

In Favor of a Skills-Based Approach to Music Appreciation: Pedagogy and Personal History

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Music appreciation is the most important course music historians teach. For many college students, it is the only music course they take. It shapes their perception of music and its importance for the rest of their lives. It deserves to be taught by the best teachers we have to offer, and there is no more important text published in our field than the one those teachers will choose. I have believed for decades that it was time to revisit the pedagogy of the music appreciation course in light of significant shifts in the college population, its background, and its needs. The changes in teaching materials that I have seen over the past thirty years have been primarily content-based, not methodological. Most current music appreciation texts contain at least a few chapters on popular and world music, material that would not have been considered appropriate for such a course a few generations ago. I am concerned, however, that placing them as additional topics to be covered in the course adds to the increasingly futile attempt to condense all musical knowledge into a digestible semester-long package. I would much rather that students learn less music and learn it well. In this essay I intend to describe the ways the student population has changed during my lifetime and the pedagogical style I have developed to address those changes: a style that has shaped the writing of my own new text, *Take Note: An Introduction to Music through Active Listening*, which is being readied for its launch in 2014 by Oxford University Press.

Musical Education

It might help to frame this discussion if I explain that, as a late baby boomer, I was born the same year that the first edition of Joseph Machlis's *The Enjoyment of Music* appeared in print. It grew up with me. Machlis lived just downstairs from my grandparents, in a New York City apartment building that my family built in the 1920s and that my grandfather still managed. When he learned that I was interested in music, he began to shape my own musical development at a very early age. He gave me carefully produced long-playing

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records devoted to Mozart, Schubert and other composers, and I practically memorized them. With the Kyrie/Christe double fugue from Mozart's *Requiem* throbbing in the background, I cried at the oft-told story of the composer's premature death after the belated recognition that "fate had decided against him." I delighted in hearing about Schubert's emergence from obscure beginnings, and learned all the words to *Heidenröslein* by heart—in English, of course. In eighth grade, I proudly brought to class an autographed copy of *Music: Adventures in Listening*, Machlis's text for junior high students. I was hooked.

In short, Machlis personally helped to mold me into exactly the kind of student for whom *The Enjoyment of Music* was written. Such a student had been raised on a steady but limited diet of classical music at home and yearned to know more about it. Machlis knew his audience well. In his 1998 obituary in *The Independent*, Martin Anderson quotes him as follows:

In those days, they believed in starting at the beginning. In an English course, they'd start with *Beowulf*. By the time you got to *The Faerie Queene*, you hated English Lit. I thought, why don't they start with Steinbeck and Hemingway and work back. With music they'd talk to 300 non-music majors about Gregorian chant. The students were bored to death. I began with Tchaikovsky and Grieg, the kind of music that you hear at a pop concert. I spoke the language of the kids because I was a City College boy.¹

In other words, Machlis undermined the chronological teaching format in a way that made sense for the college students of his time, starting instead with some music they knew, introducing some elements to listen for, and only then beginning to teach history. Likewise, by teaching me to love Mozart and Schubert as a child, he set me up to study music history in college and graduate school.

When I was a graduate student at Yale in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were two music courses offered for non-majors. One was a two-semester music history course, of which I had the privilege of teaching the second semester in 1983 and 1984. The other was a one-semester course taught by Jane Stevens. Many people called it "music appreciation," although that was not its official title. As a text, it used Richard Crocker and Ann Basart's book *Listening to Music*, which was published in 1971 and had already been out of print for several years.²

1. Martin Anderson, "Obituary: Joseph Machlis," *The Independent*, November 5, 1998, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-joseph-machlis-1182804.html>, accessed May 21, 2013.

2. Richard L. Crocker and Ann Phillips Basart, *Listening to Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

The two-semester course began by teaching students to read music and referred to examples in music notation throughout. It covered Western music in chronological order, just like the parallel, two-semester, Grout-based course that was taught for music majors. The one-semester course didn't use music notation, and it didn't bow to chronology in the least. Instead, it followed the arrangement of the Crocker/Basart book, which began with an introductory chapter focusing on the third movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony, followed by one on "Qualities of Sound" that used examples by Stravinsky, Monteverdi, Beethoven and Davidovsky. Further chapters dealt with topics like "Texture," "Linear Organization of Pitch," "Harmonic Organization of Pitch," and finally "Some Approaches to Overall Shape." The book concluded with detailed capstone studies of a few extended works. The entire listening list consisted of eighteen pieces by twelve composers. A final appendix gave an almost mocking twelve-page "Historical Outline of Western Music from 700 to the Present." Students were clearly not expected to read it.

I spoke with Mrs. Stephens—as Ivy League etiquette demanded she be addressed—at the time about her reasons for adopting that approach. Why did she believe in this quirky, non-chronological pedagogy so deeply that she was willing to ask the publisher every year for permission to photocopy the book and make it available to her students? Her answer, as I recall, was that all the music appreciation books on the market dealt with "terms about music." This was the only one that actually dealt with music.

First Teaching Experiences

When I got my first full-time teaching job in 1984 and was asked to teach two sections of the introductory non-major course, I had a chance to find out what Stephens meant. I examined the available textbooks in search of one that didn't try to cover all of music history in one semester, but instead dealt with a limited repertory in a way that ensured students would really know those pieces well by the time the course was over. Since this seemed like such an intuitively obvious approach, I assumed such a book would be easy to find.

I was wrong, of course. Book after book followed the "music history lite" approach made familiar by the best-selling works of Machlis, Kamien, et al. At that point there was no alternative available in print. Those that had been tried, like the Crocker/Basart book and Jeanne Bamberger's and Howard Brofsky's *The Art of Listening*, had had only limited success. I decided to wing it and teach without a text.

I quickly realized that most of my students at a large state university on the West Coast in the 1980s were starting from a different point entirely from those who had inspired Machlis to write his book three decades earlier. Most had no background in music, and no idea what to expect from a college

course in the subject. They could no more recognize Tchaikovsky than they could Machaut. Unlike the college students of the 1950s, they had not heard much classical music at home, at a pops concert, or anywhere else. Nor was there much other music I could assume they would all recognize. Since 1984 was the year Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album came out, I assumed they had at least heard that. Everything else was guesswork, and I learned on the job. What I quickly realized was that a chronological approach—even the modified one still used in the Machlis book—would bore them just as dependably as it had the students of Machlis's generation.

Toward a Different Teaching Model

A new teaching model was clearly needed: one that would engage students with little musical background and virtually no experience listening to anything that lasted more than a few minutes. They needed to be challenged to listen critically and not just prepare to identify pieces they had heard before on quizzes and exams. They needed to develop long-range listening skills that enabled them to understand and experience musical form in longer works. They did not need to learn to read music and were not well served by the idea of a limited canon of "great masterworks." What they did need was to be prepared to react as educated listeners to a new work of music in any style.

Unencumbered by a text with predetermined choices, I put together a listening list of the music I loved the most. I had already determined, for example, that I was not going to include Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in any course syllabus I created. The piece was in all the standard books, and it practically taught itself; you told the story, you played the music, and you showed how the music told the story. I wanted my students to know, though, that Berlioz had also written an imaginative realization of the Romeo and Juliet story and a fabulous opera based on Vergil's *Aeneid*. I wanted them to hear at least the first movement of Bruckner's Symphony No. 7, and I wanted them to listen to the rhythmic verve of a Bach harpsichord concerto instead of one of the Brandenburgs. I also wanted to teach them about jazz, which was by no means standard fare in such courses three decades ago.

At the same time, though, I didn't want to expose them to too many different styles or too wide a range of works. I focused on classical music—as I do in my text—not only because it was what I knew best, but also because it allowed me to highlight both important consistencies and significant diversity of style without trying to cover too much.

A second feature of my teaching that helped open my students' ears was that I decided not to play what was still accurately described in the 1980s as "drop the needle" on quizzes and exams. Any time I played music for students and asked for their feedback, it was something they hadn't heard before. I

asked them to apply their listening skills and describe what they were hearing. This was how I had been tested in music major classes as an undergraduate, and I saw no reason why it shouldn't work at this level as well.

The most difficult aspect for students to "get," I quickly realized, was musical form. I could tell them that a selection began with one musical idea, proceeded to a contrasting idea and then returned to the first one. I could point out the first two events as they happened and ask them to raise their hands when the opening music returned. Hardly anyone, I found, could do that. Something that I thought to be easy and self-explanatory challenged the limits of their listening skills because they weren't used to thinking about music in those terms. Hearing how any extended composition was put together was thus not part of their initial skill set. I could describe ABA, rondo or theme and variations form and students could learn the descriptions and parrot them back. As far as practical benefits went, though, they might as well have been memorizing Sanskrit.

Form, I had learned, was in the wrong place in the standard textbooks, so I decided to ignore the model they set in this regard as well. You couldn't wait until students had learned about the great composers and styles and then introduce them to form in the final chapters. They might learn to describe it accurately, but they didn't learn to hear it, so unfamiliar music remained hostile territory to them. Listening to an extended performance of something they hadn't heard before was no less of an ordeal than it had been before they took the course.

So I introduced them to musical forms right at the beginning of the semester and spent the rest of the time drilling them in every way conceivable. I gave quizzes in which I challenged them to create listening charts for pieces they were hearing for the first time. I encouraged them to get in the habit of listening to the first twenty seconds or so of a new piece repeatedly, since easily recognizing it when it returned was going to be the key to unlocking virtually everything else that happened as the music unfolded.

Of course that wasn't all I did. Students also had to learn to recognize the sounds of the different instruments—but I found they were often just as interested in learning about the people who played them. They had to be able to count musical meters: again, not just understand how they worked, but hear them as physically engaging processes that spanned and defined long stretches of music. If they were going to listen to opera, they needed to think about how music could develop character and project drama in ways that differed from a stage play. Fortunately I had taught a college seminar at Yale on operatic adaptations of great literary works, so I was prepared to show them in detail how Verdi's *Otello* differed from Shakespeare's *Othello* and how Mozart and Da Ponte edited and streamlined *Le Nozze di Figaro*. These things weren't in any of the textbooks, so I had to improvise, and not everything I did was

equally successful. It was in this manner, though, that I began to create the pedagogy that would later motivate me to write my own text.

Another thing I learned during that formative year was that I simply couldn't spend much class time talking about music history. I didn't go to the extreme that Crocker and Basart did and leave it out entirely, but I reduced it to a unit—one that fell fairly late in the semester—in which I introduced the historical periods in fairly broad terms. I never asked the students to memorize dates or lists of great composers, and I frankly didn't care how many names they recognized. The idea that a one-semester music appreciation course should try to cover a little bit of everything was, I decided, pedagogically destructive. It was better to teach a few things in depth than to spread the net too wide.

It was also emphatically not worth spending time, I decided, teaching music appreciation students to read music. Some of them could and some of them couldn't; in fact, that discrepancy was the single biggest obstacle I faced in setting up a course that would be challenging yet fair to all the students who took it. It reflected a difference in training and background. Those who could read music had usually taken lessons and perhaps played or sung in an ensemble in high school. Most, though, were accustomed to hearing music but not to seeing it, and if I was going to upset that balance I wanted to do so carefully and for good pedagogical reasons.

Crocker and Basart had devised their own highly idiosyncratic solution to this problem. Instead of using standard music notation, they filled their book with unique graphics that represented different aspects of the musical experience visually in what were supposed to be intuitive ways. These examples progressed across the page as music notation did, but they showed phrase structure, beats, meter, texture, relative pitch and other aspects of music in ways that could be grasped visually without the ability to decipher noteheads, clefs and staves. They allowed students to focus on what was essential in any passage of the music being discussed; unlike the old Norton Scores, which highlighted the essential aspects of the music to focus the listener's attention, these examples simply left everything inessential out. On p. 343, for example,³ there is a visually striking diagram that shows the melodic shape and note values of the opening theme of the Vivace of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 as it appears at the beginning of that section. Immediately underneath is a graph showing how that theme is transformed at the close of the same section, with the counterstatement in the cellos and basses mapped in visual counterpoint to it. With some help from the instructor, a student can use this illustration to grasp an essential point about the theme's profile, its

3. Crocker and Basart, *Listening to Music*, 343.

adaptability to contrapuntal treatment, and its role within the work's larger structure, all at the same time.

This was in the days before interactive visual analogues for the experience of listening to music could easily be created at the computer, so the Crocker/Basart graphics were a kind of desperate compromise between the dynamic involvement they suggested and the frozen inflexibility of the printed page. In a sense they were the forerunners of the online listening guides that now come with virtually every appreciation textbook. The advantage of the latter is that they can offer running commentary in real time, so students who are sufficiently motivated can now do listening practice on their own and gain the kind of skills I was so painstakingly reinforcing in class back in the '80s. The disadvantage of most of those that have been developed so far is that they offer only written commentary, not graphics. They cannot do what the Crocker/Basart example just described managed to accomplish so efficiently.

An early attempt to bridge this gap can be found in a series of CD-ROMs developed in the early 1990s by Robert Winter, which realized works like Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and String Quartet, op. 131 and the Brahms *Requiem* visually so as to produce a truly interactive listening experience.⁴ These have long since been rendered obsolete because they were MAC-only and did not survive the update to OSX. They gave an idea, though, of what could be done with state-of-the-art computer graphics to make music more accessible to people unable to read a score. The opportunity to develop such graphics in connection with a music appreciation textbook has been evident for some time. Ideally, they would represent as many musical elements as possible through highly intuitive visual analogues, so only minimal training would be required for students to learn to use the guides on their own. This would enable them both to control the listening experience and to enjoy all the advantages of a conductor leading the music from a score. The ability to see what they were also hearing would bridge the gap between intellectual description of music's elements and the ability to hear them in real time.

In designing the interactive listening guides that will accompany my book, I did not seek to imitate the Crocker/Basart graphics in electronic format, since I was aiming at a slightly different pedagogical goal. Those graphics were meant to highlight passages of particular interest, so their arrangement in the book is sporadic and they assume an instructor with the ability to coordinate them with a particular recording and then tease out their meaning in class. Without such careful work on the instructor's part, the entire book would be useless. My own graphics are recording-specific and do not demand as much instructor involvement. They assume a visually oriented, computer

4. Published by Warner New Media, Burbank, CA, in the Warner Audio Notes series.

savvy student who is willing to spend some time using them to develop listening skills and get to know the works on the listening list in greater depth outside of class. They are meant to supplement the instruction provided in the classroom, not to serve as its backbone. They do not show as much musical detail, since they are oriented toward the big picture: form and structure are the most important elements they represent, with instrumentation and melodic shape a close second. Since the goal is to illustrate entire pieces, local aspects like phrase and beat structure and harmonic shifts are not described visually, although I still hope to expand the listening guides in this direction in future editions of the book.

I offer this commentary not as a promotion of my new text, but as a description of where I believe the pedagogy of introductory non-major courses needs to go for the role of music in the curriculum to remain viable. My sincere hope is that my book will be a step in the direction of a skills-based concept of musical literacy that will prepare students to encounter new, unfamiliar music in any style and listen to it with discernment and pleasure. The choice of repertory covered in the book reflects my own personal tastes and knowledge, but it is not meant to be exclusive. Each chapter can be augmented by the inclusion of additional music at the discretion of the instructor, and I will be honored if those who teach from the book use the skills I model in each chapter to introduce students to entirely different types of music than those I have selected.