

Some Personal Reflections On Past Methods Of Teaching And What They Can Tell Us About Current And Future Initiatives

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I have been active in the teaching of theory for close to fifty years, dating back to my graduate assistant days at Eastman in 1956. During this not inconsiderable span of time I have been fortunate not only to observe the remarkable evolution of music theory as a separate scholarly discipline, but also to participate in the changing philosophies and technological advances employed in its teaching. In this article I will attempt to draw on that experience and knowledge in presenting a broad historical survey of theory pedagogy in America during the last half century. While you may not find your favorite author among the selection of undergraduate texts in the appended bibliography, I believe the books on this list serve as representative models which typify the different approaches prevalent during the successive decades from 1950 to the present. Following this chronological overview, I will address some issues raised in the recent College Music Society's Initiatives in Music Theory drawn up by Severine Neff, the Board Member for Music Theory in that society. (A copy of these Initiatives is available on the CMS web site.) Although these remarks will attempt to incorporate the achievements and failures of the past in evaluating the potential success of these Initiatives for the future, I remind you that anything I say in this regard stems from a purely personal bias.

The initial pair of bibliographical entries provide some general background for the succeeding chronological breakdown into subsequent decades. While David Thompson's *A History of Harmonic Theory in the United States 1897-1966* (1980) culminates in the mid 60s, Michael Rogers' *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory: An Overview of Pedagogical Philosophies* (1984) explores more contemporary pedagogical approaches.

Two textbooks of strikingly differing philosophies dominated the market during my own undergraduate days in the early 50s. Even though the venerable Walter Piston *Harmony* (first edition, 1941) continued to perpetuate certain traditions inherited from earlier English manuals such as Kitson or Prout, it nevertheless

broke new ground by relieving the obligatory pages of endless half-note progressions with short examples of *real* music from a surprising range of tonal literature. The Allen McHose *Contrapuntal Harmonic Technique of the 18th Century* (1947), on the other hand, really amounted to a statistical stylistic study of two specific historical genres—the chorales and chorale preludes of J. S. Bach—with particular emphasis on their harmonic and functional tendencies. This “green bible,” used by Robert Ottman in my sophomore theory class at North Texas University, was supplemented with sight singing, keyboard, and dictation manuals (all Eastman oriented and all green), insuring that the student could both write, play, sing, and hear Bach chorales with equal aptitude. This four-pronged approach to practical musicianship with its stress on empirical simulation as well as writing and aural skills was admirable. But unless the curriculum included a junior-level “form and analysis” course (and many did not at that time), the two-year extent of undergraduate theory courses never succeeded in escaping the confines of the Baroque period, leaving students to cope as best they could with later music (of which, obviously, there was quite a bit). Never mind even mentioning twentieth-century procedures—a topic wholly relegated to a few scattered graduate offerings, but usually of interest to only those “weird” composition majors.

The impact of events during the 60s on theory teaching was four-fold. The possibility of inexpensive multiple copies, resulting from improvements in reproductive technology (mimeograph to overhead transparencies to xerography), vastly increased the range of music literature available to students in the theory class. No longer were teachers forced to rely on tattered class copies of Schirmer sonatina collections to supply examples of stereotypical Classical forms. This new-found accessibility of different genres and composers (even twentieth-century) spawned a corresponding interest in *analysis* “for analysis sake,” an evolving discipline which gradually began to erode the older traditional skills courses, such as stylistically-oriented counterpoint. In turn, this redirected interest gave rise to the first generation of theory-class anthologies, as opposed to the older musicological collections such as HAM.¹ Two early examples immediately come to mind—the historically oriented Charles Burkhart *Anthology for Music Analysis* (first edition, 1964), which featured a selection of complete pieces spanning 18th through 20th-century composers arranged in chronological order,

and the Howard Murphy-Robert Melcher-Willard Warch *Music for Study* and *Music for Advanced Study* series (1960/65), whose shorter tonally-oriented excerpts were organized by specific chord function or device. Future anthologies tended to follow these prototypical layouts.

The reforms of the “new education and open classroom” in primary and secondary public schools during the late 50s eventually spilled over into the collegiate arena during the 60s. Nowhere was this transfer more clearly exemplified than in the Contemporary Music Project, sired by the Music Educators National Conference and funded by the Ford Foundation. A number of experimental pilot theory programs sprouted up in selected universities around the country, headed by faculty who were often more compositionally than theoretically oriented. Although each project was allowed to establish its own goals and pursue its own individual objectives, as a whole the pilot programs were encouraged to integrate the various disciplines of theory, history, and performance as much as possible through cross reference or team teaching. The strong emphasis on compositional techniques encouraged students to relate seemingly dissimilar historical periods, such as the use of isorhythm by both Machaut and Messiaen, or the striking similarities between a Baroque continuo and a jazz rhythm section. In my own pilot class of fourteen music education majors at Eastman, which intentionally included one student of each orchestral instrument, I stressed short original composition assignments that explored one or more specific musical idioms or devices. As a final sophomore project, each student took the lead sheet of a popular ballad of their choice and made a complete arrangement for studio orchestra, which the class then performed and recorded. A retrospective evaluation of these pilot programs revealed that while this more adventuresome methodology doubtless stimulated the students to a greater extent than an endless parade of figured-bass exercises, it also sometimes smacked of a superficial, almost dilettantish approach to the acquisition of solid musical skills.

As a means of evaluating and propagating the results of these pilot programs several years after their initiation, a number of conferences and workshops were held across the country during the summer months. These meetings had the effect of drawing together well-known scholars from various disciplines and institutions, often for the first time. From the ensuing discussions and interactions arose the need for some form of permanent

organization that would insure a continuation of this dialogue. One of the first resulting regional societies (the Music Theory Society of New York State, founded by John Hanson in early 70s) eventually lead to the formation of the national organization The Society for Music Theory in the mid 70s, encouraged by generous financial support from the College Music Society.

Although several textbooks and anthologies published during the 1970s were the direct product of pilot CMP programs, none proved particularly big sellers on the market. These included the Robert Cogan/Pozzi Escot *Sonic Design* (New England Conservatory, 1976), with its eclectic emphasis on such secondary parameters as texture and tone color, the Leo Kraft *Gradus* (Queens College, 1976), with its cyclical approach to the presentation of material, and the David and Susan Ward-Steinman *Comparative Anthology of Music Forms* (San Diego State College, 1976), with its analogue correlations to the visual arts. Meanwhile, a new problem was arising—the almost exponential increase of enrollment in collegiate music programs at larger state universities. In their search for a solution, the faculty at Michigan State in general and Paul Harder in particular turned to the programmed text, which would allow individual students to work at their own pace without the necessity of tying up large numbers of faculty in small classes. Since his resulting *Harmonic Materials in Tonal Music: a Programmed Text* (1968) seemed an desirable way out of the dilemma of hiring more and more staff, several hundred students were sometimes herded into auditoriums to sight sing, take dictation, and listen to lectures. Or, as the case in several institutions (which will remain anonymous), they were assigned cubicles equipped with playback tape recorders and expected to show up each morning at 8 AM to operate these machines on their own; individual “faculty conferences” were scheduled about once a month. Well, you can imagine how well that worked, and what would happen in the week immediately preceding the final exam. Nevertheless, despite their initial problems these early programmed texts and tapes paved the way for the sophisticated computer software presently existing in these areas.

About the same time, testing at the Universities of Michigan and Cincinnati convinced Paul Cooper of the feasibility of teaching basic undergraduate theory through a historical-chronological approach. His resultant text, *Perspectives in Music Theory: An Historical-Analytical Approach* (1973) and its methodology, were also

reflected in the “Literature and Materials” curriculums at Juilliard and Indiana, as well as such later books as John Baur’s *Music Theory through Literature* (1985).

I view the pedagogical trends of the 80s and 90s as splitting in two divergent directions. The first, represented by the Edward Aldwell-Carl Schachter text, signaled a return to the “old fashioned” tonal harmony text with a novel twist. Building on the foundation laid by Allen Forte’s *Tonal Harmony in Concept and Practice* in the mid 60s, a book which unfortunately never received wide circulation, their *Harmony and Voice Leading* (first edition, 1978) placed an increased emphasis on the melodic or linear aspect of music by evoking basic principles of Schenkerian reductive procedures while stopping short of actually incorporating extensive voice-leading graphing. Due to its excellent topical organization, careful selection of musical examples, inclusion of keyboard exercises, and limited historical scope (no twentieth-century material), it proved an unqualified boon for those music schools with more advanced or sophisticated students. Coupled with a species counterpoint course and a solid aural skills program, it suggested a return to the skill-oriented theory programs in the 40s, albeit incorporating a much broader analytical outlook and range of music literature.

However, the Aldwell-Schachter failed to meet the demand of a more readily *accessible* and at the same time more *comprehensive* text for larger state universities, who now expected their students to cover both the tonal and nontonal repertoires in only two years. This void was filled by two books which proved to be very popular—the Bruce Benward *Music in Theory and Practice* (first edition, 1977) and the Stefan Koska-Dorothy Payne *Tonal Harmony with an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music* (first edition, 1984). Both featured a writing style that was readily comprehensible, along with self-tests, extensive workbooks, and even tapes of the musical examples. Needless to say, they have gone with several subsequent editions.

Although I hesitate to include my own book on this illustrious list, it does exhibit several elements that demonstrate some current trends in theory teaching. In addition to raising the ante of the Aldwell-Schachter by including actual voice-leading graphing, *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music* (1997) extends the Western musical canon to include such heretofore neglected genres as Strauss waltzes, Sousa marches, Joplin rags, gospel hymns, jazz standards, and even a little of the Beatles (no Eminem yet), all of which are

aurally accessible on a accompanying CD.² Renewed emphasis is placed on more creative projects such as melody harmonization, as well as keyboard skills and current terminology (such as pitch class, interval cycles, commercial chord symbols, “tritone substitution,” etc.). I conclude with mention of the new theory kit by Steven Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening* (2003). Curiously enough, its completely integrated approach cycles back to McHose’s original concept some fifty years earlier. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the increasingly sophisticated software that extends not only to aural skills but general information and musical examples (both notated and performed) as well.

I trust this brief survey has at least partially succeeded in laying the groundwork for a consideration of the recent CMS Initiatives in Music Theory. Perhaps if nothing else, it may aid in deterring us from being “condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past.” I will not attempt to paraphrase the contents of Severine Neff’s position paper but instead select certain portions on which to base my comments.

Let me begin by stating that these remarks are confined only to those courses which constitute part of the *undergraduate* core curriculum—usually two years of freshman-sophomore theory followed in some cases (if you are lucky) with a “form and analysis” or even counterpoint class. One might even wish to make a further distinction—separating bona fide majors at a school of music, who desire to make music their profession, from non-majors, who are opting for elective theory courses in a music department. In the latter case the students are frequently learning to play an instrument, such as guitar or keyboard, and tend to enroll in these courses to increase their knowledge of notation, rudiments, and chords while acquiring some practical skills in harmonization (whether they really get what they want is another issue). In the former instance, the policies of the particular school of music in question determine the contents of the theory courses for their music majors.

As Severine Neff has so forcefully underscored, the typical core theory sequences for majors in many music schools or departments have frequently shrunk to a total of not more than three or four semesters. Consequently, it is extremely crucial that within this abbreviated framework we must be dead certain that *what we do* teach is absolutely essential to the education of a well-rounded

musician. I wish to underscore this point, since in reading the Initiatives report, I keep encountering such expressions as “non-Western,” “intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches,” “non-canonical studies,” “feminist philosophies,” and “documentary and sketch studies.” This diversity, while providing admirable areas of study for upper-division or graduate courses, may give rise to two problems I feel are sometimes all too common in freshman-sophomore theory classes.

Permit me to illustrate the first scenario. I recently taught a graduate music history seminar for DMA students entitled “The Russian School.” On the first day of class I handed them the titles of about twenty lesser known musical compositions from that country and asked if they could identify the genre and composer. Although two students were from the Ukraine, three from Bulgaria, and one from Turkey (all geographical locations that would suggest at least a passing acquaintance with Russian music), no one person in the class knew more than four! I then asked for a definition of a “seminar” and received this approximate explanation: “A seminar is a group of individuals knowledgeable on a particular topic who periodically come together to discuss issues and deliver reports of their research.” Now I ask you—how could my “Russian School” class qualify as a seminar? It seems more likely to me a 101 rather than a 590 course. If one encounters this situation with doctoral-level students in a respected music school, how much can we expect from raw high school graduates coming into freshman theory for the first time? Perhaps the most frequent request I received during the second-edition revisions of my harmony text was the need for additional drills and exercises—in guess what? Fundamentals! I fear we faculty members are sometimes guilty of teaching what interests *us* at the moment rather than catering to what the students actually need. I personally know of many such instances with teaching assistants, who cannot wait to get out of their graduate seminars to inflict the latest concepts of set similarity relations or transformational networking on their poor unsuspecting sophomores.

As to the second problem, is it really necessary that we teach undergraduates about *everything* in their first two years? By gradually accepting everyone else’s responsibilities over the years (“let theory teach that”), we are now expected during this abbreviated time span to cover everything from key signatures to combinatoriality (not to mention counterpoint and form). We are

beginning to resemble that proverbial camel with the huge load in its back trying to get through the “eye of the needle” gate. I am here to plead that we don’t need anything *else* to teach. We just need to do a better and more efficient job with the material we already have.

The apparent distinctions between “voice leading in Beethoven,” “popular music,” and “nonwestern cultures” found in the Initiatives also trouble me. There is a vast stylistic gulf existing between the first two and the third, as exemplified in that misleading expression “Music is the international language.” As Leonard Meyer has convincingly demonstrated, music may communicate through referential and psychological means, but it lacks the specific exactitude or concrete definitions that words in a language possess. And musical communication is certainly not *international*, unless we can prove our expertise in the social/ artistic mores of such widely differing countries as Korea, Libya, Tibet, or New Guinea. Granted, the musics of these nations may share some common “universals” in their underlying basic materials, but their embodied music meaning is something else again. Interesting as these topics are, we simply do not possess the time or knowledge during a student’s first two years to wander into these “dragon-infested” waters unless we are terribly naive about the results.

On the other hand, provided we confine our studies to *Western* musical literature, regardless of its locale, type, composer, or origin, we are on safer ground. I personally fail to see the difference between the voice-leading procedures in a Beethoven slow movement and those of a popular jazz ballad, since *both* are underpinned by the same tonal foundations. In addition to Allen Forte’s ground breaking book in the latter area, published Schenkerian analyses of Paul Simon, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and the Beatles only serve to confirm this. I am all for “expanding the canon” to include heretofore neglected and prejudiced genres and composers, provided they partake of the common spring of Western compositional techniques---techniques that form the basic pillars of freshman and sophomore theory. In a *Symposium* article several years ago,³ I tried to make this case by demonstrating how the scherzo of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 14, No. 1 in E major and George Harrison’s *Something* employ an almost identical hierarchical use of motivic parallelism, or how the *Tristan* Prelude and the second side of Beatles’ *Abbey Road* both utilize a similar “double-tonic complex” of A and C. In the process I proposed

that often the best way for a student to remember the point you are making is to illustrate it with an musical quotation from an “unexpected” source. The market is already overloaded with harmony texts whose examples are largely devoted to the piano literature of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. On the other hand, you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of such books that list commercial chord symbols (symbols which appear on almost every piece of popular sheet music), much less include actual citations from popular or jazz standards.

Let me assure you that I have nothing against art history, interdisciplinary or sketch studies, and feminist philosophies. I would certainly hope and expect that such topics would be reflected in our upper undergraduate or graduate offerings. However, as the risk of inciting the wrath of scholars in these fields, I really must confess that they seem to have little place in undergraduate theory. If it is all that necessary to find *other* things to teach, then by all means let’s do some more dictation or keyboard or sight singing--fundamental skills which unfortunately have experienced a gradual and discouraging decline in recent years.

In closing, let me admonish you to be wary of continually copying the pedagogical techniques of others, no matter how successful they *appear* to be. Rather, be yourself and do what you are most comfortable with—as Polonius advises us, “To thine own self be true.” Some teachers always seem to be preoccupied in a continual and futile search for what I call “El Dorado,” that mystical textbook or packet of materials that will somehow miraculously teach itself. As the field of music education has sometimes demonstrated to its own detriment, we can easily become too entangled in “methods.” Maintain your curiosity about music, and when you find something interesting, write it up and present it at conferences. I would hate to think that our discipline consists of two separate camps---pedagogues on the one hand who disdain research, and speculative theorists and analysts on the other who disdain undergraduate classroom teaching. Rather, we should be all strive to become theorist musicians in the fullest sense of the term.

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(Increasing use of computer programs for aural skills and fundamentals)

ENDNOTES

¹ Archibald T. Davison and Willi Apel, eds. *Historical Anthology of Music*, 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946-1950.

²Without slighting women composers this time around, the new edition will include even more such selections on a CD-ROM disc accompanying each textbook.

³"Beethoven, *Tristan*, and the Beatles," *College Music Symposium* 30/1 (Spring 1990), 142-52.