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What Is That Melody? Language in the Context of Music and Fandom

“Music is the universal language of mankind” is a quote widely recognized in various paraphrases by people both within and without the sphere of the performing arts. Having been a musician myself, I’m inclined to agree with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on this idea. One of the most beautiful things about music is its inherent ability to connect people of all sorts of backgrounds, creating understanding where words alone may fail to do so. However, it’s equally worth noting that music inspires us to use traditional language to examine and interpret stories not only through the eyes of the composer, but also through an original narrative lens shaped by our own diversity of life experiences.

Long before my adventures in music, my literacy journey began with some of my earliest childhood memories. I’m the eldest child of my family, and my mother worked as an English teacher before becoming a stay-at-home mom. My dad worked nearly 80 hours a week to support us and eventually my little sister as well. Throughout the abundant moments my mom spent alone

with me in our tiny apartment in smalltown Texas, she instilled in me her own love of English – something I will forever be grateful for. The two of us practiced reading books together until I could recite my favorites by heart. When I got tired of that, we made our own bedtime stories together, inventing tales about princesses and kingdoms until my eyes became heavy with sleep. I carried this love of language with me into the classroom, where it continued to blossom with encouragement from my teachers. With time, my earnest passion for learning became part of who I was and am presently.

As I grew older, though, I slowly realized that I needed to think beyond what was taught to me in school if I wanted to fully explore my capacity for literacy. I was very fortunate to have started reading early on in life, and my academic performance reflected that. I enjoyed reading and writing, but I scarcely felt challenged by it like I hoped I would be. Thankfully, this was around the same time that I began my training in orchestral music, revealing a riveting new framework for my writing and storytelling skills.

When I was in elementary school, I received a flyer from a teacher inviting me to enroll in El Sistema Oklahoma, an after-school music program that would come to change my life. The teachers in this program knew that music is so much more than theory and technique – it is a medium through

which we can understand and give meaning to the world around us. When we weren't playing our instruments, our instructors taught us how to use language to connect different emotions and perspectives to the music we made. We wrote stories, skits, and comics inspired by various orchestral pieces, which we shared and discussed with our peers. Oftentimes, we learned about music from cultures across the world and the words from their languages that define specific cultural values. We even had the opportunity to compose original pieces of music based on themes of our choosing; words such as freedom, loss, whimsy, fury, and hope sprang to life in ways I had never before imagined in the composition lab where we learned to write according to the classical tradition.

I'm incredibly thankful that my understanding of language was fundamentally shaped by the music education I received. Although I may not practice it now, I consider music to still be a central part of who I am. As I continued to explore literacy in all of its different applications, I observed my peers as they ventured into the wild and untamed realm of social media. My unique experience of digital literacy didn't find its roots here, though; rather, I gravitated more strongly to the world of online fandom.

My relationship with mainstream social media during my preteen to early teen years was strained by the fact that interacting with these platforms caused me no small amount of anxiety. However, I still craved the social connection that I saw my friends achieve through apps like Instagram and Snapchat. One afternoon, after a long day of school, I sat down at our family's computer to practice my daily ritual of watching YouTube videos until I could no longer bear to procrastinate doing my homework. It was then that I encountered the first in what would become a long series of videos about a tabletop roleplaying game titled Dungeons and Dragons. As I scrolled through the comment section, reading countless character concepts and anecdotes from people just as nerdy as I was, I slowly felt my anxiety surrounding being perceived online lift from my shoulders. In its place grew the glowing, warm sensation of shared community.

From there, my love of fandom culture only continued to expand, and I acquainted myself with a number of different social platforms. YouTube remained the site that I frequented most often, but I spent countless hours on Fandom Wiki reading up on my favorite videogames. When I began creating original characters to play in Dungeons and Dragons, I consulted Reddit for character inspiration and lore questions. I followed Tumblr blogs and Amino communities to meet fellow fans and comment on fanart of the anime I

watched. One truth remained consistent across every platform I inhabited: fans use language to make the content we enjoy into something of our own.

Whether it's a sneaky reference slipped into ordinary conversation or a fanfiction consisting of tens of thousands of words, fans have always found ways to relate our favorite media to our independent interests and experiences. We speak a sort of code that can be taught only through immersion. Like music, fandom is a playground for language that allows me to connect my internal world with the external, both in fictional and real-world contexts.

Much like Gloria Anzaldua, my language is inseparable from the whole of my identity. It encompasses the most pivotal points of my development and continues to inform the way I approach new experiences. Language has also given me the gift of being able to relate to members of my community who came from every manner of background. In my early years, I learned Italian musical terms and French solfege alongside kids who spoke only Spanish or Vietnamese at home. Later, I met users from countries halfway around the world while engaging in discussion about popular fan theories. Just as I learned to relate my life to that which I created, I learned in equal part to draw similarities between my experiences and those of the friends and mutuals I made. Taking in these new perspectives has rounded out my understanding of literacy and made me the open-minded person I pride myself on being today.

Not only would I fail to be who I am without my unique flavor of literacy, but I would not know half as much as I do now about the world at large.