

Reviews

David Damschroder, *Listen and Sing*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1995. 660 pp.

Reviewed by Michael R. Rogers

L*isten and Sing*, in one bold stroke, solves a long-standing problem for the teacher of undergraduate aural skills courses: namely, how to select and correlate textbooks for both sight singing and ear training. This publication by David Damschroder (University of Minnesota) combines practice materials for vocal performance and for dictation under a single cover. It's a small wonder that such a logical and efficient approach has not been tried more often in theory pedagogy. For decades, dozens of separate new sight-singing and ear-training texts have hit the market—sometimes separate books by the same author—but rarely have the two topics been conceived as part of the larger all-embracing subject of learning “eye/ear/brain” coordination. In this view, listening and singing are thought of as related and reinforcing dual aspects in the development of the perceptual/conceptual filtering systems used for hearing and performing tonal music with understanding.

This new book, I am happy to report, is successful at balancing the needs of both types of skills and at providing sufficient practice activities of genuine usefulness and merit. The thick and large paperback size (8.5" x 11") is packed with materials: 660 pages of clearly printed music, instructions, exercises, analyses, and explanations. In addition to the expected sight-singing melodies, rhythmic drills, and straightforward dictation patterns (melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic), a menu of other formats is offered for variety, contrast, and for differing pedagogical perspective: duets and accompanied solo melodies for singing; interval and arpeggiation workshops (sets of abstract exercises independent of notation often using scale-degree numbers); Quick Switch for singing (slight variational twists of a single pattern); and multiple-choice exercises for dictation. These

last two types of activities are especially well done. Finally, four 90-minute dictation tapes are made available for extra practice.

New keys are introduced very conservatively (i.e., only one key at a time is used, then a new key is added in a separate batch of exercises, and so forth). For example, Chapter 1 is restricted to C major, with F and G coming on board in Chapter 2. I call this arrangement the "saturation" approach. Not only is this an advantage, in my opinion, at the beginner's stage for ease of reading notation (not having to switch constantly to a different configuration of lines and spaces for tonic/dominant orientation permits energy to be dedicated to what the music sounds like rather than what it looks like), but even more importantly this approach imposes—and hopefully etches into the mind's memory grooves—the force of tonic's domain.

After singing entirely in C major, in other words, for about 10-15 minutes, the pitch class "C" begins to emerge with the power of a freight train bearing down on one's consciousness. Tonic gradually comes to feel like a brighter and brighter and larger and larger light coming down the track until finally the entire room overflows with its essence. These sensations of focus and illumination have a special quality when practiced in this unrelenting manner—a vivid example of what some have called "constructive brainwashing."

The slow incremental approach is evident in other areas too with Chapter 3 introducing the subdominant chord (after previous restriction to tonic and dominant), Chapter 4 introducing the bass clef, and Chapter 5 introducing the minor mode. Likewise the chord vocabulary is wisely restricted throughout the book at each stage of development so that students know exactly what choices are available for each slot of a given progression.

Dictation responses are encouraged in four different ways: a) sing back the stimulus; b) play back on the piano; c) play back on one's own instrument; and d) notate on paper. Flexibility of response type is echoed in the flexibility of analytical and solfège systems that are offered. Two Roman numeral possibilities for harmonic analysis are suggested: a) all upper-case symbols (as found, for example, in Aldwell/Schachter); and b) the more traditional distinction between major and minor qualities as symbolized by both upper- and lower-case numerals. Similarly, a variety of syllable

choices for sight singing is generously provided: a) numbers; b) letter names; c) fixed “do”; d) movable “do” with do-based minor; and e) movable “do” with la-based minor. [Experienced readers of this journal will breathe a sigh of relief to learn that I will not enumerate the pros and cons of these systems; for details see the hotly debated exchange series on solfège systems in recent issues between Houlahan/Tacka and Tim Smith.]

A stated goal of the text is to combine theoretical knowledge with aural perception. In this regard, a considerable amount of space is devoted to presenting the basic fundamentals of written theory including unusually detailed (for an aural skills book) discussions of harmonic theory (chords, symbols, inversions, progressions, etc.). Much of this information would probably duplicate material in the student’s written theory text. Some teachers will wonder whether this duplication clutters the book unnecessarily while others will likely appreciate the pedagogical reinforcement of harmony placed right beside the aural patterns.

Among the most beneficial and unique contributions of this book are the many insightful practice strategies. Directly underneath almost every sight-singing and dictation melody, for example, are brief written hints about how and what to listen for. These do not constitute a complete analysis but rather direct the student’s (and teacher’s!) attention to telling details of structure and organization.

For example, long-range connections or recurring patterns are often highlighted or identified (how to hear one note in relation to another; how to reduce a more complex grouping to a simpler one; or how even to recognize a combination of notes as a grouping in the first place). These many wonderful pedagogical tips alone are worth the price of the book. They are, of course, the lifeblood of any good classroom and the sort of thing that experienced teachers have always done automatically—mixing a kind of analytical banter along with instructions and other appropriate comments of support or information to mold students’ thinking and to create mindfulness of the recurrent underlying principles of musical coherence. The goal should always be to learn something from each melody studied that can carry over into the next new situation—extrapolating the universal from the particular and applying it back to the individual case.

One could question, in fact, whether all of this analysis is almost too much of a good thing, an embarrassment of riches. I can imagine that some students might become distracted by reading the printed analytical suggestions before hearing or singing the example as they try to keep the words of guidance and instruction in mind while they should be just listening. Perhaps the suggestions should have been included in a separate teacher's manual to be metered out at the opportune moment or to be withheld according to the needs of the pedagogical moment. Maybe the students should be "doing" more of the analytical work and focusing less on "receiving" a finished product of someone else's mind; maybe these are the kinds of hints that students should be asked to construct on their own during repeated hearings (in the case of dictation) or during repeated score perusals (in the case of singing) rather than being handed the hints in advance for free.

In any case, the analytical clues themselves are certainly exemplary models of the sort of thing that should be happening as part of the educational exchange in listening and singing environments. It will be up to individual teachers to decide how to maximize their effectiveness for each given setting—how and when to use them.

In spite of my overall favorable impression of this book and appreciation for the immense amount of genuinely useful practice material, something seems to be missing—although to be fair to Damschroder I must admit that this "something" is missing also from nearly every sight-singing and dictation book I have ever seen. This missing "X Factor" is what might have elevated an already good book to an even higher plane of excellence.

In short, this book lacks a point of view. There is no central conceptual framework through which the material is presented or through which students are encouraged to hear. I have searched for and failed to discover any unifying value system that informs how and why humans can make sense of tonal patterns. It's not clear whether Damschroder does this by design or by chance. He may have avoided a strong methodology on purpose so as to encourage many textbook adoptions; the more neutral, generic, and safe approaches that are used are less likely to offend. Or it could be that Damschroder simply does not have any comprehensive and coordinated methodology. We just don't know.

As it stands, the book is simply a collection of practice exercises with scattered helpful pointers applied to individual situations—pointers that often are only mildly related to one another. To have amassed such an amount of materials is in itself quite an accomplishment—and, up to that point, effectively done—but there could be more. The “helpful pointers”—like loosely rolling beads on a table—ideally should be strung together by some thread of connection if they are to participate in broader strands of meaning and artistic significance. As I read through this book I sometimes get the feeling that topics are merely succeeding one another rather than progressing in a more teleological manner. Isolated comments, even the “gems of wisdom” type found in this book, can acquire magnified value and richer pedagogical impact only when they are joined together in cumulative fashion. The fullest pedagogical synergy is only likely when all the bits and pieces of advice combine to produce some larger coherent universe of beliefs. Or perhaps it’s the prior existence of this universe of beliefs that makes the combining possible.

One part of the tonal credo that many experienced aural skills teachers pay homage to—but one not fully explored or properly exploited in this book—is the value of scale-degree function: i.e., learning the “rest” and “active” tone patterns that infuse tonal music with its dynamic properties of tendency and resolution, direction and arrival, movement and respite. Once students acquire tonal bearings (knowing where one is in the key at any given time—locations in relation to tonic) and once students grasp (memorize and make their own) a network of appropriate reference points (the pulls and attractions that pitches exhibit for one another), everything else falls magically into place. A tonal grid or template is then established that can be carried to each “new” situation (no melody is ever truly new since students will simply be recognizing, at this point, more or less similar archetypes). All of tonal ear training, then, boils down to pattern recognition.

But I see no special focus on the fundamental melodic patterns or the structural archetypes of tonality in this book—only lots of melodies with solitary pockets of listening (or performing) cues that are often unconnected to one another. I am talking about such simple patterns, among others, as scale degrees $\hat{7}-\hat{1}$, $\hat{4}-\hat{3}$, $\hat{2}-\hat{1}$, $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$, etc. I’m

not saying that these patterns are not found in the book but only that they are not singled out for centered attention. Scale-degree numbers are frequently employed but seemingly not the functional meanings that go with the numbers. The personalities and flavors of the notes are missing along with any recognition of how changing contexts affect their meaning (e.g., the fact that scale degree 4, while in the presence of 7, pulls downward to 3, but while in the presence of 6 tends toward 5). The teeming inner world of tugs and magnetism that defines tonality is unaccounted for in the flattened-out, nonhierarchical perspective of this text. The functions hover on the periphery rather than radiating from the hub; they are lost in the shuffle rather than spotlighted.

Two books that *do* incorporate this missing framework and that build pedagogically from it are, ironically, both also published by Schirmer: George Wedge, *Ear-Training and Sight-Singing*, 1921; and Jorgen Jersild, *Ear Training*, 1966. These books have been around so long they are rarely seen any longer in the classroom but they have never been outdone for beautifully judged pacing, additive learning, and holistic underpinnings.

Other things that could have been more strongly emphasized include: a) in harmony, use of the basic I-IV-V-I cadential formula (or predominant/dominant/tonic functional families) as the backbone for all progressions: teach the others as a variation of the model with extensions, substitutions, embellishments, prolongations, etc.; b) use of the tonality frame concept, as found in William Thomson's sight-singing books, *Introduction to Music Reading*, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth, 1981) and *Advanced Music Reading* (Wadsworth, 1969); c) contrast of structural pitches versus decorative pitches (as found in Leland Bland, *Sight Singing through Melodic Analysis*, Nelson-Hall, 1984); and d) general scanning techniques for analyzing a tune before singing it. Even such a basic task as identifying what key a melody is in is not addressed. Again, in fairness to Damschroder, I repeat that most other books are missing discussion of these vital issues as well.

The idea of using structural reductions for drawing attention to long-range connections could have been more effectively accomplished with greater use of musically notated examples rather than through verbal instructions (in the performance or listening strate-

gies)—a case of a picture being worth a thousand words. Likewise, a comparison of simplified or skeletal *notated* versions of more complex examples rather than trying to describe the differences through the “hints” would have helped to bring instant clarity to the analytical suggestions. Another instance of the verbal clues becoming clumsy involves identifying certain pitches that will occur in later measures. Why not just write those notes on the staff in the correct internal position instead of trying to describe them with words?

It could be argued that all of these “extras” I am describing are too much burden to put on a textbook. They are things that any good ear-training teacher will know to mention and to add to the course. I would counter by saying that many ear-training courses are taught by nontheory specialists or by inexperienced faculty or graduate assistants who would welcome, I think, all the help that a good book can provide. Other books, besides the ones mentioned above, that have in the past effectively incorporated these richer layers of pedagogical advice include: Richard Brooks and Gerald Warfield, *Layer Dictation: A New Approach to the Bach Chorales* (Longman, 1978); Lars Edlund, *Modus Vetus: Sight Singing and Ear-Training in Major/Minor Tonality* (Alexander Broude, 1974); and William Thomson and Richard P. DeLone, *Introduction to Ear Training* (Wadsworth, 1967).

Besides the lack of solid philosophical grounding, other smaller concerns intrude from time to time. The dictations (both melodic and harmonic) sometimes seem too long to exercise one of the main benefits of the task, development of short-term memory. A powerful relationship is not always apparent between the listening and the singing aspects (often this is two separate books running in parallel universes—a by-product, no doubt, of the weak pedagogical scaffolding already mentioned). The lack of twentieth-century materials will be problematic for some (only eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tonal repertoire is covered, although contrived and real literature examples are effectively blended). Starting pitches and neatly placed bar lines are always (somewhat artificially) provided instead of requiring students to infer tonic, infer length and meter, etc.—all tasks that mimic real-life musical situations. Some of the C-clef exercises plunge too immediately into complexity (rather than evolving from some introductory warm-up drills).

In addition, too much focus is placed on intervals (as opposed to scale-degree function): e.g., on page 154 three places where the M6 occurs are identified: in minor from $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{8}$ and in major from $\hat{1}$ - $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{3}$. However, the impression is left that they all sound the same rather than highlighting the role of context in differentiating the affective and psychological effects. In the analytical hints emphasis is often placed on where a given note is coming from (in identifying an interval, for example) rather than on where it is going: a goal note is more likely than a departure note to provide effective tonal orientation.

Finally, a particularly egregious misjudgment is the insufficient amount of practice material for modulation. Secondary dominants (in melodic study only, not harmony) are treated in some detail, but only a very few melodies (out of hundreds), and no harmonic progressions, include real examples of key shift. Such an omission is inexplicable to me.

Any of the problems I have identified—tiny or glaring—can be overcome with a suitable infusion of cognitively driven teaching (that is, teaching that engages both the ears *and* the mind). This book can be as potent (or as feeble) as the teacher who uses it. Moving mindlessly through the exercises page by page will not produce much of value with this or any book. The materials themselves (the exercises and suggestions) can all be put to good use just as the most pedagogically advanced aural skills book could be totally undermined by the rote-drill instruction of the unimaginative. Textbooks of any kind are just the starting point; the real teaching comes from the teacher.