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## TOWARD A SKILLS-BASED CURRICULUM IN THE MUSIC HISTORY CLASSROOM

At the 2014 meeting of the American Musicological Society (AMS), I chaired a roundtable session that was sponsored by the Pedagogy Study Group and that was provocatively titled *The End of the Undergraduate Music History Sequence?* None of the panelists, nor I, nor Douglass Seaton, who originally conceived of the panel, actually foresee music history courses being eliminated from the undergraduate curriculum. Instead, we asked whether the curricular model that predominates in American colleges and universities is still effective and pedagogically viable today. We intentionally avoided a definitive answer to that question, however, instead encouraging attendees to review the curriculum at their own institutions, to assess what their goals actually are, and to evaluate whether their courses are actually meeting those goals. Given the standing-room only crowd and the considerable buzz that was generated about the panel – which is now available on YouTube<sup>1</sup> and in the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*<sup>2</sup> – it seems that we struck an important chord.

The principle criticism levied against the conventional 2- to 4-semester chronological survey is that it is designed around a teacher-centered model of disseminating knowledge. In this traditional model – which admittedly has become something of a straw man in recent years – students are often expected to acquire specific kinds of knowledge – memorizing birth dates, death dates, premiere dates, and names; demonstrating a degree of familiarity with stylistic trends and characteristics, canonical repertoire, key treatises; and so on.

When I was an undergraduate in the 1990s, there was a practical necessity to this model. If I needed to know, for example, when Johann Sebastian Bach was alive, I needed to either memorize his dates or go to a reference book (either at the library or on my own meager shelf). If I needed to know what *Musica enchiridiadis* said about *organum*, I had to track down a copy of the treatise, either Raymond Erickson's English translation or Hans Schmid's critical

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<sup>1</sup> American Musicological Society, Pedagogy Study Group, *The End of the Undergraduate Music History Sequence?*, a video from the roundtable discussion presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Musicology Society, Milwaukee, WI, November 7, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj7BTLGDj0A>.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, V, n. 2, 2015 (<http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/issue/view/19>).

edition, which would have required me to learn Latin.<sup>3</sup> If I did a research project on Aaron Copland and needed to see his correspondence or sketches of a piece, I needed to travel to Washington D.C. to visit the Library of Congress. In short, there was always a significant barrier to accessing any information that I had not memorized.

Today, however, my students can confirm dates in a matter of seconds by simply using a smart phone or a laptop. When I direct them to study the examples of *organum* in *Musica enchiriadis*, they simply open up one of the surviving copies of the original treatise digitized by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France,<sup>4</sup> the University of Heidelberg,<sup>5</sup> or the Bavarian State Library.<sup>6</sup> When they are writing a paper on Aaron Copland – or any number of other composers and topics – they can consult any number of digital archives and have instant access to thousands or millions of primary-source documents.<sup>7</sup> The barrier to accessing information is negligible – at least to the vast majority of my students who own their own smart phone, computer, or other internet-capable device. For those who do not, a visit to the library or any of the more than fifty computer labs on campus significantly lowers the barrier for accessing primary sources and other materials from around the world.<sup>8</sup>

This poses a crucial dilemma for musicologists in the Information Age. If our courses value the dissemination of knowledge as a primary goal, then we must find a way to compete with the vast oceans of knowledge at our students' fingertips. However, if we rethink our curricula, we can make our courses about more than simply the *acquisition* of knowledge, transforming them into courses about the *use* of knowledge.

In our panel at the 2014 AMS meeting, Peter Burkholder spoke of the undergraduate curriculum as providing a “framework” of knowledge. By using a core set of questions that are applied to all of the repertoire and eras studied,

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<sup>3</sup> *Musica Enchiriadis and Scolica Enchiriadis*, ed. by C. V. Palisca, trans. by R. Erickson, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995; *Musica et scolica enchiriadis una cum aliquibus tractatulis adiunctis*, ed. by H. Schmid, Munich, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8432470j>.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav\\_pal\\_lat\\_1342/0213](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/bav_pal_lat_1342/0213).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/0004/bsb00046540/images/index.html?ftp=193.174.98.30&id=00046540&seite=5>.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the Aaron Copland Collection at the Library of Congress, which features nearly 1000 digitized documents: <http://www.loc.gov/collection/aaron-copland/>.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that many American universities – including my own institution – are currently exploring ways to eliminate their computer labs. It remains to be seen how they will address the accessibility issues that this raises for those students who are unable to afford smart phones, laptops, or other internet-ready devices. For an early report on this trend, see B. TERRIS, “Rebooted Computer Labs Offer Savings for Campuses and Ambiance for Students”, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 6, 2009 (<http://chronicle.com/article/Computer-Labs-Get-Rebooted-as/49323/>).

he trains students to relate newly encountered music to this framework, placing it within appropriate social, historical, and aesthetic contexts. His interest is not in the knowledge itself, but in helping students develop historical skills by which they can quickly relate new pieces that they are learning to what they already know by asking certain fundamental questions about the music.<sup>9</sup> Melanie Lowe, on the other hand, described a four-semester undergraduate curriculum in which students are presented with four different kinds of courses, each challenging students to engage with music and history in different ways, and each developing different kinds of research, analysis, and writing skills.<sup>10</sup>

In my own teaching, one of my goals is to introduce my students to the act of *doing* musicology by focusing on the difference between consumers and users. My terminology here comes from ongoing discussions of digital technologies, in which our students' generation is often criticized for "consuming" technology, rather than learning to "use" it to its fullest potential. When I refer to undergraduate students as consumers of music history, I mean that they look up facts as needed, but rarely invest the effort needed to place those facts in meaningful relationships with each other. So long as they get what they need for a program note, exam, or paper assignment, that seems to be enough for them. But in doing so, they are finding isolated bits of information without recognizing the underlying constellations of knowledge.

I used to require students to memorize dates, but ultimately found it ineffective. In studying, my students would build a list using quick online searches – not using the textbook or Grove Music Online, but instead turning to Wikipedia or the first hit in a Google search. They would then set about memorizing the numbers as an abstract list. Inevitably – and far too often – students convinced themselves that J. S. Bach and Wagner were contemporaries, since they placed too much value on the small details of the tens and ones places. They knew that both Bach and Wagner were active in the '40s, but lost track of the bigger picture of the centuries. I have since switched over to a system I refer to as "relative chronology". At the beginning of the semester students are presented with a series of landmark historical dates – in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portion of the undergraduate survey, these dates include the start of the French Revolution, Napoleon declaring himself Emperor, Napoleon's final defeat, Beethoven's death, the 1848 Revolutions, and so on. I am not concerned if the students are unable to confidently state that Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto was completed in 1845, but they must know

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<sup>9</sup> J. P. BURKHOLDER, "The Value of a Music History Survey", *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, V, n. 2, 2015, pp. 57-63 (<http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/175>).

<sup>10</sup> M. LOWE, "Rethinking the Undergraduate Music History Sequence in the Information Age", *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, V, n. 2, 2015, pp. 65-71 (<http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/177>).

that it was composed between Beethoven's death and the 1848 Revolutions. Further, they must know that it was composed at about the same time as Schumann's symphonies, after Schubert's Lieder, and before Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

Moving beyond questions of detailed factual information, I believe that the most important role of musicologists in a music school or conservatory is in teaching students to communicate about music. This is, after all, what we do. We teach and write and speak about music. Not just about the history of it, either, but potentially every aspect of music imaginable. We do so through books, articles, and classes, but also through conference presentations, pre-concert lectures, program notes, liner notes, reviews, and so on. And so, like many people who have contributed to this issue of *Musica Docta*, I place a great deal of emphasis on writing and presenting in my classes. But in doing so, I have structured writing assignments very differently from what I experienced in my own graduate and undergraduate education. Generally speaking, when I was a student I knew at the beginning of my musicology classes that I would have a research paper to complete. But after the first day, there was little said about it. While we focused on content in class, I was expected to develop and write the project outside of class. Though there might have been a structured opportunity for feedback on a draft, most of the feedback came in the form of office hour visits on my own initiative (which I did not always take advantage of).

In my teaching, however, I guide students through a multi-stage writing process. Each stage is focused on particular research and writing skills: identifying a research question and stating a thesis, finding sources and formatting citations, writing an introduction to set up the topic, and so on. The process is incremental, intensive, and integrated into class time in writing workshops. It is also designed to mirror my own writing and research process, so that I can model for my students one effective way of doing it. Having built this focus on research and writing skills into many of my courses over the past five years, I have seen dramatic improvements in my students' abilities to read and evaluate scholarly writing. I have also seen dramatic improvements in the ways that my students write, speak, and even think about music.

When I think about musicology as a discipline, I look at it as a broadly and richly interdisciplinary subject. I also look at it as one that is, at the undergraduate level, about information literacy and communication. Just as our colleagues in music theory have shifted toward a practical, skills-based undergraduate curriculum, I believe that we can help our students by articulating clearly defined, skill-based learning objectives. Our goal in this Information Age must be to help our students develop skills of information literacy pertaining to music. We must teach our students to sift through and to *use* the vast oceans of information at their fingertips. We must also help our students learn to contribute to those oceans in whatever forms their writing and speaking might take.

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