

Response to “Rethinking Primary Sources in the Music History Classroom” Roundtable

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The contributors to this roundtable make the case for incorporating hands-on, primary source study into undergraduate music history classrooms. They offer a number of engaging, imaginative exercises to that end, from hymntune philology and collective close-reading to treatise comparison and concert program reconstruction via historical, foreign-language newspapers. The authors thus join a chorus of scholars in other fields who have shared their favorite primary source-centered classroom activities and assignments for the benefit of colleagues and graduate students.¹ And most encouragingly, they model the ways that scholarly enthusiasm for the “stuff” of history can translate into meaningful learning opportunities for students.

What are those learning opportunities? The preceding essays reveal that musicologists recognize in primary sourcework the same kinds of pedagogical benefits that have been acknowledged in related fields.² Students stand to develop historical thinking, empathy, and imagination; gain invaluable information literacy skills, including the ability to recognize and enact knowledge construction; and discover the fulfilment and joy inherent in *writing* history rather than merely consuming it. But moving from idealized to realized learning outcomes is never simple, and we should not take such pedagogical transformations for granted. As we expand our repertory of primary source-oriented activities and assignments, musicologists face the challenge of assessing whether students actually achieved the learning outcomes promised by my colleagues and by scholars in other fields. The field of librarianship and information literacy provides excellent models for developing these much-needed assessments of student learning through primary sourcework.³

1. Anne Bahde, Mattie Taormina, and Heather Smedberg, *Using Primary Sources: Hands-on Instructional Exercises* (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2014).

2. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe and Christopher J. Prom, *Teaching with Primary Sources* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016).

3. Anne Bahde, “The History Labs: Integrating Primary Source Literacy Skills into a History Survey Course,” *Journal Of Archival Organization* 11, no. 3/4, 2013: 175–204.

Even without systematic assessment, however, my colleagues make strong arguments as to the pedagogical benefits that accrue from teaching with primary sources. Though their specific reasoning varied according to the primary sources at hand, all addressed the ways that guided primary source study can return context and nuance to the study of music history. As Brooks and Blake point out, conventional primary source collections serve as a kind of information dam. They decontextualize by necessity, allowing only disparate, individual, ostensibly “representative” primary sources to serve as enrichment for the generalized accounts that typically make up textbook readings and class lectures. Teachers who open the floodgates even minimally by offering students multiple primary sources of the same type—whether hymntune editions, historical newspapers, or performance treatises—expose the richness and complexity of the historical record. Along the same lines, Tim’s close-reading of a single text seeks to introduce complexity and expose important context by reminding students that primary sources only sometimes serve as repositories of facts. Tim reminds us that students have to be trained to read primary sources as collections of opinions, perspectives, and assertions of facts very much still under debate. So long as textbooks continue to offer isolated primary sources as in-text boxes or supplementary readings, teachers will have the opportunity (is it too strong to say, obligation?) to cultivate more context-rich engagement with additional primary sources.

That obligation has been made simultaneously more and less straightforward by the advent of open-access, digitized archival collections. More materials are available than ever before, which makes contextualizing isolated sources easier, yet potentially more overwhelming. Given the volume of available materials, it is all the more crucial that teachers sufficiently guide students through primary source study in the ways described by this roundtable. That guidance includes clear assignment prompts and productive in-class exercises—but also practice, practice, practice (as memorably advocated by Beth Christiansen in her article, “Warp, Weft, and Waffle: Weaving Information Literacy into an Undergraduate Music Curriculum”).⁴ Given adequate student preparation, digitized archival materials offer great rewards.⁵ Not only can teachers curate more

4. Beth Christiansen, “Warp, Weft, and Waffle: Weaving Information Literacy into an Undergraduate Music Curriculum,” *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Libraries Association* 60, no. 3 (2004): 616–631.

5. Preparation, of course, is key, and there are numerous methods for preparing students to do archive-centered primary sourcework. See for example Ellen E. Jarosz and Stephen Kutay, “Guided Resource Inquiries: Integrating Archives into Course Learning and Information Literacy Objectives,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 11/1 (2017): 204–220; and Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba, eds., *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012).

context-rich collections of primary sources for students to study, but teachers can set students to the task of *doing* musicology by having them dive directly into archival collections, rather than relying exclusively on the mediation of a textbook or source collection or even the teacher’s own selection. Swimming in sources, students have a much better chance of experiencing the kind of “historical thinking” that Rebecca evokes, coming closer to “breathing new life” into sources by engaging with them.

Students may struggle to stay afloat within a sea of information, but this struggle and its rewards often prove among the most gratifying of all the work students will do in music history classes. In my experience, students may come to *enjoy* doing original research in archival materials, even if those materials are not physical but rather digitized (and therefore searchable). I have asked students to curate and analyze primary sources from digital archives in blog posts and in a public library exhibit on race in American music; to use historical newspapers and correspondence to write fictional letters, bureaucratic memoranda, and concert reviews from the perspective of 1920s French musical figures; and to use travel guides, correspondence, and concert reviews to document the global reception of Darius Milhaud’s music between 1922 and 1933.⁶ In each case, in their course evaluations students have grumbled a bit about the workload before gushing about the meaningfulness and impact of their final products.⁷ Implicit in my assignments and in those of my colleagues is a deeply held conviction that a musicologist is defined not merely by a body of knowledge, but by the *feeling* produced through the act of discovery. We travel—and want our students to travel—through the sense of intimidation and inadequacy inspired by sifting through enormous mounds of material to the ecstasy of finding that one crucial source to the slow realization that extensive time spent buried in primary sources instills deep knowledge and scholarly perspective that no secondary source can provide. We want our students to experience the highs and lows of knowledge production first-hand. Primary sources serve as an excellent vehicle to that end.

As Blake so poignantly asserted, the stakes of fulfilling our pedagogical obligation—that is, to provide structured opportunities for students to engage deeply and repeatedly with large primary source corpora—have never been higher. It is worth repeating his contention that teaching through primary

6. These assignments and examples of the student work they produced are available at <https://pages.stolaf.edu/americanmusic/>, <https://musicalgeography.org/invented-primary-sources/>, and <https://musicalgeography.org/project/the-global-reception-of-darius-milhauds-music-1922-1933/>.

7. Crucially, a number of my primary-source-based assignments have included public scholarship components. My thinking about the benefits of having students do public scholarship through digital archival work is informed by T. Mills Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

sources accomplishes much more than enriching students' perceptions of music history: it "cultivate[s] in students an ethic of skepticism and a habit of seeking (demanding!) corroboration." In other words, musicologists face an ethical imperative to teach from primary sources in order to train students how to evaluate the validity of knowledge in their everyday lives.⁸ The current debate around "fake news" is merely a trendy way of representing the human tendency to sacrifice factual precision for rhetorical power, and students need to be able to critique such rhetorical moves no matter whether they are historical or contemporary. Building on Blake's argument, I would point out that primary source work fulfills another ethical and pedagogical obligation, this one having to do with the mediated nature of some of the largest and most promising archival collections. Open-access, digitized archival sources offer excellent pathways to improving and sustaining students' information literacy because unlike paywalled resources (*Grove*, academic journals, and physical books far easier to obtain through a university than through a public library) these archives will remain available to students well after they graduate. We may harbor hopes that students will transfer the kinds of critical thinking and historical empathy we teach in our classes in their lives beyond the ivory tower. Intensive primary source work in digital collections provides a special opportunity to practice and sustain exactly that kind of critical thinking as students continue to use the same resources after graduating.⁹

It has been more than thirty years since the first edition of Richard Taruskin and Pierro Weiss's *Music in the Western World* appeared, and twenty years since the latest edition of Oliver Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History*. It is high time we updated not only our go-to primary source collections, but our pedagogical methods as well. Primary sources may already play a central role in many music history classrooms, but we still have much work to do before musicology develops the systematic, primary source-centered pedagogy that history boasts.¹⁰ Along with earlier articles in the *Journal of Music History*

8. The Association of College and Research Libraries have created a "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" that distills information literacy goals into a set of aphoristic "frames." The frames most relevant to teaching with primary sources are "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual," "Information Creation as a Process," and "Research as Inquiry." The ACRL website (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>) includes useful information on the frames' development; for more on using the frames in teaching, see Mary K. Oberlies and Janna L. Mattson, *Framing Information Literacy: Teaching Grounded in Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018).

9. For a good example of an assignment that uses an open-access, digitized archive to train students in critical evaluation of sources and public scholarship, see Jesse Hingson, "Open Veins, Public Transcripts: The National Security Archive as a Tool for Critical Pedagogy in the College Classroom," *Radical History Review* 102 (Fall 2008): 90–98.

10. While many of the articles and books cited throughout this roundtable attest to the rich scholarship of historical primary source pedagogy in higher education, I would also argue

Pedagogy, several chapters in the recent collected volume *Information Literacy in Music: An Instructor’s Companion*, and resources available at the Pedagogy Study Group’s website (teachingmusichistory.com), this roundtable contributes to the creation of a set of teachable *practices* that can become part of graduate curricula and musicology professional development workshops.¹¹ Renewing our teaching habits around primary sources holds the promise of realizing the many pedagogical and ethical benefits outlined in this roundtable, and more importantly, places teachers and students in a position to practice and perform musicology, inside and outside the classroom.

that we can learn much from reading scholarship on K–12 primary source pedagogy. See for example Daniel F. Rulli, “Teaching with Online Primary Sources: Documents from the National Archives,” *Teaching History: A Journal Of Methods* 32/2: 92–97.

11. Beth Christensen, Erin Conor, and Marian Ritter (eds.), *Information Literacy in Music: An Instructor’s Companion* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions and Music Libraries Association, 2018).