



# The Edge Effect, Examined

For performers, the classroom provides a stimulating biodiversity of ideas.

BY JEANNE M. MCGINN, PH.D.

Scholarly endeavors may operate, for artists, as an ecological forest to the savannah of the stage. The classroom is the meeting place between these two ecosystems, and the biodiversity found there may prove to be a stimulus for unforgettable performances.

Serendipity? Or astute, purposeful planning?

The presence of palpable, joy-in-making energy that electrifies the air is unmistakable in musical performance. And the conundrum about its origin continues to enthrall.

That question—how does the musical sublime happen?—crossed my mind when I listened to Yo-Yo Ma speak about the “edge effect,” a principle his son’s eighth-grade science teacher described to the cellist decades ago: “When two ecosystems meet, at the edge where they meet, you have the most diversity and new life forms.” (Ma outlined the idea in a speech at the Aspen Institute in 2013.)

When Curtis decided to devote its next all-school project to this “edge effect,” instructors began to discuss how scholarly endeavors may operate, for some artists, as an ecological forest to the savannah of the stage. The classroom is the meeting place between these two ecosystems, and the biodiversity found there may prove to be a stimulus for unforgettable performances.

Overlapping historical and cultural realities form the center of a new course, team-taught across the liberal arts and musical studies departments, titled *The Most German of All Arts: Music in German Culture, 1918 to 1945*. Liberal arts instructor Gordana-Dana Grozdanić explains, “This is a hybrid seminar, a teaching and learning experiment for both students and us professors—as it combines music, literature and language.” Dr. Grozdanić and musical studies instructor Thomas Patteson joined students in an exploration of primary sources (essays, letters, poems, newspaper articles, diary entries) to examine the relationship between music and other aspects of culture—in particular, technology, politics, and the “new” art form of cinema. In one class, students and professors pondered the lines between documentary and propaganda as they viewed excerpts from famed filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*.

The course was “a great, unique experience” for Dr. Grozdanić. “For one, as I teach, I always learn new things myself ... Secondly, this time I learned even more, having had the opportunity to listen to and (occasionally) engage in Thomas’s expert discussions about music in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany.”

Noting wryly that “co-teaching does not mean half the work of a solo-taught class,” Dr. Patteson concurred. “Teaching together allows professors to learn from each other, which is crucial for creating a genuine intellectual community among the faculty. But the students benefit as well: being exposed to multiple viewpoints—sometimes even hearing their professors strenuously disagree with each other—helps students see that learning is an open-ended, collaborative process and encourages them to be active participants in their own education.”



## INSPIRING CURIOSITY

The overlap of disciplines in the Curtis classroom mimics the lived experience of artists. “Liberal arts classes have been a place to broaden my understanding of what surrounds the music I play,” notes organ student Bryan Dunnewald. “Reading the same poetry the composer would, seeing the art of the time, discovering the literature from the era, and making connections to our lives and what we do builds my relationship with the music and broadens my artistry.

“What takes this a step further is writing; being able to synthesize my ideas and experience in a compelling paper, in addition to the countless practical benefits, brings the aforementioned holistic knowledge into focus so I can go deeper into learning what is important to me and to my craft.”

The ways that deep learning translates into artistic performance took on new significance for voice student Sophia Hunt in the fall semester, when she performed Aaron Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* with vocal studies coach Grant Loehnig. “In research and in our class, Dickinson and the Transcendentalists, I discovered multiple editions of Dickinson’s poetry, which ended up inspiring a new version of the songs.”

As avid readers may know, the first scholarly edition of Dickinson’s poems, based on her handwritten manuscripts, was published in 1955, six years after Copland’s setting. Earlier editions were “corrected” by editors who believed that 19th-century readers were unprepared for Dickinson’s mischievous and exultant punctuation, syntax, and poetic thought. As singers prepare to perform the Copland settings, they must weigh Copland’s textual choices (including some word substitutions of his own) with the existence of more accurate texts that became available a few years later. Sophia chose to perform some of the songs with words adapted from R. W. Franklin’s 1998 critical edition. She notes that “approaching this music in a classroom before a practice room made performing it infinitely more fulfilling and meaningful.”

Indeed, for performing artists, coursework can be an example of the edge effect in action. Liberal arts instructor James Moyer explains, “Literary study is relentlessly interpretive, so it sharpens our students’ interpretive curiosity and skill, generally.” In his course *Literature and War*, students choose musical or visual works to analyze in front of the class, drawing on course discussions. “The specific modes (say, irony) and ideas (perceptions of war) of our readings open up even familiar music in ways they hadn’t noticed.” Students were particularly moved by the work of British poet Wilfred Owen, Dr. Moyer observes. “Perhaps the deepest edge effect, though, is latent and cumulative, as critical engagement with different ideas and works becomes itself a way of living, looking, and listening afresh, and before you know it, you’re not quite the person you were.”

Curiosity. Study. Inspiration. Change. The possibilities, generated by deep engagement at the edge of concentric circles, transform us as thinkers and as artists. The purposeful pursuit of understanding may create the conditions for what may seem, well, serendipitous: Music that transports. ◇

Above from left:

Where two ecosystems meet, the “edge effect” manifests in a rich variety of new life forms. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In the team-taught course *The Most German of All Arts*, students viewed diving footage from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* in the context of music in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany.

PHOTO: ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Daguerreotype of the poet Emily Dickinson, taken circa 1848. PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKICOMMONS

In the course *Literature and War*, students were especially moved by the poems of Wilfred Owen, who perished fighting in the First World War.

PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKICOMMONS

As singers prepare to perform Copland’s *Dickinson Songs*, they must weigh the composer’s textual choices with more accurate texts that became available a few years later.