

## Parallel Universes: Producing Live Performances of Style Period Musics in the Music Industry Studies Curriculum

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It had been a long week. That Friday night as I trudged into the student union coffee shop for one of our class performances, I was met by one of my music history students, who was wearing a bow tie and holding a paper plate stacked with Little Debbie Fancy Cakes. As I took one, I asked him why he had them and he answered, “It’s a concert of Beethoven’s music. It’s supposed to be fancy!” My spirits were lifted immediately. This student was a Music Industry Studies (MIS) major enrolled in my Survey of Western Music class, a one-semester offering wedged into the tightly-packed MIS curriculum with the intent to provide students with a “crash” course in music history. The course was created in 2008 in response to our administration’s alarmed realization that MIS students were graduating with no music history experience whatsoever. As a musician with a family background in theater who later gained professional experience as a contract performer, I was approached by the dean of our school of music to create the course.

In order to make it relevant to this particular major, I was encouraged to emphasize the components of patronage and management corresponding to the developments of music in each style period. At the time, accepting this responsibility was generally considered by my colleagues to be an unenviable task, because the MIS majors had developed a reputation for being antisocial and clique-ish. The divisiveness within the student body bothered our faculty and administration, who deliberately worked to maintain a strong sense of community within the school of music. As I was designing the course, I had an epiphany: I realized that both the need for music history and the desire to unite the student body could be met if my students were required to produce live performances of music representing each style period as part of their course grade. Since the performers would largely be comprised of other students in the school of music, we could start to close the social gap while beginning the process of networking. What follows is an account of many of the challenges and victories my students and I have experienced as this class has evolved,

ending with the final *pièce de résistance*—trips to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The first section of this paper will provide a description of the dual nature of the course, while the second section will explore ways in which the course has evolved since its inception, along with a discussion of the pedagogy I have incorporated in order to equip my students with the knowledge and skills they need for successful entry into the music industry.

### Section 1: Knowledge and Teamwork

Survey of Western Music is offered in the fall semester of each academic year. In response to our university's General Education requirements, it is open to all students regardless of major. With an enrollment cap of forty, one-quarter to one-third of the class is usually comprised of non-music majors. Using the legendary educator John Dewey's philosophy, I have structured this course to embody a deliberate mix of "passive" and active learning, even though I have reversed the order of active and passive learning outlined in Dewey's credo.<sup>1</sup> This approach is intended to acknowledge and, hopefully, to accommodate the kinesthetic, visual, and verbal styles of learning demonstrated by my students.

Throughout the course of one semester, I introduce the students to the music of each style period in its socio-historical context and then reinforce that information through the added construct of performance production teams. Each team has three members: 1) a manager, 2) a publicist, and 3) a recording engineer. The students choose with whom they would like to work, as well as the role they would like to assume within the team. The style periods are assigned randomly, however, in order to ensure that none are omitted. The non-music majors begin to form acquaintances with their classmates through this process out of necessity. By the end of the second week of class, the otherwise "settled" atmosphere has been shuffled, and it is at this point that the students' attitudes toward the class, the gravity of the class requirements, and their respective levels of commitment become more apparent. Although non-majors whose interests lie in fields such as economics, business, or management often wisely recognize the activity as an on-the-ground opportunity to carry out a project related to their passions, others take the class less seriously, disappearing from their teams and from regular class attendance. While most of the MIS majors jump into the performance-production pool enthusiastically, some of them also choose to follow the perilous path of absenteeism and suffer the consequences later. The course content and the performances are presented chronologically. The following is the list of specific parameters required for each team:

1. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed: Article Four. The Nature of Method," *School Journal* 54 (January 1897): 77–80, <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm>.

1. Each performance must contain a minimum of two performers and twenty-two minutes of music. Production Team members may not double as performers. Performers may not serve as evaluators.
2. None of the performances may take place in the school of music building.
3. All of the performances must take place in a type of venue that somehow correlates with the time period.
4. No major school ensembles' performances may be utilized for this assignment.
5. As the publicist from each team provides a spoken introduction to the performance, s/he may only use notes as reminders of the major points rather than as text from which to read. The length of time taken up by this introduction does not count toward the minimum of twenty-two minutes of music to be performed.
6. All performances must be completed by midnight of the last day of class in the fall semester. Performances scheduled after that time do not earn credit.

I set an arbitrary deadline of October 15 for the teams to establish performance dates and venues, having learned the hard way that if no deadline is set, the majority of the teams procrastinate until the end of the semester and then have to scramble to produce a usually mediocre-to-poor quality performance. By October 15, we have covered the musics of the Middle Ages up through Beethoven, and the corresponding teams have already produced their performances. The teams responsible for early Romantic music and later eras consequently need to research their assigned periods outside of class in order to determine the type of venue they will need to locate and reserve. Each team is also allotted a window of time in the semester during which its performance must be scheduled in order to align with the style periods being explored in class.

Furthermore, the October 15 deadline is essential for all students in the class because each student is required to attend and evaluate six performances from the stylistic array represented and produced by the other teams. A deadline allows each student to fit his/her choice of six performances produced by the other teams into his/her school- and work-packed schedules. In a class of thirty-five to forty students, the performance attendance requirement usually ends up providing at least a small audience. Each student completes and submits an evaluation for each of the six performances s/he attends. The evaluations actually provide not one, but two grades: the first is for the student who fills out the evaluation, according to the level of attention to detail demonstrated; and the second grade for the performance attended. Each team's grade for the performance is a composite: 60% of their grade is determined by peer evaluation and

40% from my own assessment. At the top of the evaluation form, I provide a preliminary component that acknowledges the event of the performance itself as a simple boost for the overall grade (and to give a reason for my students to learn each other's names). This grade is combined with the respective publicist, manager, and recording engineer's contributions to the performance, each of which is graded separately, added, and averaged to result in one grade shared by all members of the team. The students consequently have a vested interest in each other's performances, and this interest gradually creates a foundation of support between members of the class community.

Regarding the items included in each portion of the evaluation form, Pulman discusses choosing

criteria that are determined by the students themselves since it is they...who will be using such criteria to make their judgements. Importantly, student generated peer assessment criteria are advocated by many on the basis of the desirability of involving students in the assessment process in order to promote greater transparency.<sup>2</sup>

While student-generated evaluations would work well in a course more reliant on general student opinion, I have found that holding students to the requirements for which they know they are responsible effectively reinforces their understanding of their respective roles within each team. The process of evaluating the performances of teams by other students, or "inter-peer assessment," becomes transformative for the students in the audience, because once each student has completed his/her own team's performance, s/he is equipped with a new ability to comprehend the effectiveness of the other performances being evaluated.<sup>3</sup>

As the semester progresses, the team members often recognize a blurring of the lines between their roles. Students frequently help each other as they secure venues, contact musicians, initiate and follow up on e-mails and phone calls, and generally provide moral support. In fact, teams occasionally help out other teams, since there is no element of competition, but instead the common goal of a successful performance. Equally important to the historical content of this course is the opportunity afforded to the students to experience the challenges and victories that accompany the mounting of a live production while they are still in school and before the success of their careers is at stake, thereby enhancing their "employability," as Gareth Smith explains:

2. Mark Pulman, " 'Knowing yourself through others': Peer assessment in popular music group work," (Ph.D. diss., Sheffield Hallam University, 2008), 34 (section 1.4.2). <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/5592/>

3. Pulman, "Peer assessment in popular music group work," 33-34 (section 1.4.1).

Today...a pedagogy for employability should aim to instil [sic] in students the skills for, and a sense of, collaborative entrepreneurialism, because it is widely agreed that a key to achievement in the professional musical environment of the future is likely to be an ability to work successfully in teams.<sup>4</sup>

For example, when performers cancel at the last minute, teams learn very quickly who they can and cannot rely on, especially when their friends from outside the class step in to assist. When my students and I comprise the audience for live performances of music we are currently studying in class, it seems as though the historic and contemporary universes conceptually line up with each other. While such an event is otherwise unremarkable, since public performances of music representing all style periods can be attended in cultural centers throughout the country, what makes this particular experience special is the intimacy of the productions being facilitated by the students' classmates and friends, which are then preserved by the recording engineers as contemporary audio/visual documents in a private class account. The recording engineers thus assume the historic role of archivists, using the state-of-the-art methods of their personal time period in history, just as copyists, diarists, and librarians did for centuries before them.

Since I believe strongly that newly-minted graduates of MIS programs who have been coached in the art of effective public speaking are advantageously equipped for successful employment in the music industry, I have added two tasks to each student's composite grade: 1) a team PowerPoint/Prezi presentation delivered to the class detailing its own process of mounting the production; and 2) the final project, which is an individual presentation in the form of a promotional pitch to a specific audience. Although the point Channing makes here comes from the vantage point of the orchestral musician, it aptly applies to MIS students as well:

Increasingly, students are being encouraged to understand how skills can be transferred from one situation to another. For instance, a requirement that chamber groups and soloists must introduce their own concerts prepares them for public speaking and encourages them to make use of library facilities to research their introductions. Later in their careers, they may have to stand up in front of a violin section to explain and demonstrate a musical point...by adopting such customs and practices in their formative years,

4. Gareth Dylan Smith, "Pedagogy for Employability in a Foundation Degree (FdA) in Creative Musicianship: Introducing Peer Collaboration," in *SEMPRE Studies in The Psychology of Music: Collaborative Learning in Higher Music Education: Why What and How?*, ed. Helena Gaunt, Heidi Westerlund, and Graham Welch (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013) 193.

students learn them as an integrated part of their musical education, whilst being taught to express themselves and to be creative.<sup>5</sup>

The team presentations occur during class time at the end of the semester, before final exams begin. Because I added these requirements, I have had to devote a class period to how to prepare and present an effective PowerPoint/Prezi since, while the majority of my students have picked up on positive and negative components of visual presentations in previous classroom experiences, very few have received formal training in the art of successfully assembling and then presenting a PowerPoint/Prezi effectively. The presentations also provide the members of each team with the opportunity to stand in front of their peers and speak about their process, with each manager, publicist, and recording engineer relating his/her specific contributions to the events leading up to the final production. Although the teams' experiences turn out to be remarkably similar to each other, ultimately it is not the content of the narratives that matters as much as the experience each student acquires through speaking to the class. Flanked by his/her team, each student is placed within a "safety in numbers"-type of environment in which to speak individually and get a sense of being in front of the class before doing his/her individual presentation for the final project. The team presentation also seems to be essentially cathartic for the students, since it provides them a forum in which to express their frustrations and triumphs to their peers as they gradually realize that these are actually shared experiences, thus enhancing the class community and solidifying a sense of camaraderie.

The second task takes the form of a three-minute pitch for mounting a contemporary setting of an opera assigned by me, with the rationale that students who have gained the ability to speak to an audience should practice having the confidence to address a specific group of people capable of providing support for the production (such as the management staff of an opera house, the board of directors for a philanthropic foundation, or the owners of a major costume shop). Three components are required within the content of the pitch:

1. presentation of the students' concept of the opera and what will be needed in order to make the production effective;
2. demonstration of need for the type of support being sought; and
3. proof that the support will benefit all parties concerned.

Students may use one PowerPoint slide only, and no audio/video clips are allowed. Since the proposal is for a hypothetical production, the students are

5. Simon Channing, "Training the orchestral musician," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Orchestra*, ed. Colin Lawson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186.



allowed to incorporate any and all performers, venues, costumes, and other resources, limited only by their imagination. In order to complete the project successfully, the students must acquaint themselves with historical aspects of the opera, including its plot, the style period with which it is associated, and the type of accompanying ensemble for which it was composed. The pitches are presented during our two-and-a-half-hour final exam period in lieu of a cumulative test. Due to the large number of students enrolled each fall, I make it clear that: 1) their job is not to tell the story, since everyone in the class knows it by now; and 2) in order to respect the three-minute time limit, they must carefully decide what not to include as they rehearse the presentation ahead of time.

## Section 2: Evolution and Realization

In the Fall 2016 semester, I experimented with a few changes to the class that proved fruitful. The first one addressed the attendance policy. Up until last fall, I had not taken attendance because I believed in treating my students as adults, but this policy resulted in chronic absenteeism, coupled (logically) with my inability to learn the students' names. I realized that my assumption was flawed. I had actually been treating my students as graduate students rather than as undergraduates, many of whom apparently interpreted my decision not to take attendance as an indication that I didn't care whether or not they came to class. So I devised a seating chart, which had the dual-benefit of splitting up groups of friends and forcing the students to become better acquainted with others in the MIS and other degree programs while making it possible for me to learn their names much more quickly. The new policy did not completely eliminate absenteeism, but it gelled the class in a way that was noticeable to both the students and to me.

With the new attendance policy now in place, I added one Saturday meeting for all the managers, one meeting for the publicists, and one for the recording engineers. The rationale was simple and straightforward. During the meetings, I explained in detail the responsibilities of each role and offered several suggestions for accomplishing those tasks. The students had the opportunity to meet and recognize all the others in the class who had assumed the same role in their production teams. By holding the meetings, I hoped to set the tone of my willingness to go "above and beyond" with my students. Once our class performances began, my students would realize that I would attend every one of them and could be relied upon for outside counsel and suggestions pertaining to their production.

I made another change based on a hunch and was thrilled when the gamble paid off. At the end of each class period in which the teams did their class presentations, I asked all of the teams who had presented that day to sit on the

apron of the stage and engage in informal discussion with the class, perhaps adding conversation points they had either forgotten or deemed too petty to be included in the formal presentation, answering questions from the rest of the class, and responding to each other onstage. This wrap-up of the session went over beautifully, since the relaxed atmosphere allowed for additional validation from both the students' classmates and from me, and for a brief moment, the presenters became the authority as they sat onstage answering questions. It turned out to be a "we're in this together" type of occasion each time, a sentiment that ultimately aligned with the social and learning environments established within our school of music.

The last change involved the final project. Up until last fall, the project was not a promotional pitch, but rather a presentation of each student's concept of a contemporary setting of an opera I assigned. While a few students "caught on" to the project, most didn't really understand the concept and presented ideas that were either outlandishly far-fetched or barely imaginative at all. The projects universally seemed to have been "thrown together" at the last minute, and we ended up with 150 minutes of the same plot being told to the class by the students, over and over. In order to subvert this presentation purgatory, I decided to try the idea of a promotional pitch, with both positive and negative results. On the positive side, all but one of my students grasped the concept, presenting their cases aptly and, in some cases, humorously. On the other hand, not all of my students remembered to clarify the type of audience their classmates were intended to hypothetically be. Furthermore, most students took the three-minute limit too much to heart, opting simply to present less information. Overall, however, the majority of my students took the initiative to speak directly to the class, eschewing notes for reference when at all possible and winning over their classmates, often uproariously.

Since this course began ten years ago, I believe it has bolstered the sense of community in the school, not only because our MIS students have become better acquainted with the other music majors, but because many of them have taken the opportunity to perform for each other. They have tapped into and developed extra-musical talents (for example, in interpersonal communication skills and graphic design), thereby enhancing their self-concepts and mutual respect. In September 2012, I came up with the idea of rewarding my students for all of their work. I wanted to provide them with an opportunity to experience a masterful production as audience members, thereby crediting them with the knowledge they had gained through their own experiences in producing performances. I had recently become enthralled with the renowned German soprano Diana Damrau. After finding out that she would be performing her debut of Verdi's *La Traviata* with Plácido Domingo at the Metropolitan Opera the following spring, I assigned that opera to my students for their final project.



Then, with the support of our generous dean, I arranged a trip to New York for those students who wanted to go, as well as for those from previous iterations of the course who were interested in joining us. I mentioned the trip to one of my music theory colleagues, who enthusiastically offered to go over the score with her MIS theory class in preparation for the trip. Once all of the arrangements had been made, there was one more aspect of the event that I couldn't resist exploring. I contacted Ms. Damrau's agent in Berlin to find out if it might be possible for my group to meet briefly with her in person after the matinee performance, and I was overjoyed when the agent agreed to allow us twenty minutes with the soprano (who ended up talking with us for forty-five minutes). Two years later, I took another group of students to the Met again to see Diana Damrau perform Massenet's *Manon*, and this time she spent an hour with us and posed for a photo with her two young sons (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1:** With Diana Damrau at the Metropolitan Opera, March 21, 2015. Photo permission of D. Damrau.



While I really did want to reward my students for their work, I also had an ulterior motive. Since the majority of MIS graduates at our university pursue careers in popular music, I wanted them to experience a truly professional opera because I doubted that they would do so otherwise. Even though our school of music has thriving orchestras and bands, the MIS students who do not perform in these ensembles may very likely never attend one of their concerts, consequently missing the opportunity to realize that they now possess the

knowledge necessary to enhance their understanding of the music performed. According to Kolb, students often avoid “classical” performances because they believe that without being educated about the music, they would not belong in the audience whose demographic appeared to be one or two generations older than their own (Kolb 2000). Yet, students recognize the middle-class level quality of hard work demonstrated by the composers of classical music, which partially accounts for the durability of their music over time. The overarching context for twenty-first century undergraduates attending classical music concerts is undeniably different from that of their parents and grandparents:

They still have an interest in high culture such as classical music, but they also insist on being entertained. They do not look to the classical music organization for a ritual to provide meaning to their lives because they construct their own meaning. Because their experience of life is far broader than that of previous generations, they no longer look to a single social class, religion, or nationality for cultural meaning or entertainment. Young consumers living in [sic] this multimedia, cross-cultural environment...want concerts which feature music combined with other art forms and which use modern staging techniques.<sup>6</sup>

Since the goal of this course is to educate our students about the stylistic characteristics of music from each of the historic eras, I hoped that they would go into the Metropolitan Opera confident in their ability to comprehend the performance and would not be intimidated by the presence of older audience members. Even more importantly, I wanted my students to witness a world-class performance in order to realize that, on a basic level, it is assembled in much the same way as their own performances were, i.e., through communication, artist management, and design. The roles assumed by my music history students in their production teams parallel those assumed by, for example, the people who were responsible for arranging public concerts during the nineteenth century as well as those in twenty-first century arts administration, stage management, ticket sales, and artist bookings at the Metropolitan Opera. Given the premise that our understanding of the universe is not limited to one dimension, if a person’s “universe” can be equated to his/her “world,” then the universe of our undergraduate students is comprised of the people, events, and transactions encountered in their daily lives, coupled with the contributions the students make to their own learning processes. So while part of my MIS students’ universe constitutes active engagement in the class requirement to make a performance happen, it parallels that of their counterparts in the style periods

6. Bonita M. Kolb, Conclusion to “You call this fun? Reactions of young first-time attendees to a classical concert,” in *Journal of the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 13–28, [http://www.meiea.org/Journal/html\\_ver/Vol01\\_No01/Vol\\_1\\_No\\_1\\_A1.html](http://www.meiea.org/Journal/html_ver/Vol01_No01/Vol_1_No_1_A1.html)

of music history assigned to each group and, in that way, the parallel is based on chronological time. Career professionals at the Metropolitan Opera are naturally responsible for much more refined versions of these tasks, although their work parallels the responsibilities faced by our students conceptually instead of chronologically. My objective is to put students in a situation that affords them the opportunity to find their places, albeit temporarily, in the musical production continuum.

To conclude, performing the music we study in music history classes presents many invaluable opportunities for learning. In so doing, I believe it is possible to begin an important discussion of the context in which each type of music was made. For students whose careers depend upon developing 1) intimate knowledge of the music of each style period in Western music history, 2) effective interpersonal communication skills, and 3) a firmly established network of colleagues whose areas of expertise complement one another, the combination of learning about music corresponding to style periods while facilitating live performances of that music holds great potential. On a personal note: I'll never look at a box of Little Debbie Fancy Cakes the same way again.