

Exploring Music

Kayla Connett

In this article, Kayla Connett explores a piece of sheet music and how it connects to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Sharing some of her personal experiences as well as providing many examples, she shows readers how even in a genre that is not often thought about as “writing,” it can be beneficial to examine different factors that contribute to the creation and use of the text.

Music is everywhere. No matter where you turn, it will always be there. Billions of people in thousands of countries speaking hundreds of languages around the globe are tuning in to all sorts of music via radio, personal music devices, and performances. Music can often bridge a cultural divide, connecting people regardless of what culture or previous exposure they have. Furthermore, music is the language of life. It can be soothing and exciting. Still, everyone interprets each melody, song, or symphony differently. But no matter the interpretation, music offers a sort of feeling that you can experience within your heart and soul.

Now, since you are reading this article in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, you may ask yourself by now what music has to do with writing research, genre, or even how cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) ties into all of this talk about music. Just think of the last song you have heard. Were you concerned more with the music itself (i.e. the beat or the rhythm) or were you more interested as to what the actual lyrics of that song meant? This was the question that inspired me to use a cultural-historical activity theory approach to investigate music, and in particular

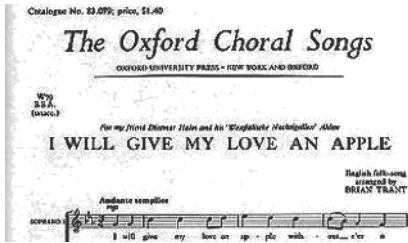


Figure 1: “I Will Give My Love An Apple”
arranged by Brian Trant

sheet music, as a genre of writing and communication. What I discovered is that as a composition, music is more complicated than it seems, but we can examine specific elements of a piece of music to help us understand its meaning and function, just like any other genre.

Analyzing a Musical Piece

As a current choir student at Illinois State University, I wanted to learn more about the music that is such a big part of my life. Furthermore, I wanted to understand more about how I identify musical pieces before I sing them. To do this, my process was to use some of the components of CHAT I learned about in my ENG 101 course, and I hoped connecting music and CHAT would help me not only be a more thoughtful musician, but think about what it means to fully examine any text as a writing researcher, which is something that you can do even if you are not a choir student and want to learn more about another kind of writing or another genre.

Once handed any piece of music, I always start by “reviewing” the piece. Reviewing means that I glance through page by page to get a feel for what I will be singing about. After this, the next step of my process is analyzing. To describe what I mean, I decided to look at one particular piece of music: “I Will Give My Love An Apple,” arranged by Brian Trant. The reason I chose the piece “I Will Give My Love an Apple” is twofold; this piece is one of my absolute favorites, and it is a piece that I feel clearly reflects some important CHAT components.

I have found that reviewing a piece of music is always a smart thing to do before I begin to sing. But although this kind of review of the text seems natural to me, taking a CHAT approach means analyzing my own interactions with a piece of writing like this composition. By thinking about the cultural and historical components of a piece of music, we can identify how these factors affect the genre, and by applying the seven components of CHAT, we can further analyze it. But CHAT is more than the terms production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. According to Joyce Walker, CHAT,

refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices. CHAT is useful because it’s a more

complicated and interesting way to look at writing, but it's also a challenge (because it's complicated).¹

All of this can be applied to music, just like any kind of writing practice. Who knew that English and choir can be intertwined with one another?

In chorus, there is more than just simply taking out the music, practicing it, and then once practiced, going out and singing it at one of our concerts. In order to fully prepare myself, I begin by examining the features of the piece. I first examine who created the piece. Looking at the example “I Will Give My Love An Apple,” the person who produced this piece is Brian Trant. Whenever looking for the person who has created a piece of music, this information can usually be found either on the top right hand side of the song, underneath the song title, or even the first page of that piece. Next, I try to figure out why this person has chosen to arrange the song the way he or she did. So, I simply ask myself (or do a little researching to find) where a writer might have gotten the idea from and what tools he used to write them down. In other words, what kind of production was used for this piece? Did he use a pencil and a piece of paper at the time to write down those ideas before actually using a computer for the finished product? In fact, not all pieces of music are handwritten, and this particular piece was printed—an important element of **production** similar to a lot of genres you might encounter.

Now, knowing that this composer probably used the pencil, paper, and computer to help him finish this piece, my next step was to shift gears into deeper thinking about the overall piece. My choir director often begins by playing a YouTube video that shows another choir performing the exact piece we are about to practice. After it is over, she starts asking us to think about why she chose this song to sing, and she often talks about how the song came to her from one of her past choral directors. This is an important element of the **distribution** of sheet music, but there are many ways that a piece of music like “I Will Give My Love An Apple” can be distributed and then placed into my hands as well as the choir's hands.

Understanding fully how this piece was given to my choir class is another thing I had to look at before I could even start to sing. I wanted to know why the choir director would choose this piece over any other piece. What caught her attention when she was reviewing this piece? How was the text **represented** to her? Did she have to think a lot before picking the piece or did she choose the piece because it reminded her of something? These questions all come to my head when I encounter a new piece, and they are all parts of CHAT.

¹Walker, Joyce R. “Just CHATing.” *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* 1 (2010). This article can be found at <http://isuwriting.com/resources/grassroots/>. For more information about CHAT, including full definitions and uses of production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology, see Walker's article or the in-depth critique of generalized writing instruction written by David Russell: “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction” in *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, edited by Joseph Petraglia.

When I first received “I Will Give My Love An Apple,” I remember looking down at the piece as if my choir director was crazy or something. How could I know why she had chosen this piece by simply re-reading it? I thought my head was about to explode. I was looking at my director, and I could sense she had something going on in her mind. But instead of explaining, she said, “Now class, begin by opening up to the first page of ‘I Will Give My Love An Apple’ and read each line to yourself. Then, let us discuss what those first sentences mean.” By doing this, the others and I were engaging in **activity**: both physically holding the piece of music and mentally wondering to ourselves what these few sentences had meant. Once finished, we closely examined the next couple of sentences. But I was still wondering about distribution and representation.

I also realize that my thinking through how a piece of music works might be a unique kind of approach. My friend who sits next to me in choir once asked me, “Why does she [our director] always do this to us . . . I hate thinking like this, especially when I know choir is where we sing and not think?” I laughed in response, but I told her that choir does involve a lot of thinking, but that both of our reactions (while different) are part of the concept of **reception**, or how people take up a text once they receive it. My reception was unique from hers, because instead of wanting to sing instead of thinking or believing “I Will Give My Love An Apple” is a horrible piece, I was thinking about the lyrical symbolism that gives the composition meaning.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines symbolism as “the use of symbols to express or represent ideas or qualities in literature, art, etc.”² Although this definition does give a great overall idea of symbolism, there are many others who have described what they feel is the true meaning of symbolism. For example, Richard Nordquist (an English professor at Armstrong Atlantic State University) defines symbolism as “the use of one object or action (a symbol) to represent or suggest something else.”³ People will interpret symbols differently, but how is the symbol represented? Whatever definition you feel that fully explains symbolism is up to you, but for me, it is expressing a word by using references to specific feelings.

Lyrical symbolism is definitely evident within “I Will Give My Love An Apple.” By reading the first sentence, “I will give my love an apple without any core,” I notice three symbols. These symbols are love, an apple, and a core. So, how does lyrical symbolism help us to not only analyze the piece but perform

²“Symbolism” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. 2014. <http://merriam-webster.com> (Aug 2014).

³Richard Nordquist discusses his definition of the literary term “Symbolism” at <http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/symbolismterm.htm>. (More info on Richard Nordquist can be found here: <http://grammar.about.com/bio/Richard-Nordquist-22176.htm>.)

it in a way that can grasp the audience’s attention at our performance (part of our distribution of the music and the audience’s reception of it, as well as the activity of performing and listening)? Taking those three symbols to place them all together, it reads: love apple core. I know that sounds a little strange, but to choir students, it is something we see everyday—phrasing that takes on more meaning than just the words when you connect it together. Next, I think about the similarities between the three words; how is love connected to an apple and then connected to a core? Well, love is similar to a heart, which is red, and an apple is red, but a core is not red. What if love is an analogy to an apple without a core? What if love is the apple and love is something that doesn’t contain a core? Lyrical symbolism is something that may at first not make sense, but by digging into the exact words and thinking about their symbolic meaning, I realize that there is more to the use of language in this song than what’s on the surface.

Lyrical Importance?

In “I Will Give My Love An Apple,” my interpretation of the song is that it talks about the main theme of love, which is tied to the main symbolism. The song connects love to an apple and explains how love is something we shouldn’t take for granted. Throughout the song, the lyrics express love through different questions, and specifically, the song tells us how love shouldn’t be messed with, and instead it should be something that should be kept until the time is right. Part of the representation of this idea is the fact that the composer addressed these questions as if a girl was asking him, and he used symbolism to convey the meaning. But picking apart this symbolism isn’t just helpful to understanding the meaning, but also relevant to how we sing the song—or in other words, the production of our presentation of the music we read on the page. By thinking about the use of lyrical symbolism, we can understand the overall feeling of what that piece is about, and this is used to determine the feeling



Figure 2: Bel Canto Choir—My Senior Year High School Choir Class (image taken by my choir director)

with which it's going to be sung. For example, analyzing the symbolism of the words in this piece gave me a sense of urging and desire to know the real way to love, so I would sing in a low tone with a lot of crescendos (increasing sound) and decrescendos (decreasing sound) to make the audience feel as if I were pulling back or struggling to sing the song like the girl in this piece is struggling to find out the real truth of love.

Musical Wrap Up!

To conclude, whether you are jamming to a song on the radio or walking on the quad listening to your iPod, take a step back and really listen to the music/lyrics of that song. You may be surprised to find how easy it is now to examine music if you are thinking about it from a CHAT perspective. In the end, it doesn't matter if you are in choir, but picking up on the use of lyrical symbolism or other elements of music that you can understand more clearly using CHAT can help you out no matter where your life takes you. I will leave you with this quote that speaks true to my heart, and I hope that after reading it, it will do the same for you:

“Music speaks what cannot be expressed
soothes the mind and gives it rest
heals the heart and makes it whole
flows from heaven to the soul.”

—Anonymous



Kayla Connett is a sophomore Special Education Major at Illinois State University and hopes to continue her singing as well. On Mondays and Wednesdays, Kayla is involved in ISU's Women's Choir. She has been singing for over 12 years and, in her senior year of high school, she was involved in five choirs and was the president of one of them. She loves God, her family, her friends, and her two dogs. In her eyes "no one has a disability, everyone has an ability."

