

Reviews

Earl Henry, *Sight Singing*.

Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997. 363 pp.

Reviewed by Timothy A. Smith

A successful sight singing course requires a thoughtful teacher, diligent students, and a good text. That Earl Henry (Webster University) is a thoughtful teacher is evident from his new text, *Sight Singing*. The book begins with scales, and progresses through the usual arpeggiations of tonic and dominant triads, to chromatic, modal, and atonal melodies. Each unit contains a predictable sequence of what the author calls "concepts, warmups, exercises, studies, excerpts from the literature [and] ensembles."

Sight Singing's more than 400 warmups are evenly divided between pitched and rhythmic examples; the author recommends the latter be improvised on scales so as not to be entirely without pitch. Many of the rhythmic examples are in two voices; the pitched warmups are frequently in parallel major and minor. Whereas intonation problems are usually remedied by proper vocal technique, the warmups provide ample opportunity for instructors to inculcate good singing habits, although *Sight Singing* itself does not address the issue.

Warmups are followed by three or four analytical and compositional exercises. As with the warmups, both rhythmic and pitched examples are represented. The compositional exercises in *Sight Singing* appropriately incorporate improvisations to which students are instructed to attach tempo and performance indications in various languages. Newly-composed melodies, called "studies," follow the "exercises." Typically ten per unit, studies are more substantial than the warmups and correlate nicely with the essential concepts of each unit.

Each unit's six to eight "excerpts from literature," plus three or four ensemble pieces, represent the only literature pieces *vis a vis* proto-compositions or etudes. Some 100 of these excerpts, plus fifty

ensemble pieces, comprise less than one third of the book. Ensembles range from two- to four-part polyphony, including a half dozen longer choral works, chorales, and a half-dozen canons. Examples are not limited to the public domain; the later chapters include Ives, Bartok, Hindemith, Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Holst, Dallapiccola, and Babbitt. The units on non-traditional resources, atonal and serial melodies are especially well done.

Each chapter begins with a thorough review of concepts, and it is here we discover what sets *Sight Singing* apart from other primers. First, it paces smoothly with most harmony texts. Second, and more importantly, concept reviews are related to the reading and hearing of music. It is in these reviews that Henry's pedagogical "angle" becomes evident, for *Sight Singing* is, in many ways, two books in one. Its comprehensive approach to the integration of skill development with cognition of formal and theoretical rubrics has much to commend it and is the book's greatest strength.

More than two-thirds of *Sight Singing's* examples are warmups, exercises and studies, composed specifically to reinforce allied concepts of each unit. These studies are a significant achievement with venerable pedagogical roots in the development of technique, but not without cost—humorously articulated in Alice Parker's explanation why she preferred arranging to composing: "The likelihood you or I will write a memorable tune is practically nil."¹ Parker's maxim aptly describes *Sight Singing's* warmups and studies on scales and triads no matter how inspired the composer may have been!

Sight Singing contains no more miscues than one might expect of a first edition: as when students are instructed to "change the key signature to that of the relative major" (p. 118); a dominant of the dominant is described as a process in which "the supertonic is heard as a temporary new tonic" (p. 168); in the context of enharmonic modulations, "an enharmonic relationship depends upon the listener's ability to hear a single chord as functional in two different keys" (p. 226); or (in tonal contexts) "because the fully

¹This quotation is recalled by the reviewer from a workshop Alice Parker conducted at Biola College twenty-five years ago. Alice Parker is a prolific arranger and composer of choral music. She began her career arranging for Robert Shaw.

diminished seventh chord is made up entirely of minor thirds, inversions are impossible to discern aurally" (p. 250). Rather than dwell upon typographical errors. I propose to question four assumptions which permeate sight singing texts in general. These, then, are not a critique of *Sight Singing* so much as commentary on shibboleths of the theory curriculum which manage to pronounce themselves in nearly every text.

The first assumption is that the aural cognate for what students have learned about chords and progressions requires the singing of melodies outlining triads. Here I am reminded of Julie Andrews's famous line, "when you read you begin with A, B, C; when you sing you begin with *do, re mi*." Most sight singing texts assume that "when you study harmony you begin with I and V, so to connect this information to the ear you should sing arpeggiations of I and V." The point is that melodies are not chords and chords not melodies. The reader is invited to take exception (because there are plenty) but, in general, most melodies are not about the business of outlining triads.

While arpeggiations teach students to sing intervals, the better way to help them grasp melodic manifestations of harmonic function is to sensitize them to tendency tones. Functions are, after all, about momentum and resolution, phenomena which arpeggiations do not capture as elegantly as "*fa-mi, ti-do, le-sol*" etc. If this is true, then most melodies, especially stepwise non-arpeggiating ones, qualify for a chapter on harmonic momentum. *Sight Singing's* frequent reminders that tones tend to move in certain directions are therefore more effective than its arpeggiating etudes.

Because melodies are linear events, students learn more from discussions directing attention to linear, rather than vertical, sonorities. There are advantages, I should think, to teaching students to perceive and name the melodic characteristics of harmonic progressions without recourse to traditional harmonic accouterments such as inversion symbols, Roman numerals, comparisons of chord qualities in major and—spare us please—three forms of minor. The best way to do this is the Jersild method.² A text exploiting Jersild would likely bill its chapter on dominant/tonic harmonies as melodies fea-

²Jorgen Jersild, *Ear Training* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1966).

turing “re-do, fa-mi, la-sol” and “ti-do.” This would follow with units on “ri-mi, fi-sol, si-la, te-la” (secondary function), or “le-sol” plus “fi-sol,” and “ra-ti” (chromatic pre-dominants).

While *Sight Singing* often mentions the tendency of tones to move in certain directions, a pedagogy exploiting this principle would have employed a three-step process in which students were first taught to produce, then recognize, tendency pairs apart from notation, then connect those sounds with symbols of key and clef. Students might have been required, for example, to demonstrate competence at singing Jersild pairs from flash cards, then to write syllables from sounding pairs, then to identify and sing pairs notated in keys and clefs. This could not be done, however, because *Sight Singing* deigns not to use solmization syllables to name pitches (more about that later). While *Sight Singing’s* many reviews of vertical structures contain important information, they do not represent a systematic method for “growing” that information into aural skills, which leads to the second assumption.

Many ear training texts presuppose that cognition of structure is the quickest way to quicken the ear to recognize sounds those structures produce. Not to deny that this happens, and certainly not to question the appropriateness of teaching structure, I doubt the efficacy of methodologies wherein the inculcation of aural skills relies upon pedantries of harmonic structure. I’ve known too many students, alas, who could recite the particulars of a half cadence but who, when asked to sing the tonic pitch after having heard one, sing the dominant. Instead of one-more-timing half-cadence structure, I’ve found that if I immediately re-articulate the tonic chord students will perceive that they have confused “sol” for “do.”

This implies that “knowing” how a half cadence progresses, is spelled, voiced, etc., is not enough—there is something missing. In fact, what is missing is “perceiving,” connecting cognition of a structure with recognition of its sound. Explaining once more that the cookies are in the jar on the top shelf won’t get the cookie; students need something else—a stepladder or pogo stick—to “get” the cookie. It is this “something else” that I find missing in most sight singing texts.

I suspect this “something else” has something to do with telling students something like this: “Right there. . . Did you hear that

sound? . . . You've heard it many times before. . . . It's a familiar thing but you haven't known what to call it. . . . Listen to the next example and raise your hand when you hear it again. . . . Silent-sing example four and identify the measure in which it occurs. . . . Which one of the following melodies also contains that sound? . . . What syllables seem always to appear with it? . . . How do those syllables move? . . . Guess what? That sound is called a thus-'n-such. . . . Remember that sound!" While it may be helpful to know the vertical ingredients of "that sound," it is possible to give it a name before knowing its ingredients.

Naming familiar sounds is primarily what a course in sight singing should be. Twenty-three years of students have convinced me that they learn to read music the same way they learned to speak and read their mother tongue—before having encountered the rules of grammar, punctuation, or even spelling. It is a process that requires listening more than explanation, naming sounds more than theorizing about the mechanics that make them. And there is no better way to name sounds than solmization . . . which leads me to the third assumption of most sight-singing texts.

But first a story. A few years ago I read *A Brief History of Time* by physicist Stephen Hawking. While I liked the book very much, I remember most its preface which seemed mostly to defend the author's decision to use but one equation. The reason for this is that Hawking's publisher had informed him that, with the addition of each equation, sales would plummet by some predictable increment. In spite of this warning, the professor felt he could not function without Einstein's famous $e=mc^2$. Two points are relevant: first, the economics of publishing often drive authors to omit valuable information because the public won't "buy it;" second, authors who believe passionately that such omissions do not serve the interests of readers will employ pertinent methods, even if it costs.

I think it not an unfair portrayal to say that most ear-training texts tiptoe around solmization for the same reason Hawking jettisoned equations: in order to survive in the competitive publishing world it pays to be passionless when it comes to this method. One can imagine the hopefulness, then, with which those of us who use syllables read "*Sight Singing* is a workbook . . . grounded upon the philosophy that . . . solfège can be taught and learned through . . .

explanatory prose" (preface, ix) and then again in chapter one, "SOLFÈGE will be studied in the next chapter" (p. 8), only to find the next chapter wimping out with "use a syllable recommended by your instructor" (p. 17). Remembering the promise of its preface, we might be excused for finding it inexplicable that *Sight Singing* neither explains solfège, nor does it use one solitary solmization syllable, anywhere in any of its prose, to name any pitched sound. How much more elegant that prose might have been if it had used "le" and "ti" rather than "minor mode 6" and "raised 7." This omission is particularly puzzling in that *Sight Singing* prescribes a liberal dose of rhythmic solfège (presumably because that convention is not controversial).

The fourth assumption of most sight singing texts is that the nostrums you and I were taught must be perpetuated in our students. In the last few years John Buccheri (Northwestern University) has convinced many of us to abandon "compound" and "simple" nomenclature in the context of meters. John has also been teaching his students it is not all that important whether an augmented sixth chord speaks French, German, or Italian . . . and he is right. In addition to being the indefatigable apostle of the Jersild method, Michael Rogers (University of Oklahoma) has demonstrated the futility of several die-hard tenets of the theory curriculum, including the identification of intervals out of context. To these I would add the teaching of "three forms of minor."

Consistent application of the rationale for three forms of minor might just as well create three forms of major. Chromatic pre-dominants employing "le" in major should be equal justification, I should think, to add "do-re-mi-fa-sol-le-ti-do" to the inventory of master-at-all-cost scales. And, while we're at it, let's smooth out that augmented second with a "te" (but only when the scale is descending). I got the picture some years ago that, while melodic minor indeed helps pianists untangle fingers in terms of the literature, it is doubtful that this theoretical unicorn is worth the confusion it creates. How much more time has been wasted untangling minds about "which-form-of-minor-are-we-in-now" than all the fumbling fingers in the piano department. If I were to use *Sight Singing*, I would skip its explanation of minor scales, inform students that all dominant

functions in minor are: (a) borrowed from the parallel major, (b) signaled by the appearance of “*ti*” which is (c) often approached from a borrowed “*la*,” and leave well enough alone.

On balance I would rate *Sight Singing* as a cut above the average because it has a pedagogical angle—integration of harmonic knowledge with ear training skills. The book is well-balanced, comprehensive in scope, and attractively composed. But, like most texts of its kind, *Sight Singing* equivocates when it comes to naming scale degree functions and thereby deprives itself of an effective tool for connecting sounds with symbols.