

Teaching Music Theory and History with Collaborative Awareness

Description

The oral comprehensive examination for the graduate program in music at Andrews University requires students to synthesize music theory and history. Rather than analyzing music according to one or the other, music theory and music history are meant to inform each other. This type of synthesis demonstrates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of a musical composition. How do students develop this skill? What is the pedagogical process, especially given the fact that students enroll in separate theory and history courses?

Undergraduate students who declare a major in music typically begin their training in the freshman year with Music Theory I and proceed through four semesters with the fundamentals of music theory. The music history courses are upper division, intended especially for juniors and seniors. The skills that freshmen and sophomores acquire in their theory courses are essential for studying music history, but music theory also needs to be contextualized in history as techniques and aesthetics have changed over time. How do we as teachers inform our students in our respective disciplines without overlap? In the broadest sense, how do we cultivate the skills of synthesis?



Academic Goals and Requirements

According to the master's degree comprehensive examination syllabus regarding music theory and history, students are instructed:

- b. Remember, the goal is to synthesize expertise from performance, history, and theory
- c. Do not simply address each "content" point in order. Instead, consider connections (synthesis!) between content points. For instance: How do the key relationships relate to historical style? What formal or harmonic events mark this piece as unique? What is the performance practice for a particular texture? How do external factors of influence inform a composer's use of particular scales/sonorities/genres? (MUHL 670 Comprehensive Exam syllabus Spring 2023, page 3)



To maximize the breadth of study in any particular student's curriculum requires a minimized amount of overlap between classes. Teaching with collaborative awareness means trusting our colleagues to teach their area without doubting that essential concepts expected to be learned for our area have already been taught. We don't have to hesitate to give assignments and create activities that draw on students' skills in theory (in a music history class) or encourage them to explore connections with history (in a theory class). It also means that we may intentionally take steps towards aligning the curriculum and engage in collaboration with classes.

Activities

The most direct example of preparing students for synthesis takes place in our graduate-level seminars and analytical techniques courses, where the final exam for these classes resembles the comprehensive exam itself. Students are given experience preparing for the theory and history section of the comprehensive exam through preparing their oral presentations for their core classes in music theory and history.

Reading assignments for the Music History and Literature graduate courses regularly draw from both theory and history scholarly sources, providing students with professional models of synthesis within the scholarly literature. Discussions in the graduate Analytical Techniques courses include historical perspectives on music theory. Upper division undergraduate theory courses beyond the initial four-semester sequence, such as Counterpoint and Form Analysis, investigate multiple styles and techniques of composition which necessitates a historical perspective. Music Theory IV, the final and fourth semester in the sequence, includes activities such as the reharmonization of a folk song, hymn, or pop song, and the upper-division music history courses include score identification assignments that require both score study and an understanding of historical context.

For Future Exploration

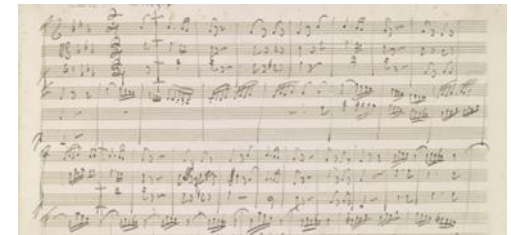
The pedagogical literature on synthesis in music theory and history is sparse. Studies that are most similar to ours typically focus on interdisciplinary awareness within one course by one teacher rather than collaborative awareness between teachers who aim not to overlap but share related concepts. We have more tools for exploring the graduate-level achievements reached through collaborative awareness, including a recently introduced combined grading rubric for the comprehensive examination. However, due to the recent implementation of this rubric substantial data for measurement is pending. The activities briefly described in the previous section represent only a broad overview of our collaborative awareness. There is much yet to be explored regarding curriculum alignment and establishing benchmarks for student understanding and achievement in synthesis. As teachers we utilize similar concepts in our courses but intend to forge connections rather than teach these concepts redundantly. Allowing for broad study of musical styles and letting students choose topics of study presents opportunities for applying skills of synthesis.

Not all of our undergraduate students continue on to our graduate program, so we don't expect to train our students from their freshman year until they obtain a master's degree, but by teaching all of these levels we as faculty have a unique opportunity to shape the curriculum and guide our students towards higher levels of understanding and synthesis.

Methodology

While this study focuses on how students may be guided to see connections between theory and history it must be contextualized by addressing the diverse population of musicians and interests who are taught in these classes. All music majors must select a specific "applied" area of study. This can be performance studies in an instrument or voice, or a student may select composition for applied studies. Ultimately a student's studies in music theory and history should be applicable to their applied area of study as well. This requires casting a wide net to include a variety of composers, styles, and techniques. Our goal as teachers is to encourage connections and applicability to multiple musical traditions, including popular music.

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Selected Bibliography

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