A Perceptual Learning Hierarchy: An Imperative for Aural Skills Pedagogy

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Research in the field of music cognition in the last decade has resulted in impressive advances in our understanding of the ways in which humans process and organize auditory stimuli. However, cognition research has had surprisingly little influence on aural skills pedagogy, the area of musical study most directly concerned with cognition/perception issues. At first glance, this would appear to be a quite glaring and inexplicable disconnect between two fields with obvious points of convergence and considerable common interests. Yet, perhaps it is not so surprising in light of the fact that aural skills pedagogy has vigorously resisted substantive change and, as a consequence, has remained essentially static through successive generations of educators.

This article considers two large obstacles that have impeded the development of a more meaningful and mutually beneficial exchange between cognition research and aural skills pedagogy. The first of these obstacles, which falls mainly under the purview of cognition study, concerns the respective goals of the two fields. In recent years the range of topics on which cognition research has focused has expanded and diversified at a remarkable rate. Despite this growing interest in interdisciplinary issues, only a fraction of the studies conducted aim expressly at aural skills pedagogy, or music study in general for that matter. Still more problematic from a pedagogical perspective, even those studies that directly or indirectly address aural skills-related topics focus almost exclusively on isolated perceptual tasks. Cognition research to this point primarily has focused on understanding the cognitive processes that underlie existing perceptual skills. Aural skills instruction, on the other hand, strives to enhance and refine existing perception skills and to develop new ones.

This difference in the goals of the two fields highlights the second of the large obstacles: the absence of a perceptually-based learning hierarchy. This issue is the concern of both cognition researchers and aural skills instructors. Cognition studies need to take into account the relationship between perceptual skills, in an attempt to begin to understand how these skills develop. Aural skills instructors need to examine their curricula from the perspective of perceptual ordering. Most aural skills courses are designed to roughly parallel the sequence of topics presented in traditional tonal theory textbooks. This raises the question of whether the conceptually based order of topics found in theory texts also represents the optimal perceptual ordering. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least sometimes, the answer is no. Most students can learn conceptually rudimentary topics, such as how to spell or analyze intervals, in a relatively short time. Yet, for many students the aural identification intervals requires months and

even years of practice to achieve competency. This article will examine several topics which might be re-ordered in light of perceptual considerations. It will also survey research in the burgeoning field of auditory imagery for its potential to answer questions related to perceptual ordering in the development of perceptual skills.