

Discussion on Music and the Culture of Democracy

World-renowned violist and founder of Music for Food Kim Kashkashian spoke at Boston College's Devlin Hall on Thursday, April 21, discussing the role of music in the culture of democracy. Joining Kashkashian were poet and critic Edward Hirsch, award-winning journalist Scott Poulson-Bryant and musician and author Elijah Wald, in what was a lively and insightful conversation. The discussion was part of a series hosted at Boston College's Clough Center, exploring "the complex relationship between the arts and democracy through thoughtful conversation among practicing artists and engaged cultural commentators."

Hirsch spoke about the connection between poetry and song, song and democracy. In some cultures there is no distinction between poetry and song, they are one and the same, he said. Hirsch highlighted the "work song" as a way to make difficult, repetitive activities easier, but also as a method of resistance. The "work songs" sung by slaves, were a revolution in plain site, Hirsch said.

Kashkashian began by redefining classical music as "composed music." Music with an architecture, built with a purpose. "Any music, that has been put down on paper, is a composition; just like an architectural drawing or a poem," she said. "If we think of it this way, then the question for us classical musicians becomes, how do we create a more universal access, a democratic access to composed music?" she continued. Kashkashian cited the lack of access to music programs in public schools in the US as a major issue.

One of the notions that developed over the past century is the sense of pyramid structure, Kashkashian noted. Musicians performing on a stage, assuming a "heroic" status is only one way to experience and share in composed music. "I would postulate that, that pyramid structure has to be minimized, if not destroyed." She emphasized the need for "give and take" between the audience and the musician. One possible way of doing so is by tapping into the "Golden Mean" (a number that occurs both in nature and in art) in order to bridge the gap between non-musicians and musicians. "As Monet says, it is not necessary to understand it is necessary to love."

Cultural attitudes toward music seem to be an important factor. In Armenia, Kashkashian said that she couldn't walk down a single block with composer Tigran Mansurian without people wanting to stop and talk with him! Mansurian enjoys celebrity status in Armenia – not something a composer in the United States will experience! Music: understanding it, feeling it and even playing it, is an important component of Armenian society and culture.

Scott Poulson-Bryant spoke on cultural citizenship in using culture to make advances outside the fields of law or politics. In his research, Poulson-Bryant explores ways in which "marginalized communities use culture...to embed themselves into the national narrative of citizenship in the US in the 1970s." At the same time as civil rights were being expanded, there was also less access to the means of cultural production, he said. Music has shown us the way to rehearse, believe and achieve democracy, Poulson-Bryant said.

“I regard mainstream pop as by-and-large a democratic process, not a perfect one, but more democratic than any other musical scene I know about,” Elijah Wald said. “The fact that it is democratic isn’t necessarily a good thing, democracy is a messy business,” he said. Wald spoke about the “busing” of 1975 in South Boston to integrate schools. Local residents protested, throwing rocks at the buses carrying black students going to schools and they used Fight the Power by the Isley Brothers as their anthem. South Boston residents, to protest what they perceived to be government encroachment, appropriated Fight the Power.

“I have devoted my life to music, I believe deeply in its power to unite people, and I believe deeply in democracy. But I also believe deeply that the world is a complicated place, and that we need to be willing to deal with its complications and to recognize that big, amorphous, in some ways meaningless concepts like music and democracy mean very different things to other people and even to us in other situations,” Wald said.

“Is there a way to create a space for art in general, and music in particular that isn’t just dependent on the bottom line?” Hirsch said.

Kashkashian highlighted Music for Food as one example of doing so. “Six years ago we began a project called Music for Food, and it was an attempt actually to involve artists, audiences in the community, to make everybody come together as part of the community,” she said.

Based in Boston, Music for Food is a federally-recognized 501(c)3 non-profit and now has chapters in 10 U.S. cities. Musicians volunteer their time and talent and 100% of all donations go to benefit local pantries and shelters. MFF has over 120 artists collaborating with us and has provided more than 250,000 meals to those in need, with concerts in Boston, California, Illinois, New York, New Jersey, D. C., Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.