

A-R Online Music Anthology

<http://www.armusicanthology.com/anthology/Default.aspx>
free instructor access; \$60 for six-month subscription for students

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The essential starting point in planning the undergraduate music history survey for me, conjoined with my own set of learning outcomes, is not the textbook, but rather the anthology. Does the selection of pieces included tell the story I want to tell? A-R Editions has taken a leap forward by moving its anthology off paper into the internet, allowing faculty more than ever before to “choose your own adventure,” like the popular series of children’s books. The options are far from limitless—indeed, in many ways that selection remains as traditional as any existing anthology—but that move away from hard copy both gives more options and opens the door to further innovations, so it is worth celebrating.

I have used this electronic anthology for my classes for the past couple of years, and, while it’s not perfect, I expect to continue to do so. I should acknowledge up front that I also plan to contribute to its growing collection of associated essays, an expansion of the anthology that may allow me and others to move away from a traditional textbook entirely. (More on that below.) This review will therefore in some respects be a reflection on how I have used, and plan to use, the anthology in my classes.

It’s worth providing a brief description of that class, then. We have a two-semester survey, and my portion covers the traditional first half (antiquity through the baroque); we currently use Burkholder’s text throughout the year, and the second half (which I do not currently teach) uses the Norton Anthology. I have worked in recent years to “flip” my part of the course, which has required being much more selective about the styles and genres I take time for: two-part organum but not the conductus, Machaut’s ballades but not the *Messe de Nostre Dame*, Lully but not Rameau, and so on. Class activities, mostly in pairs or small groups, may allow encounters with some additional genres, but the general trend is toward deeper coverage of less material—though I still start with the Orpheus story and end with Handel responding to market forces in the creation of the English oratorio.

The A-R Anthology contains the same types of pieces, and in many cases exactly the same pieces, as the traditional anthologies. The main difference is a relative lack of 20th-century coverage, presumably because A-R has not been able to get rights to distribute recent music in this format. While the anthology includes a number of pieces by Debussy, other 20th-century holdings are limited to a piano sonata by Prokofiev, two *Saudades do Brasil* by Milhaud, a Gershwin prelude, Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet, and Penderecki's *Threnody*, along with pieces by Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, "Fats" Waller, W. C. Handy, and Earl Scruggs. This, obviously, is insufficient for the last unit of most music history surveys. If I were teaching the second half of our survey, I would surely have to turn to a traditional printed anthology for this material—probably either the third volume of the Norton Anthology or a twentieth-century anthology such as that by Joseph Auner (also by Norton). I don't know whether there are plans to fix this lacuna soon—it's admittedly not an easy problem to fix—but for now, at least, it's a serious gap.

It's hard not to be concerned about the ever-increasing cost of textbooks and related materials, and I have expressed my own dissatisfaction with Norton's move to a three-volume anthology, which may be great for a three- or four-semester survey but is simply more weight and expense for students such as mine, who won't use much of that material in their one-year survey. (This disjunction will probably be even more acute as more institutions scale back or even eliminate a traditional survey in order to provide a different balance of breadth and depth.) A six-month student subscription to the A-R Anthology (instructor access is free) currently runs \$60, with unlimited access (including printing), only slightly more than the retail price of volume 1 of the Norton Anthology (currently \$53.75). Six months, unfortunately, won't get students through the academic year, or even quite far enough for Norton's third volume to pick up—remember that instructors will need to find an alternative for twentieth-century material—so students would either have to renew the subscription or turn to the hard-copy anthology for the whole of the second semester. In either case, the costs are basically comparable to those for the Norton materials. Site licenses are also available, but while my own institution's library might be willing to negotiate that if we used the anthology through the year, it's not cost-effective for them as long as I'm the only one who uses it. A-R might compete better by extending its subscription term to eight months, or even ten, with minimal (or no) increase in cost. I'll return to the question of cost, however, when considering the textbook angle below.

Aside from the problem of more recent music, in general the coverage is pretty good, even generous in some ways. Moreover, the anthology administration willingly accepts suggestions for additions, so if a particular item isn't there, it might be possible to get it. I haven't taken full advantage of this option,

because I had already dealt with the major lacunae of the standard anthologies that most affect me, but it is my intention to turn those personal additions into suggestions for the anthology.

The ability to tailor the selection of pieces is one of the biggest advantages of this format. No more does one have to lament the lack of a good trope while bemoaning the presence of multiple Italian madrigals! There is more here than one can possibly use, but here it is clear that the “anthology” is simply a body of music from which an individual instructor can make personal selections. They have marketed a set of “pre-set courses,” basically one for each style period (except the twentieth century) plus five for form and analysis classes. It is also possible to make class-specific lists (which is what I do), though the interface is terribly clunky: adding a piece puts it at the end of the list, and it is possible to move an item only one place at a time, so it can take considerable time and frustration to add a new piece to an early part of an existing class list. I also find awkward the fact that, even while working from a class list, a master list (or search result list) remains visible on the top of the screen, requiring constant scrolling down. While I’m noting technical obstacles, I’ll point out that only ten items are visible at a time in the course list. Finally, when editing a course list, doing a search for an item on that list yields no results—not in the general pool because anything on the list is apparently removed from the general pool, and not in the list, because there is no way to search within the list. It is necessary to browse—again, ten pieces at a time. All of this makes the anthology more difficult to use than it should be. To some degree this may be a necessary result of entering the electronic anthology age early, but it’s an annoyance, and that may prevent some people from choosing the anthology.

The editions are generally decent or better—sometimes new, sometimes borrowing from existing editions, and about as good as can be found in the other standard anthologies. Chant is rendered in modern stemless noteheads (not my preference). Unfortunately, texts and especially translations are not always given; this is something that I hope is high on the list of improvements to be made for future editions. Similarly, I would in some cases like more guidance for the student—for instance, for the chants for Christmas, each item is titled simply by its text incipit, with no indication of the type of chant. The fact that there are no commentaries—as can be found in the Norton Anthology and some others—may turn off some instructors, but I find it easy enough to make up for that with pre-class videos and other materials and in-class activities. Indeed, sometimes what I want to do in class is essentially covered by the commentary in other anthologies, so in a way I find their absence in the A-R materials to be liberating. There are no commentaries here to steal my thunder (or rather, to pre-empt what I hope will be my students’ insights).

I find the way the music is placed on the screen to be awkward: the index frames remain on the left, while the music is added to the right, which requires scrolling to get to what I want to see. I expect this is even more problematic if using the anthology on a tablet or phone, as many students tend to do. Moreover, only one page is visible at a time. I almost always use this stage simply as a vehicle to “print” the piece as a PDF file, or even a hard copy, either of which is much easier to use.

I first set up a class list, then ask students to bring hard copies of specific pieces to class, so that they can make notes, etc. I’ll admit this works imperfectly, but it is no worse than requiring them to bring the anthology to class in book form. I also use anthology content for special projects: for instance, I have had groups report on examples of sixteenth-century sacred (or secular) music, using five or six pieces I wouldn’t have time to cover otherwise. Traditional anthologies can often be used for this as well, but I find that sometimes they are not quite up to the job; this is a place where the extra material becomes very useful indeed.

The cost of the anthology subscription recently rose from \$50 to \$60, because it now includes a series of “textbook” essays: one general overview per style period is available now, and period surveys of genres and forms and music theory are planned, as well as specific essays on major composers and significant works. This area, like the anthology itself, is likely to continue to grow according to the interests and needs of its users. The period overviews range from 19 to 33 pages. Given the obvious constraints, opinions of the value of these are likely to vary, but I’m pleased to say I find much to like in the ones I would use in my own class, and here I’ll focus on my own native ground of the middle ages. James Maiello, who wrote the medieval essay, is not the only one to acknowledge that complete coverage is impossible within the space available, choosing instead to focus on four broad themes: “organizing sound” (modes, etc.), the birth of polyphony, intersections of sacred and secular, and intertextuality. These four themes cover many of the basic issues of the period, though of course they leave much to be done in the context of the class, through supplemental readings, lectures (in class or video), class activities, etc.

I find such overviews awkward even in a traditional textbook: at the beginning of the unit, students aren’t ready for much of what is here, and at the end of this unit, it’s too late. This is not by any means a criticism of Maiello’s work (or of the other essays), but an inherent difficulty of this sort of essay, which moves in about 15 pages of text (plus bibliography, related material, and musical examples) from 476 to 1417. Actually, Maiello’s four themes align closely enough to my own thinking, and to some degree take up distinct enough chunks of the period, that I’m less worried about his essay than some others. I’m even more nervous about a single essay dealing with genres and forms, or with theory, of

the entire period. To summarize over a thousand years of material, covering both monophonic and polyphonic developments, seems to me to be an impossible task—if not for the writer, then certainly for the student reader. I'd much rather see these essays, especially the ones covering genres and forms, cover smaller units: chant, say, or the medieval motet. Some of this material may well be better covered in the more focused composers and works sections, which I am likely to use much more. Still, it can be difficult to speculate about the usefulness of essays that don't yet exist.

I am looking forward, however, to seeing these additional essays, and I'm already toying with the question of whether they, in combination with Grove and other reference resources, scholarly articles, documents, and other materials, could allow me to move away from a textbook entirely. This brings back the issue of student cost, because the \$60 subscription could replace both textbook and anthology, which would generate real savings for the student—though in my own case, that savings would still be limited, because students would still have to buy the traditional textbook for the part of the course I don't teach, as well as the related anthology volumes.

The A-R Anthology, then, is at the same time both traditional and revolutionary. Its content and approach echo printed antecedents, but it also opens up potential new ways of thinking about how we teach the basic music history survey. (I haven't spoken here about non-survey courses, because I don't use anthologies for those classes, nor would this or any other anthology easily serve those courses, at least the ones that I teach.) Its technical clunkiness may well seem insurmountable, or not worth dealing with, for those who are happy with current materials and current techniques, but for those looking for something new, it provides interesting opportunities, and in its openness to continued adaptation, it can allow a committed instructor to shape the future.