

Reviews

Gary Karpinski, *Aural Skills Acquisition: The Development of Listening, Reading, and Performing Skills in College-Level Musicians*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Reviewed by David Butler

The book makes an ironic first impression. When you pick it up initially, you can't help thinking that its massive title (truncated from this point on to *Aural Skills Acquisition*) seems misplaced on an octavo-sized book, not quite two centimeters thick. But the title is much more appropriate than you first suspect. *Aural Skills Acquisition* is not just one more aural skills manual, filled to the edges with specimens for sight-singing and dictation. Rather, its focus is the pedagogy of aural skills and its range comes credibly close to the breadth suggested by the title.

The book's eight chapters are collected under two major headings. Part I, slightly more than half the book's length, is titled "Listening Skills"; Part II is entitled "Reading and Performing Skills." These two headings are intended to be broader than the typical "ear training" and "sight singing" staples of the aural skills classroom, however. The former is intended to cover skills beyond music dictation, and the latter involves not just correct conversion of visual code to sound, but skilled reading and literate, tonally savvy performance.

The musical scope of the book is confined to common-practice Western metric and tonal idioms, which makes a tacit statement that it is a sensible first step in a much-needed series. The discussion is supported by almost 300 references, drawing from the literatures of aural training, historical musicology, music theory and analysis, and music cognition.

Listening Skills

The first chapter, "Identification of Basic Features," discusses six fundamental characteristics of musical sound (texture, timbre, tessitura/register, tempo, dynamics, and articulation) that—the author asserts—listeners can learn to identify at the earliest stages of musical study. The rationale for including a discussion of these foundational characteristics isn't entirely clear: although instruction in recognizing variations in these characteristics is considered optional in the college-level aural skills curriculum (p. 11), it is then suggested that the topics really should be somehow interwoven with, or covered concurrently with, topics in later chapters. But if listeners can identify these musical characteristics at the earliest stages of musical study, shouldn't we assume that college-level musicians are past this stage of musical development? What is a reasonable lower limit of college-level musicianship, and what should be considered remedial? J. David Smith's 1997 article, "The place of musical novices in music science," gives a psychologist's perspective on cognitive skills that could be considered in separating complete musical novices from what we might agree to designate minimal musical/aural competence for college-age musicians. Smith's discussion also gives the reader a sense of how rare this level of minimal competence—not to mention the level of expertise we want to see in our successful students—is in the general population.

Chapter 2 is entitled "Preliminary Listening Skills," discussed under the broad headings "Pulse and Meter" and "Pitch." Karpinski's presentation of the temporal aspects of music follows a familiar and reasonable simple-to-complex progression of topics and instructional tactics. This progression begins with the segmentation of time first into regular and neutral "pulses" using tapping / clapping activities and simple meta-notation, and continues through discussions of meter and hypermeter to a discussion of rhythmic notation. The foundational discussion of pitch begins with extensive coverage of the process of pitch-matching, and progresses to generous discussions of pitch memory, tonic inference, perception of melodic contour, identification of scale-degree, and finally to iden-

tification of intervals. The order of topics in this discussion carries the implicit but powerful message that notational and/or systemic primitives don't necessarily turn out to be the best materials with which to begin an aural skills tutorial. "Melodic" and "harmonic" dyads may be easy for the instructor to present and grade as dictation exercises. That certainly doesn't mean they are the easiest aural constructs for students to identify—or that they are even musically realistic, at least when presented (as they typically are) in isolation from any musical context. Discussions of aural recognition of scale types, the relationship of solmization systems and listening skills, and absolute pitch complete the chapter.

Karpinski makes a convincing case at the outset of Chapter 3, "Melodic Dictation," that dictation's intrinsic complexity, from the pedagogue's perspective, is its Achilles heel. Musical dictation demands a tangled web of responses involving (at the very least) aural perception, immediate recall of what has just been (is now being) heard, recognition of idiomatic scalar/tonal, registral, durational, and metric information, and the student's fluency with notational conventions. When a student errs on a dictation exercise, which one or several of these factors—or some factor not listed here—is responsible? The discussion in this chapter—as in the previous chapter on preliminary listening skills—lays out a careful compilation and analysis of the many component skills that must be combined to produce fluent and accurate dictation. The discussion then goes on to suggest teaching strategies that take the complexity of the learning task into account. Throughout these chapters, Karpinski is both liberal in supporting discussions with relevant evidence from the research literature of music cognition, and appropriately critical of that research and the extent to which it bears on aural training.

Chapter 4 covers polyphonic and harmonic dictation, and is one of the shorter chapters in the book. This rather cursory coverage is probably not because these forms of aural training are less important, or that either is particularly easy to do. One likely reason for the brevity of this chapter is that musically sophisticated experimental reports on polyphonic and harmonic perception are actually quite scarce. The author is thus forced to base his discussion on the more-anecdotal pedagogical literature. The discussion of har-

monic dictation, for example, is a compendium of short sections covering instructional activities such as real-time arpeggiation of heard chords; concentration on the bass line; recognition drills for chord inversions; and recognition drills for chord qualities.

Chapter 5 offers a brief overview of other listening skills that can and should be integrated with the more-traditional classroom and lab activities—but which instead are often abbreviated and sometimes missed completely because of time constraints. These include transcription (using recorded and sometimes live performances); instrumental playback; error detection/correction; listening to more extensive features such as higher-level hypermeter and large-scale formal attributes; listening to (and recognition of) non-tonal pitch collections; and aesthetic attributes of musical process and performance.

This valuable and all-too-brief chapter touches on some of the hot-button issues in music cognition research as it discusses aural skills that should get much more attention in the classroom and lab, if instructors could just find the time. Karpinski points out, for example, that perceptual research reports (e.g., Cook 1987; Marvin & Brinkman, 1999) indicate that—with the exception of certain experts—listeners are largely unaware of large-scale key relationships. When even a fairly short piece of music ends in a different key from which it began, very few listeners are aware of that fact. These test results seem not to have been warmly embraced by Schenkerian specialists. It has also been argued (e.g., Thomson 1991, 1993) that listeners are similarly incapable of identifying even small and simple collections of atonal pc-sets, and perceptual evidence (e.g., Gibson 1986) supports that assertion as well. These are important challenges to the standard analysis-based, scorecentric genus of music theory instruction that predominates in U.S. colleges and universities, and should be stimulating further research and discussion.

We can also respond, through our aural training pedagogy, to the apparent challenges raised in these perceptual studies. For example, students can dramatically improve their abilities to recognize large-scale formal processes and key relationships when they hear them, without benefit of following a score—based at least on the anecdotal evidence of my own teaching for many years. One third of the grade in my introductory forms course reflects students'

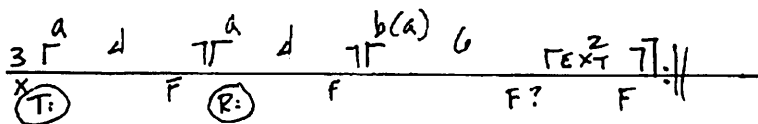
abilities to produce accurate phrase structure graphs of entire movements (starting with short pieces such as Beethoven bagatelles and eventually progressing to large sonata and sonata-rondo movements) without a score. Students are instructed to graph the formal properties of phrase length, motivic content, cadence type, and key relationship. They typically begin each exercise and test with a beginning outline similar to that shown in Figure 1. The movement to be graphed in this example is the third (minuet) movement of the Beethoven Sonata No. 1, op. 2 no. 1.

Students are instructed to indicate phrase beginnings and ends with brackets; to identify primary motivic content for each phrase with a standard alphabetic code above the opening bracket (point 1 in Fig. 1); to indicate the length of the phrase by number of measures at point 2 in this figure; and to indicate the cadence at point 3. After 3 or 4 hearings of this movement, even the most intimidated student very likely has graphed this much of it.

Figure 1: Beginning aural analysis bargraph for Beethoven Sonata No. 1 in F minor, op. 1 no. 1, III.



Figure 2: Bargraph for the first three phrases of Beethoven Sonata No. 1 in F minor, op. 1 no. 1, III.



By emphasizing relativity and avoiding absolute labels for meter, phrase lengths, key levels, and cadences, the analytic task becomes feasible for students without appealing to absolute pitch or divine intervention. This is to say that without the score, students can only make a best guess as to absolute identities of several musical characteristics. For example, the aural hints as to the meter of the Beethoven movement are obviously triple, but the beat unit is a matter of guesswork when one does not have access to the score. Phrase lengths can be specified in varying numbers depending on similar aural inference: when the listener has no prior knowledge of the beat unit, phrases in the Beethoven example may be inferred to be either two or four measures long. Either choice can be accepted as correct for this analysis, provided the student is consistent: the first two phrases are equal in length for example, and the numbers at the midpoints of the phrases should reflect that. The third phrase is equal in length to each of the first two, but then is extended by a repeated cadence so that it ends half again as long.

At least at first, students can be encouraged simply to decide whether cadences are final or non-final; in either case, students are forced to make a relative key-level judgment in order to make that generic identification of cadence. Being able to graph correct specific cadence labels may be worth extra credit. In this example it was given that the piece started in the tonic key area. At the surface level at least, there is a shift away from tonic in the second phrase (although the motivic content is identical to the first), and remains in that key throughout the remainder of this repeated phrase group. This is graphed in this example with the letter "R" which, quite handily, can stand for both [closely] Related or Remote. Classroom listening sessions in which students aurally ferret out formal characteristics and processes with these simple bar graphs often turn out to be the first time that students really begin to synthesize and apply much of the information they have absorbed in their earlier music theory classes. In fact, much of the material presented in separate sections of Chapter 5 turns out to be nicely integrated in large-scale aural analytic activities such as this. These activities should also allow students to begin to develop the sense of *Fernhören* that Karpinski discusses late in the final chapter, in his discussion of reading Schenkerian graphs.

Reading and Performing Skills

Chapter 6 counterbalances Chapter 2: in Chapter 6 Karpinski describes important characteristics of the music reading, solmization, and performance skills that complement the fundamental listening skills discussed in the earlier chapter. One important example of these characteristics can be illustrated as follows: aural skills instructors regularly hear the old student lament that goes something like, "I could sing this melody perfectly if I didn't have to use those stupid syllables!" The student doesn't yet realize that this statement is true in the narrow sense but that it misses the point in a larger, more sophisticated musical sense. In a call-response activity using neutral vowels, a student can produce a vocal imitation of the sound of a melody without having any idea whatsoever of how to notate it, or how to describe any of its tonal contents with any degree of precision. Karpinski quotes Michael Rogers's (1996) important distinction between sight reading and sight singing, and the distinction is so important that it bears repeating here. "The real goal of sightsinging is not just accuracy; it is to hear the music in a particular way—a way that is musically nuanced, that is shaped and directed by goals, and a way that respects the encoded tensions and internal-movement proclivities of the specific environment. The job of sightsinging is context sensitivity and the enculturation of *tonal bearings*." (147, emphasis original) In the remainder of this chapter and in Chapter 7 (Sight Reading), Karpinski proceeds in the same systematic fashion as in Chapters 2 and 3 to identify and discuss the many smaller skills we group under the rubric "sight singing." Again, Karpinski cites relevant findings from music cognition research to frame and support his suggestions.

Over half of the final chapter, "More Complex Reading Skills," is devoted to singing and understanding chromatic inflections, and modulation. The remainder of the chapter presents brief discussions of proportional tempo and metric juxtaposition, clefs, transposition, score reading, conducting, and the reading (and aural comprehension) of Schenkerian graphs. Some of these topics are more complex and do build on skills discussed in earlier chapters, but this is not true of all of them. For example, most sight-singing manu-

als present chromatically altered tones before their halfway point, and students are typically required to begin drilling on altered solfège syllables at that time. Some instructors begin very early in the aural skills program to require that students conduct the class in singing examples from the sight-singing manual—not to be graded on their conducting, but to be evaluated instead on the accuracy and completeness of their report of the errors they heard while conducting.

It does not seem hyperbolic to state that this is a pivotally important contribution to the literature of music theory pedagogy. It is the first English-language book devoted entirely to aural skills pedagogy, and as such it is an important complement to Michael Rogers's seminal *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory* (1984). Moreover, throughout this book Karpinski relentlessly pushes the field of aural training pedagogy beyond the methods-and-materials status quo. He has drawn heavily, and critically, on research findings in the field of music cognition, and this book makes a convincing case that musicians stand to benefit by paying careful attention to this literature. The writing is clear, careful, and unfailingly accessible—the author obviously knows that his readership will consist in large measure of readers who do not conduct research in the area of music cognition, for example. But those in the music cognition community also would do well to pay attention to this book, because it lays out a number of issues that are meaningful to musicians. This an important point to recognize, because music cognition research currently does not have as great an impact in the college music profession as it now enjoys in the scientific community. Increasing numbers of cognitive scientists have been attracted to the research field of music cognition because music offers them a complex, rule-based auditory realm with the gilt-edged characteristic that it is non-verbal. As such, it avoids the potentially confounding lexical and cultural baggage that speech-based auditory perception research is forced to carry. But the scientist's research agenda is not necessarily the same as the musician's, and it is no great accomplishment to find studies in this literature that are musically flawed, musically simplistic, or simply musically irrelevant. Books such as *Aural Skills Acquisition* set a musically important research agenda for music cognition research.

Aural Skills Acquisition can be regarded as a first step in two major respects. First, because its scope is limited to aural skills trained on music of the Western tonal/metrical tradition, the book invites similar treatment of aural skills pedagogy dealing with post-tonal and non-Western idioms. And second, each discussion in this book based on anecdotes from pedagogical experience—rather than on solid experimental evidence—should be interpreted as an invitation (even a challenge) to those working in the area of music cognition research. We can only hope that, as a series of next steps, future editions of *Aural Skills Acquisition* will be able to take advantage of the results of more—and more musically sophisticated—empirical research. One final point: a vanishingly small number of book reviews compliment the editor. This is one. For over two decades now, Maribeth Anderson Payne has had a clear sense of emerging ideas and issues in the field of academic music. She has repeatedly benefited our field through her willingness to take risks to give those ideas and issues a chance to develop in the pages of the book projects she nurtures.

REFERENCES

- Cook, Nicholas. (1987). The perception of large-scale tonal closure. *Music Perception* 5, 197-205.
- Gibson, Don. (1986). The aural perception of nontraditional chords in selected theoretical relationships: A computer-generated experiment. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 34, 5-23.
- Marvin, Elizabeth West and Brinkman, Alexander. (1999). The effect of modulation and formal manipulation on perception of tonic closure by expert listeners. *Music Perception* 16, 389-407.
- Rogers, Michael R. (1984). *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory: An Overview of Pedagogical Philosophies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rogers, Michael R. (1996). The Jersild approach: A sightsinging method from Denmark. *College Music Symposium* 36, 149-61.
- Smith, J. David. (1997). The place of musical novices in music science. *Music Perception* 14, 227-62.
- Thomson, William. (1991). *Schoenberg's Error*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Thomson, William. (1993). Review: *Ear Training for Twentieth-Century Music* by Michael Friedmann. *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 7, 129-45.