

Teaching Music History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong: “Reading” History

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In this paper, I discuss some of the challenges in teaching Western music history in my institution. It is in many ways an exceptional teaching and learning environment, rich in opportunities for both instructors and students. But there are also difficulties, mainly in teaching language-based subjects. These result in part from the nature of the environment, but may also stem from a wider problem of literacy in a broad sense, and from changing attitudes towards reading.

The Context

Although its name might suggest otherwise, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is in many ways a cosmopolitan institution. Established in 1963 through the amalgamation of three colleges, the University has always provided instruction in both Chinese and English.¹ Applicants to all undergraduate programs are required to have attained a high level of proficiency in both English and Chinese. Once admitted, students must take language courses and pass further proficiency tests in both languages to graduate. In the Department of Music, more than half of all courses are taught in English. Among the notable exceptions are the courses on Chinese music, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of the department is that it provides extensive instruction in both Chinese and Western music. Indeed, students are required to take courses in both musical traditions, including instrumental lessons. This curriculum within the music department is consistent with the philosophy and goals of the University.²

1. In contrast, English is the official language of instruction at the territory's other comprehensive university, the University of Hong Kong, which was founded in 1911.

2. The University cites the “bilingual and multicultural dimensions of student education” as part of its vision. See “Mission & Vision, Motto & Emblem,” <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/aboutus/mission.html>.

The actual interests of music students, on the other hand, are not quite in sync with the University's vision. Typically, at least 90% of our students are primarily interested in Western music. It is the music that they know best. Many come from secondary schools where music was given some emphasis, and most have progressed through the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) exams on their primary instrument. As with undergraduates just about everywhere, what most are interested in when they arrive in our department is learning to play that instrument better. Nevertheless, they are required to take lessons in a second instrument and take a number of courses on Chinese music, including the history of Chinese music. So our program differs from those in most Western countries in its overall approach to curriculum and in the music history we teach.³

Overall, the department offers a wide range of courses, given its modest size (12 full-time faculty) and broad mission. Due to the diversity of the music curriculum and to the large number University-wide courses all undergraduates are required to take, music students must complete only three semesters of Western music history. In their second year of university they take a two-semester survey, after which they select from a list of electives and occasionally special topics courses.⁴ Instructors use a combination of textbooks and selected readings in these courses.⁵ The music department also offers four general education (GE) courses, three of which are taught in English. I teach two of these—one that explores a wide range of musics through the history of sound recording, and a second on film music that is part history and part appreciation.⁶

The Problem

Having taught at CUHK for just over a decade, and offered courses on many topics, I find that the one problem that continues to concern me is the students' reluctance to read. We already assign a limited number of pages per week because students are studying in their second language, but this is not a

3. In the sixteen years since China reclaimed sovereignty over Hong Kong, music has remained an area within university studies that is still highly cosmopolitan. For a discussion of the pre-handover context, see Greta Olson, "Report from Hong Kong: Present Directions and Thoughts about the Future," *Current Musicology* 58 (1995): 121–8.

4. Western music history electives are offered on jazz, romanticism, nationalism, film music, and women in music.

5. In the survey, instructors have in recent years used Barbara Russano Hanning's *Concise History of Western Music*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009). In the pair of courses I teach on film music, I use Mervyn Cooke's *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), while in most electives selected readings are the norm.

6. The Music Department also offers a course titled "Appreciation of Chinese Opera," and a traditional "Music Appreciation" course, in which Roger Kamien's *Music: An Appreciation*, 7th brief edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010) is used.

question of ability. Students’ command of written English is very high, and I am not aware of any studies showing that the level of English among Hong Kong university students has declined over the past decade. Nor have I observed any decline in the verbal skills or basic comprehension of texts in English. Among the students I have taught from Mainland China (accounting for 10-15% of the students in my GE courses), the average student’s verbal abilities are perhaps only slightly lower than their Hong Kong counterparts, due presumably to their having had fewer opportunities to use the language, while their ability to understand readings seems to be about the same as the Hong Kong-born students. This is also true of the growing number of Korean students in my GE courses,

From my experience with both music students and those taking my GE courses, the common problem is, I expect, becoming a universal one: a declining interest in reading. While students seem unprepared to invest much of their time in reading either textbooks or the higher-level content of journal articles, they are generally open to new topics and are interested in learning. To illustrate, several years ago, I experimented with the so-called “flipped classroom,” in which students undertake the work—reading, viewing, listening—before class, and then come to the classroom to engage in some way, rather than listening to a lecture. While teaching the music history survey, I used role-playing and debates as a way to engage students in learning about nationalism in music, the “War of the Romantics,” and other topics. To explore each issue, I began by assigning students to groups. Rather than simply giving each a side (pro or con) on a particular issue, I assigned a role—Vaughan Williams, Bartók, etc.—and provided each student with a number of short readings by or about their character. They then had several weeks to prepare to debate from their character’s point of view. In each debate, the students seemed to enjoy the process and the game of taking on the role. The problem, however, was that few had taken the time to do the reading that was needed to prepare for the debate.

Regrettably, this was not an isolated case. Each term, I receive emails from students who think that their lecture notes are all that they need and ask if they really must read a particular article, chapter, or passage—even though it has been assigned as “required.” Based on what I often read in final examination essays, many students do not take my advice. The reasons for this are no doubt many. There are real demands on students to frequently “change channels,” as they say, and absorb material in both English and Chinese. And although Hong Kong students may have better attitudes towards reading than their peers in some countries, their facility with English-language texts is limited when compared with those whose first language is English.⁷ They will, then, be at a

7. Shek Kam Tse, et al, “Attitudes and Attainment: A Comparison of Hong Kong, Singaporean, and English Students’ Reading,” *Research in Education* 76 (2006): 74–87.

disadvantage in any language-based subject, where teaching and learning are dependent largely on printed texts. That said, a declining interest in reading may be a much wider problem, one that extends well beyond the community and region in which I live. I have had this conversation with colleagues in North America. PowerPoint, YouTube, and video games are all frequently cited distractions from reading.⁸ But many believe it originates in the culture of the Internet, and its ability to provide quick answers to simple questions. Whatever the reasons may be, new approaches to teaching and learning are needed if students are to benefit from studying history—both gaining a deeper understanding of the music that they play and acquiring transferable skills and abilities.

Those solutions are likely to be found through some combination of reading and other activities, both in the classroom and in online environments. In my experience, the “flipped classroom,” is not a natural fit for the humanities, and my experiment with it was not encouraging. Still, it may provide a way forward. A focused discussion of ways in which this model might be adapted to teaching music history could be profitable, regardless of where one is teaching. In my teaching environment, I have not found students to be uninterested in history. Rather, they face obstacles of culture, in the widest sense, and require new approaches to learning, approaches that may need to be employed long before they begin their university studies.

8. A discussion of the positive effects of leisure reading on academic success is beyond the scope of this short article, but what I perceive to be students' declining interest in academic reading may result in part from students devoting less of their free time to reading for pleasure. See, for example, Jude D. Gallik, “Do They Read for Pleasure? Recreational Reading Habits of College Students,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 24, no. 6 (1999): 480–88.