Harmony and Wisdom: Conversations about Music and Philosophy

Report to the American Philosophical Association

Over the course of July and August 2016, Emma Levine—a Ph.D. Candidate in music at UCSB—and I conducted eight sessions of our interdisciplinary humanities project, “Harmony and Wisdom: Conversations about Music and Philosophy,” at two senior living communities in the Santa Barbara area: Maravilla and Friendship Manor. Each of these facilities houses diverse populations in very different physical plants. Maravilla is a luxury senior living community with a posh feel to the complex, while Friendship Manor is a charity supported community on a tight budget with a building that shows some wear and tear.

The sessions we ran at each facility were on the same topics and conducted in the same manner. We executed the project in this way so as to see if different populations of seniors at different types of facilities held similar views regarding the topics discussed and whether they had similar interests, both musically and philosophically. Moreover, we approached the project in an open-ended way, so as to allow the seniors to drive the narrative and the direction of the project. We served as co-participants and co-creators, rather than as directors or facilitators.

We found that the seniors at each facility wanted a similar format for the group, shared similar philosophical and musical interests, and also had perspectives on the various issues raised and discussed that were largely consistent in displaying similar distributions of positions held. First, with respect to the format of the
sessions, the seniors at both facilities preferred a lecture-based approach with a more limited amount of dialogue and conversation than we expected. They told us that they wanted us to teach them, rather than to engage in open-ended discussion groups. They wanted to ask questions after the end of our presentations, and discuss their views a bit, but they didn’t want these sessions to lead to too much cross talk or dialogue amongst each other. When certain sessions led to more free-ranging discussions, participants would approach us after such sessions and ask that we limit such dialogue.

There were times when the seniors did engage more extensively in dialogue, especially towards the beginning of the series before they told us that they preferred lectures. We found that discussions on topics where the seniors had strong pre-existing views (such as with respect to God) were not particularly fruitful and generally resulted in the seniors speaking at length regarding their commitments, with little interest in the views of the other group members. On the other hand, when we presented them with material to which they hadn’t been previously exposed, they reacted in a way that was receptive, thoughtful, and open-minded.

The topic that worked the most poorly was when we discussed the existence of God and religion. I presented a short talk on the argument from design as put forth and criticized by Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. It was difficult to keep the participants on topic and to the seeming annoyance of the group as a whole, each senior wanted to share personal stories with respect to spiritual experiences or their strong opinions on the topic. While the seniors were eager to
share their own views, for the most part, they didn’t want to hear the contributions of their co-participants.

The most successful philosophical discussion was about racism and what types of acts and utterances constitute racism, as opposed to mere bad taste or offensive speech, using Lawrence Blum’s paper, “Racism: What it is and what it isn’t” as the basis for my talk and subsequent discussion. We raised this topic in response to Colin Kaepernick’s protest of the national anthem. Unlike the discussion of the arguments regarding the existence of God, the seniors hadn’t previously been exposed to a systematic treatment of what constitutes racism and they found the topic quite interesting. Moreover, rather than sharing strong or long-help opinions on the topic, the seniors contributed their life experiences to the discussion, which they seemed interested in hearing from their fellows.

The project was a success, and we learned a great deal about how coming from different socio-economic statuses, backgrounds, and ages contribute to the views held by seniors on diverse philosophical topics. We found there to be a similar distribution of views between the residents of the two different facilities. Moreover, the populations of each facility had similar interests topically and both requested the same format of mostly lecture with minimal discussion. For future work, it would be interesting to execute a similar project with high school students from different socio-economic backgrounds and to see if our findings are similar when working with a population forty to sixty years younger.

I’m deeply grateful to the American Philosophical Association and to the committee members overseeing the Berry Fund for their generosity and support of
this project. Using the funds I received, I created booklets for the seniors containing the texts (or portions thereof depending on copyright considerations). It is my hope that the project’s participants continue to return to the material we discussed, continue to meditate upon such issues, and use the texts as jumping off points for ongoing discussions with their fellow residents, families, and friends. It was an honor and privilege to be able to bring philosophy and music to seniors in Santa Barbara and I thank you for your support.