

STUDIES IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Don Quantz

The association of the performing arts and Christian faith practice extends back to early Christian times. Whether its forms have been chant, organum, liturgical dramas, motets, cantatas, hymns, gospel songs, Easter plays, sacred dance, or contemporary Christian music, the Church has nearly always had some form of artistic expression as part of its life and liturgy. Also, the Christian Church has been a dominant force in Western music and music education for much of the last two millennia. Currently, however, the Church and its music have lost their dominance in the performing arts and must seek and share its artistic place within a number of competing narratives. One of the features of many artistic endeavours is that individual advancement and gain are their primary focus. Thus, the attraction of stardom, popularity, and financial success become blended with artistic and aesthetic goals. In contrast, Nazarene post-secondary performing arts programs have a voice that calls students to a Christian and, in particular, Wesleyan understanding of the performing arts. We share a belief that a loving, holy God is central to all our art, and we can use that art to participate in God's mission of redemption and reconciliation to the world and to live a life that is Christian, holy, and missional. There are a number of ways in which our performing arts programs respond to this calling.

First, our classrooms are places where students are helped to understand that God, through Christ, is the ultimate Truth.

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It is through this lens that we understand our lives, our world, and our art. God is the Center, the Beginning, and the End, the source of all truth and knowledge. Similarly, He is the first and ultimate Creator. From His creativity come sound, color, movement, story, and picture. Although some people believe in power within themselves, Christians believe in a power outside themselves: God. This reality informs everything we do and express in the performing arts, including the possibility to create anything ourselves or to appreciate the art and creativity of someone else. All creativity began and continues with God. In truth, there would be no performing arts with-



out Him. Nazarene faculty in the performing arts affirm that God is the bases of artistic inspiration. Further, we remind students that our art is not “the end,” something that is greater than it should be, supplanting God’s Truth or our relationship with Him with artistic truth or value. We practice, learn, and perform with the awareness that those activities are part of a greater purpose: to love and serve God with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luke 10:27).

We help students understand the proper tension between self-focus, which is necessary to develop their artistic skills, and the call to service and self-surrender.

One of the characteristics of our discipline is the fact that performing arts students spend much time and effort developing their individual techniques and abilities. By necessity, they focus on themselves and their performance skills. Within the framework of God’s creativity, Nazarene performing arts programs are able to guide students into an understanding of the proper role of performing arts in their lives. Instead of developing their talents for individual advancement or gain, we work to help students sense the call to be Christ-like, offering their talents to God and His service. We help students understand the proper tension between self-focus, which is necessary to develop their artistic skills, and the call to service and self-surrender. This is partly accomplished through class teaching and discussion but also through mentoring and modeling by professors who seek to be examples of self-surrender to their students, peers, and society.

Further, we help students look at their strengths and weaknesses with honesty and candour. In the performing

arts, we are often in the public eye, and there is a temptation to seek audience approval, regardless of how that is achieved. Shortcuts are attractive. Healthy artists, however, avoid shortcuts and replacing real artistic development with anything fake or phoney. Faculty work to help these students face their weaknesses head on, by accepting the challenges and hard work that are necessary to their development as artists and people. Further, students have strengths, and we celebrate these with them. Their strengths, however, must be viewed with humility. Ultimately, our strengths are not our own but given by God, the original Creator. This call to honesty, by facing our shortcomings and celebrating our strengths, is part of our spiritual development and servant-hood, and, in turn, prepares us to be servants to others.

The high standards that are set in Nazarene performing arts programs reflect the importance that we place on excellence in our programs. Once we understand and accept God as the ultimate Creator and see ourselves with honesty and humility, we can respond by striving for excellence. This is not someone else's excellence, but our own, and it becomes our response to God's grace and its full expression in Jesus Christ. Second rate efforts are not enough. What pleases performing teachers the most is not a student with a great ability or talent (this is a temptation, to be sure), but the concerted effort and determination that students apply to their art. As well as requiring personal excellence, we ask students to be excellent by investing in each form or style of the arts with integrity and authenticity. We call them to become aware of the unique value of each form of artistic expression and embrace the diversity of performing arts as part of God's rich creativity.

Nazarene post-secondary performing arts programs also strive to help students live holy and Christ-like lives in relationship to other artists and within their communities. A healthy arts community is one where each person is valued and respected. There are some important ways in which this comes about. First, this happens when artists celebrate the successes of other artists. Admittedly, this is a challenge in the performing arts. Students know how it works: The best actor gets the lead part, the most gifted dancer gets the feature



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role, the most proficient musician is offered the solo, and second place doesn't get the gold medal. Celebrating another's success or achievements is not easy. It is only through God's grace that we are able to do that. We live the belief that in His kingdom, each of us plays a unique and important role. Second, community is developed when we seek the good for others. The faculty's interest in students goes beyond their stylistic or technical progress. It includes a desire that students develop in all areas of their lives, achieving wholeness and wellness as persons. Seeing the personal, social, and spiritual progress as well as the academic and artistic growth in a student's life offers a rich reward to every

faculty member. Third, faculty invest in all levels of students. There is a great temptation to give extra attention to the "stars" in the performing arts. They are the students who, because of the public nature of our discipline, make the teachers "look good." Instead, Nazarene performing arts faculty are called to be agents of God's grace to every student, regardless of talent or potential. In this we follow Christ's model—Jesus loved us all equally. God also expects us to be wise stewards of our gifts, and because of this expectation, He will help us fan into flame our special gifts.

As Nazarene performing arts instructors, we are proud to be part of the great legacy of Christian performing arts, and we strive to continue that tradition with our own teaching and artistic lives. We believe that Christian, holy, and missional lives can be led by performing artists as they recognize the Center of their creativity; allow art to be part of lives that are surrendered to God's purposes; assess abilities with honesty and humility; strive for excellence; and live in caring community. ■