

Lara Downes: Artist, Activist

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the background, training, and vision of an individual to create an artistic persona.
- Discuss strategies for presenting fine art to the public.
- Explain how activism can accompany musical performance.
- Design and evaluate charitable initiatives in connection with artistic personalities and performances.

Topics For Discussion

Lara Downes as Artist

The case narrative explains Lara Downes's diverse heritage and unusual artistic experience spent overseas after the death of her father. Along with her sisters, Lara obtained instruction with leading piano instructors in Europe and engaged in rigorous daily practice. The demanding training paid off with appearances at major concert halls in Europe. In her encounters abroad, the young pianist discovered a very "American" quality she wanted to pursue when she returned to her native country. Her efforts manifested in different ways, as she sought to express something special about the United States. How do Lara's background and training position her among concert pianists? How much of a competitive advantage was the "American" quality of Lara's programming and artistic vision?

- In the wake of a mass shooting in a South Carolina church in 2015, Lara recalled a poem by Langston Hughes ("Let America Be America Again"), which drove a project featuring American composers such as Amy Beach, George Gershwin, Scott Joplin, and Florence Price. The resulting album *America Again* features a mix of popular pieces and lesser-known works. Invite students to sample the album. What connotations do the pieces have in their titles and sounds? What does the album imagery convey? How does the artistic product reconcile with Lara's training as a classical pianist?
- Lara developed a tribute to Leonard Bernstein with the album *For Lenny*, released in 2018, the centennial year of his birth. Many individuals and arts organizations likewise planned tributes to the internationally-acclaimed American composer and conductor. Lara's project was fundamentally collaborative in addition to being commemorative. She solicited composer input, mirroring Bernstein's *Anniversaries* for solo of piano, which honored various individuals important to him. Again ask students to survey and evaluate the contributions that appear on this recording. Encourage them to read album descriptions and reviews. Describe the reception of this centennial Bernstein recording in a year that was difficult to break through with unique performances of his music.

- Lara followed up the collaborative effort on the album *For Lenny* with another collective recording project *Holes in the Sky*. How does this project differ artistically from the previous albums? What risks are involved with this project in particular? Given changes in the recording and listening landscape, invite critiques of the value of in-studio recording initiatives of this scope.

Lara Downes as Activist

- The case demonstrates how Lara Downes used ideas and musical performances as an opening to pursue social objectives. Although trained as a concert pianist, she has branched into writing, broadcasting, and public service. Many pop artists have become social activists, but it is less commonly seen among trained professional musicians. Why might this be the case?
- A single work on the *America Again* recording—David Sanford’s “Promise” for solo piano—prompted an entire social campaign for Lara. As detailed in the narrative, Sanford was inspired by Rita Dove’s poem “Testimonial” from *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (2000). Dove, a former United States poet laureate, wrote: “I gave my promise to the world, and the world followed me here.” Jointly with Dove, Lara developed a program called the *My Promise Project*, which drew upon American history, poetry, and music to transform communities.
 - ♦ The *My Promise Project* is open to all but focuses on young people around the United States. The campaign encourages participants to record 10-second videos announcing their promises to the world. Remark on the format of the campaign and how it might best be delivered to achieve maximum impact.
- School visits were a part of Lara’s *America Again* and *For Lenny* tours. In classrooms, she plays music and introduces ideas to inspire the children she encounters. Leonard Bernstein was a model for her as a performer who voiced social concerns and worked to improve lives beyond his music. Review the tactics that Lara brought to classrooms as part of the Bernstein project. What seems to be her objective with these visits? In light of Bernstein’s television series *Young People’s Concerts*, what other approaches could work in the classroom?
- In the concluding scenario of the case, Lara has arranged a partnership with Plan International, an organization that promotes children’s rights worldwide with particular emphasis on equal opportunities for girls. Aiming to expand her role as activist, Lara found that Plan International fit well with her female-centered *Holes in the Sky* project. Classroom visits remained, but the global reach of Plan International allowed students to tap “digital pen pals” assembled by the organization around the world.
 - ♦ With the digital pen pal initiative as a base, Lara’s sponsor, The Yamaha Corporation, has offered its Disklavier technology to unite students globally through music. Lara can decide how these digitally-enhanced “player pianos” could be deployed. The case describes some ideas for using the technology to share music between classrooms around the world. Which of the proposed ideas could have the greatest meaning for the children? Readers can research the Disklavier technology and develop further ideas that would have impact. How should the *Holes in the Sky* project play a role in the content delivery and student interaction?

- ♦ The partnership linking Lara Downes with Plan International and Yamaha is in its early stages and limited to select classrooms at this time. Ideas are further sought for how the student interaction and technology on display can maximize impact around the world. Digital pen pals will need some periodic correspondence, and Yamaha can only provide a set number of Disklaviers worldwide, for example. How could the campaign under Plan International develop a broader and more sustained reach?
- ♦ Lara's previous classroom initiatives around social justice have been custom tailored around musical projects. The artist has begun thinking about "deliverables" with her past, present, and future social campaigns.
 - Lara is intent on continuing the *My Promise Project* she had begun with Rita Dove. How could goals be set for an initiative of this sort, so that its momentum is not lost? How can success of the *My Promise Project* be measured? Should it stand within or apart from the Plan International campaign with Yamaha?
 - Lara is looking to develop some benchmarks for the Plan International partnership. How can the proposed initiative extend beyond the classrooms currently enlisted? Ask students to work in groups to compare solutions and present consensus ideas to the larger class. What metrics can be used to determine success of the project, either as originally conceived or in an expanded form with wider reach?