

# SERENADE FOR HAITI



GRADES 6-12  
CLASSROOM GUIDE

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## TEACHING THE FILM:

**Serenade for Haiti** is a touching documentary that chronicles the story of the students and teachers at Sainte Trinite Music School in Port-au-Prince Haiti, before and after the devastating 2010 earthquake. A class screening of the film may supplement a social studies, global studies, or arts/music curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, *Serenade for Haiti* will encourage students to consider art and music as a fundamental building blocks of society and self, instrumental in the development of full personhood and culture. Discussion questions and supplementary materials facilitate further research into related topics such as global poverty, recovery from trauma and Haitian history.

All SFFILM Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFILM Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

Guide created by Lizzy Brooks.  
Please direct all comments and queries to SFFILM Education:

Keith Zwolfer, Associate Director of Education  
39 Mesa Street, Suite 110 - The Presidio San Francisco, CA 94129-1025  
kzwolfer@sffs.org  
415.561.5040





## USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Serenade for Haiti**.

Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

## ABOUT THE FILM

“Music is our refuge,” says a student at the Sainte Trinité Music School in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. “With music . . . we feel we are in another world, far from troubles.” Recognizing those troubles but celebrating the refuge, this documentary is a testimony to the role that art can play in creating community and sustaining hope under the most difficult circumstances. Shot in Port-au-Prince over a seven-year period both before and after the 2010 earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands and reduced much of the city to rubble, *Serenade for Haiti* finds a sanctuary of hope at Sainte Trinité, which has been training young people in classical European and Haitian musical traditions since the 1950s. Replete with vivid images and joyous sounds, the film focuses on the students—most of them poor, some orphaned by political violence—and their teachers, many former students themselves. All speak eloquently about how the discipline of music has helped them discover their own voices and value in the world, but nothing speaks more forcefully than the glorious music itself. After the quake, with the school’s stately white buildings in ruins, lessons and practice continue outdoors, maintaining a rhythm of resilience. In one teacher’s words, “The country is destroyed. All the buildings are destroyed. Music must go on. Life goes on.”

Directed by Owsley Brown  
USA 2016, runtime 72 min  
In French and Haitian Creole with English subtitles  
Grades: 6-12

### Recommended Subject Areas:

French  
History  
Journalism  
Music  
Peer/Youth Issues  
Social Science  
World Affairs



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

**Serenade for Haiti** will touch a chord with any students who have played an instrument, particularly in the school band. Before watching the film, you may encourage students to consider the role that music plays in their own lives, whether it is original music that they compose, live music that they perform, or music that they listen to. How does music transcend cultural, national and economic boundaries? What is the language of music?

Students will take more from the film if they have some understanding of Haitian history, politics, and the disaster of the 2010 earthquake. The Supplemental Resources section of this guide offers links to lesson plans that cover the Haitian revolution, relations between the United States and Haiti, and the devastating 2010 earthquake.

### POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

#### Character and Story

- 1) Describe the students at Sainte Trinité Music School.
  - What are their values?
  - What are their goals and hopes?
  - What are their lives like inside and outside of school?
  - How are these students like your classmates in the United States? How are their lives different?
- 2) Describe the faculty at Sainte Trinité Music School.
  - What are the backgrounds of the music teachers?
  - Why are the teachers working at the school? What do

- they hope to give to their students?
- How do the teachers create a culture of excellence at Sainte Trinité?
- What do they teach their students beyond how to play instruments?

3) Describe Father David César, the director of Sainte Trinité.

- What kind of a leader is Father David?
- How does Father David view his work and the mission of the school before the earthquake?
- How does he react to the earthquake? How does he avoid losing hope?
  - What does Father David's example teach his students, faculty and the film's viewers about leadership in adversity?

4) Describe Marc Valens.

- How does Marc grow and change during the course of the film?
- What are Marc's goals in the beginning of the film?
- What are his goals in the end of the film?
- How do you think Marc's experience of growing up and learning was transformed by the earthquake and by his attendance at Sainte Trinité?

## WHAT KIND OF A LEADER IS FATHER DAVID?

#### Context

- 1) What are the teaching and learning goals of Sainte Trinité Music School?
  - What does the faculty hope to impart to their students?
  - Why do the Sainte Trinité teachers believe it is important to learn classical music?
  - What are the benefits of studying a classical instrument?



- What other art forms offer similar benefits? What other subjects and areas of study require practice and discipline? What other mediums offer emotional release?

2) The film begins with a group of Sainte Trinité students describing music as a refuge and a place of comfort.

- What does it mean to call music a refuge?
- How does the act of playing music promote emotional healing?
- How does the community of the school support students as they work through trauma?
- What does singing teacher Nicole Saint-Victor mean when she tells her students to leave their problems at the door?
- Are there areas in your own life where you use creative practice as a refuge or a sanctuary?
- How can music be both an escape from pain and a source of healing?

3) What is your impression of Haitian culture after watching this film?

- What are Haitian values?
- What is life like in Haiti?
- How do history, politics and culture enter into the everyday lives of the citizens of Port-au-Prince?
- How do the Haitians we meet in the film feel about their history and their national identity?

4) After the earthquake, Father David called the school orchestra together to play for the displaced survivors.

- Why does he feel that it's important for the orchestra to play music? Why doesn't he tell the musicians to do something more concrete and practical, like help with cleaning and rebuilding?

- What can music give to the displaced and grieving survivors of the earthquake?
- What does this example show us about the role of the arts in society? Why is it important to value, teach and preserve art and music?

## Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) The soundtrack of the film is a mix of recorded music from the school, and the sounds of regular life in Haiti.

- What did this soundtrack add to the film?
- How did the music help to tell the story?

2) Serenade for Haiti was shot over seven years, before and after the 2010 earthquake.

- What do you think were the filmmakers' original intentions when they began the project? What was this film originally about?
- How did the earthquake transform the story that the filmmakers were telling?
- How does the process of documentary filmmaking account for the unplanned?
- What choices do documentary makers face as life unfolds in front

of the camera? What choices do you think these filmmakers faced as they came to terms with the devastation of the earthquake and the destruction of the music school?

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CALL MUSIC A REFUGE?

3) Does this film have a message?

- How did you feel after the film ended? What do you think the filmmakers want you to take away from this film?
- How do the film's elements—story, theme, and style—work together to communicate?



## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) **Serenade for Haiti** is a story about a school. If you were going to make a film about your own school, where would you direct its focus?

What is special about your school?

Which teachers would you interview?

Which students would you follow?

Which areas of the campus would you include in your film?

Write a short paragraph about what your film would accomplish: what thoughts and feelings do you want people to have about your school, your fellow students and your teachers after they have left the theater?

Write a logline for your film idea. A logline is a one- or two-sentence synopsis of the story of a film. Your logline should pique a reader's interest and make viewers excited to watch the film.

2) A class screening of **Serenade for Haiti** provides an entry point for debate about the value of the National Endowment for the Arts, and other publicly supported arts programming. Use the Supplemental Resources section of this guide to examine the issues surrounding recent proposals to defund public arts programs.

Hold a classroom debate. One team will argue in favor of Father David's view that public art and music offers benefits to the larger society. The other team will argue in favor of cutting public costs and funding the arts through private philanthropy.



## California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- Grade 7: Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- Grade 8: Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

## Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 9-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



## MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

### SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.



### CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed.</p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format?</p> <p>What technologies are used to present the message?</p> <p>What visual and auditory elements are used?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</p> <p>Who is delivering the message?</p> <p>Who originally constructed the message?</p> <p>What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language.</p> <p>What is the subject of the media message?</p> <p>What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?</p> <p>What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?</p> <p>To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</p> <p>Who receives the message?</p> <p>For whom is the message intended?</p> <p>What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?</p> <p>What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?</p> <p>How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</p> <p>Why was the message constructed?</p> <p>Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?</p> <p>To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?</p> <p>What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>

## THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

**1895** The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., Train Arriving at the Station)

**1900-1920** Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

**1926** John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

**1929** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

**1935** Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

**1960s** The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

**1988** The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

**PRESENT DAY** The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



## THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

### Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

### The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

### Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

### Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

### Haitian History and Current Events

Lesson Plan, Haitian Revolution

[http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/lessonplans&ideas/Lesson\\_Plan--Haitian\\_Revolution.pdf](http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/lessonplans&ideas/Lesson_Plan--Haitian_Revolution.pdf)

Teaching for Change: Teaching about Haiti

<http://www.teachingforchange.org/teacher-resources/haiti>

New York Times teaching about the Haitian Earthquake

[https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/14/5-ways-to-teach-about-haiti-right-now/?\\_r=0](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/14/5-ways-to-teach-about-haiti-right-now/?_r=0)

Pulitzer Center Lesson Plan: Haiti After the Quake

<http://pulitzercenter.org/education/lesson-plan-haiti-one-year-later>

### The Role of Art in Society

Debate.org: Should Government Subsidize the Arts?

<http://www.debate.org/opinions/should-government-subsidize-the-arts>

The Atlantic: The State of Public Funding for the Arts in America

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/01/the-state-of-public-funding-for-the-arts-in-america/424056/>

The Washington Post: A Trump Attack on the Arts Would Be More Than Just Symbolic

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/01/19/cutting-the-nea-is-first-move-to-eliminate-a-free-open-public-realm/?utm\\_term=.86cf6b5a2ec8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/01/19/cutting-the-nea-is-first-move-to-eliminate-a-free-open-public-realm/?utm_term=.86cf6b5a2ec8)

Forbes: Public Funding for the Arts

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidmarotta/2012/09/17/public-funding-for-the-arts/#7e29379465f8>

The Julliard Journal: To Fund or Not Fund Shouldn't Be the Question

<http://www.juilliard.edu/journal/fund-or-not-fund-shouldn%E2%80%99t-be-question>

The Heritage Foundation: Ten Good Reasons to Eliminate Public Funding for the Arts

<http://www.heritage.org/report/ten-good-reasons-eliminate-funding-the-national-endowment-orthe-arts>

New York Times: What if Trump Really Does End Money for the Arts?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/30/arts/design/donald-trump-arts-humanities-public-television.html>



## REVIEWS

### Indiewire

Kate Erbland

Oct 14, 2016 1:00 pm

Documentarian Owsley Brown's third feature, "Serenade for Haiti," is bound for New York City's prestigious DOC NYC festival next month, and continues his burgeoning tradition of exploring and celebrating music and art. The film was shot over a seven-year period and focuses on the Sainte Trinité Music School in Port-au-Prince, all the better to capture a little-seen side of Haiti and some of its wonderfully talented youth.

The film is billed "as story of resilience and great humanity [that] unfolds as the teachers and students of Sainte Trinité sustain a deep commitment to music and education against extraordinary odds, including the destruction of their school in the 2010 earthquake and the subsequent efforts to rebuild it."

The country — and school's — legacy of and dedication to classical music takes center stage, bolstered by a series of interviews with Saint Trinité school leaders, instructors and students, all of whom work to present a complex look at an often overlooked institution and culture.

"Serenade for Haiti" includes a mess of talent behind the camera, too, including cinematographer Marcel Cabrera and sound designer Richard Beggs.

### Shadow and Act

NOVEMBER 16, 2016 by ARAMIDE A. TINUBU

Like many of my friends and loved ones, I was horrified and disgusted by the outcome of the Presidential Election last week. I spent twenty-four hours in a stupor scrolling through my various

social media timelines and grieving a version of America that was so cruelly snatched from our grasp. A day later, I woke up and got real. Being an American in itself embodies a particular sort of privilege, despite my Blackness and womanness, my socio-economic status and education provide me with a particular lifestyle and cushion that many Black women across the globe could only dream of. Though I have every right to be paralyzed by Trump's ascendance into the highest office of our land, my self-pity stems from a particular type of isolation, one that often cuts off Black Americans from the rest of the African Diaspora; essentially enabling us to ignore the plights of others.

The island of Haiti has a remarkable history. One that includes the country's defeat of Napoleon in the early nineteenth century. If you know nothing about the Haitian Revolution, you've become accustomed to the images of a deeply impoverished and corrupt country ravished by natural disasters — most horrifically 2010's earthquake and most recently, last month's Hurricane Matthew. In "Serenade For Haiti" director Owsley Brown cracks open those images and misconceptions, delving further into the rich culture and traditions of Haiti through the Sainte Trinité Music School in Port-au-Prince. The film opens in 2007, three years before the earthquake of 2010 would leave the school and much of Haiti's population in shambles. Following the school's music director Father David César, several staff members, including cello teacher Bernadette Williams, and 9-year old student Marc Valens, the audience comes to understand the importance of music and art in a country with little opportunity.

(adsbygoogle = window.adsbygoogle || []).push({});

For the film's subjects and all of the other pupils and instructors at the school, music is solace; it's a way to heal pain, to forget, and possibly serves as a gateway to an otherwise unattainable opportunity. Told over a seven year period from 2007 to 2014, "Serenade For Haiti" touches lightly on the school history and its students, never really diving in deeply to any one person's



backstory. I felt that the 70-minute documentary may have benefited from connecting the audience more profoundly with any of the subjects; especially Marc Valens whom we see grow from 9-years old to 16 years old and whose sheer determination, warm spirit, and infectious personality bubbled over, bursting brightly onto the screen.

Still, the images, and videos of the 2010 earthquake destruction provide a sobering and horrifying glimpse into all that Haiti loss. Using the power of his camera, Brown positions us in this particular place and time. With over 300,000 deaths and 1.7 million people displaced, it is still the most catastrophic earthquake in Haiti's present day history. Sainte Trinité was just one of the many casualties. Images of the teachers and students dropping violin cases and drums out of crumbling facades are not images one will quickly be able to forget. Post-earthquake, Father César stands on the land where Sainte Trinité stood, a breath away from breaking down, while Marc's mother recounts desperately searching for her son amongst the rubble for four days before finally locating him. Vignettes of school children clutching their instruments in one hand and chairs in another as they moved outside from makeshift area to makeshift area showed their weariness but desire to press forward.

Much more of a message than a fully encompassing documentary film, "Serenade For Haiti" might quickly gloss over the crippling effects of the 2010 earthquake for the citizens of Haiti and the people of Sainte Trinité Music School but it doesn't sugarcoat the trauma and anxiety that continues to permeate throughout the nation. Concluding in 2014, the film ends on a weary but hopeful note. Sounds of the Boy's Choir glide softly through the air while small children pick up their instruments for the first time amongst the loud banging of construction and rebuilding; it's hard not to consider the loss and despair that citizens of Haiti will encounter again in just two short years.

In America, many of us are grieving as is our right. Many of our lives and livelihoods are very much at stake, as they have been for centuries. However, Owsley Brown's "Serenade For Haiti" though

just skimming the surface of the history of Sainte Trinité Music School and the island Haiti, provides a timely and much-needed message. We only need to stretch out our hands to reach one another to begin, to rebuild and look toward the future. It is hope, after all, that springs eternal.