "Send in the Clowns," which flows directly into the clear, rich verse of Diana Ross. The set ends with a nostalgic piece by Perry Como, evoking a slower mood and an era long-gone.

As I glance around the room, I see quite clearly the drifting and sifting of thoughts and emotions. In this class so rich with vitality, we are somehow summoned to kinetic motion, then invited into the realm of memory and musing. As much as the experience is about feeling the musical strains and learning about diverse styles, it is also about reflection, and ways to approach the terrain of memory and sentiment.

Neurological research during the past decade has shown that music has the power to revive memory, spark emotions, and stimulate both motor coordination and verbal abilities. Joe Pixley's enthusiasm and careful preparation allow him to tap into this vast power on a weekly basis. The entire classroom experience is indeed a testimony to the evocative power of music, as well as to Joe's soaring imagination, great teaching skills, and richness of heart.

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