Music Theory and Music History

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In any consideration of advanced graduate studies in music, it is most appropriate that the question of how music theory relates to music history should arise. The following discussion represents an attempt to summarize briefly what seem to be the most pertinent issues. First, I should like to comment on the general nature and objectives of graduate studies in music. Then I shall describe and illustrate specifically how I would interpret the role of music theory in relation to music history in advanced graduate studies in music.

One of the commonly stated objectives of graduate study in music is to investigate musical styles in the various periods

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of music history (Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, etc.). Another is to study particular style-species (Mass, madrigal, opera, sonata, etc.) in their historical development. And a third is to pinpoint the styles of individual composers. To clarify the musicological approach to these style problems I have found it helpful to compare the layman's approach to music itself. For example, it happens that our local radio station has a program of standard art music at our lunch hour from one to two o'clock daily. My wife and I often tune in this program at the lunch table, but too late to get the opening announcement.

My wife is not a musician but has heard a great deal of music. I have found her to be very proficient in identifying musical styles by the simple process of saying, "that sounds like Wagner," or "that sounds like early Renaissance music," or "that sounds like Palestrina," or "that sounds like Beethoven's late music," etc. In other words, over the years, she has gained a wide knowledge of musical styles; and, I am sure her experience is typical of many musical laymen.

But the professional must go further than the layman. One of the objects of the musicological approach is to go beyond the simple recognition and identification of various musical styles to a knowledge and understanding of their musical-technical distinctions. Such an insight into the nature of music implies a technical study of such musical elements as melody types, dissonance treatment, cadence structures, rhythmic devices, and structural patterns. In other words, we come back to one of the main objectives of advanced graduate studies in music: to explain in musical-technical terms the stylistic factors that distinguish the music of different periods and different composers. Work of this type has been subsumed under the rubric of style-criticism. A necessary prerequisite for successful achievements in this area of graduate work in music is, obviously, a solid background in the field of music theory.

The usual undergraduate courses in music theory should, among other things, satisfy this prerequisite. But something more is needed. To clarify what I mean by this need, I have resorted to the phrase, "the theory of music theory." Such an expression helps insofar as it shows that so-called courses in theory in the undergraduate curriculum are rather more practical than theoretical. That is, they are designed primarily to give the student skill in manipulating the materials of music, with emphasis in the direction of musical composition. The theoretical knowledge presented in these courses is handed out

on a platter, so to speak. The students are told merely how music is notated, how intervals are named and classified, how scales are constructed, how cadences are built, how melodies are composed and harmonized, but rarely why. Such incomplete explanations are understandable, since a course in freshman harmony is obviously not the place to go into an extensive study of the theory of harmony in its systematic and historical aspects. Such studies belong rather in the graduate school, and beyond. The difference in the two approaches to the theory of music may be clearly seen if we compare any conventional textbook of music theory with such works as Joseph Yasser's A Theory of Evolving Tonality (New York, 1932), Matthew Shirlaw's The Theory of Harmony (London, 1917), or Hugo Riemann's Geschichte der Musiktheorie (History of Music Theory, translated with commentary by Raymond Haggh. Lincoln Nebraska, 1962). The textbook's primary concern is pedagogical, dealing with the organization and presentation of the material for purposes of instruction; whereas the true theory book's primary concern may be characterized roughly as the advancement of musical knowledge.

Pertinent to the foregoing discussion and the ways that music theory relate to music history in advanced studies, I should like to mention Knud Jeppesen's distinguished work in Renaissance music. His book, The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance (2d rev. and enl. ed., Copenhagen, 1946), was actually based on his doctoral dissertation submitted to Guido Adler at the University of Vienna in 1922. Although the book lies ostensibly in the field of music theory, it is permeated with historical implications and references ranging from Gregorian chant to Bach and even Mozart. Obviously this type of detailed, thorough analysis and description of late 16th-century polyphony as represented in the vocal works of Palestrina is imperative for a thorough understanding of the intrinsic musical factors involved in the shifting processes of music history. Without this kind of penetrating investigation the study of music history would tend to remain merely a study of the more superficial aspects of each period.

But Jeppesen's systematic and historical research into the Palestrina style has had another important significance besides its contribution to our understanding of a great period in the history of music. He has made a vital contribution to our understanding of the principles of contrapuntal technique in music. To be sure, the vast amount of detailed information contained in Jeppesen's book on the Palestrina style was not well adapted to the teaching of counterpoint. But his later book, Counter-

point: The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century (English trans. by Glen Haydon. New York, 1939), based on those earlier researches, was expressly designed as a textbook for courses in modal counterpoint. As such it has contributed notably to the great revolution in the teaching of counterpoint, wherein "strict counterpoint," has given way to authentic modal counterpoint based on the style of Palestrina, on the one hand, and to tonal counterpoint based on the style of Bach, on the other. This comment is not meant to imply that the styles of Palestrina and Bach represent the only possible bases for contrapuntal studies; but they do provide convenient and practical points of departure, which, in the course of further studies, would naturally be extended to other periods and styles.

When we say that a knowledge of the theory of music is basic to studies in the history of music, we should not overlook the fact that the converse statement is, perhaps, equally true. A knowledge of the history of music is basic to studies in the theory of music. Not only do we need to study the history of theory of music theory (particularly as represented in the writings of theorists throughout the ages), but also the statements and interpretations of the theorists need to be examined and evaluated in the light of the musical practices of each succeeding era.

Music theory is needed not only for the perception of different styles – it is basic for the understanding of the whole subject matter of music history. In other words, the student needs his music theory not only to understand what distinguishes Bach counterpoint from Palestrina counterpoint, but also merely to understand what makes a fugue and what makes a motet. I think we would all recognize the fact that too many of our graduate students are distressingly weak in the skills of simple, basic, reliable harmonic, not to mention contrapuntal, analysis.

In our program of graduate courses at the University of North Carolina, we have three main categories of style studies: style periods, style species, and the styles of individual composers. The style period courses include a series of survey courses covering the history of music from ancient to modern times. The style species courses deal with the various genres; such as: the Mass, the motet, the opera, the oratorio, the sonata form, keyboard music, the string quartet, and the art song. Composer courses may survey the works of single composers: Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms; or small groups of composers, such as Ravel and Debussy, or the French "Six." Or, they may

concentrate on individual genres in the works of a given composer; as for example: the cantatas of Bach, or the string quartets of Beethoven. In all these courses, since the descriptive analysis of each musical style provides the focal point for the studies, music theory plays an important role. In addition we have a series of miscellaneous courses; such as: Introduction to Musicology, Musical Bibliography, Notation, The History of Music Theory, Performance Practices, Folk Music, and American Music. In all these courses a knowledge of music theory is practically indespensable. I say practically indespensable because presumably a student without a solid background in music theory could get much that is new to him from these courses; but, there is no doubt that he would also miss much of their potential deeper significance.

In addition to the types of courses mentioned, we have a set of graduate courses in music theory in the narrower sense of the term, designed especially for candidates for the Master of Music degree in composition. These courses include advanced work in harmony, modal and tonal counterpoint, canon and fugue, orchestration, and composition. These are not courses in musicology in the most significant senses of the term, but we should all be happy if all our graduate students could get that much training in music theory, so-called, or composition. In fact, some of our best Ph. D. candidates have completed the Master of Music in composition before continuing for the doctorate in musicology, and most of our advanced students do take one or more of these courses.

From the discussion so far it must be apparent that I see little justification or need for dividing graduate work in music under the separate categories of music theory and musicology. Such a distinction apparently tends to identify musicology with the history of music. Musicology, to me, is a more comprehensive term that includes both music theory, (particularly as applied to the descriptive analysis of musical styles) and music history. There is, of course, some basis for a distinction if, by music theory, we mean practical courses in musical composition rather than work in the area that I have referred to as the theory of music theory. The one type of course would lead to actual musical compositions; whereas the other would lead to the formulation of theoretical principles such as are found in The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance, by Jeppesen, or in my own The Evolution of the Six-four Chord (Berkeley, California, 1933), or in one type of article constantly appearing in The Journal of Music Theory.

In 1940 at Cleveland, Curt Sachs read a paper before a joint session of the Music Teachers National Association and the American Musicological Society in which he made the categorical statement, "The theory of music is not in the domain of musicologists." He goes on to say:

> Music is the sole consideration in theory, whether melody or form, harmony, counterpoint or orchestration are concerned, and beyond being a musician, the only prerequisite imposed on the author of theoretical works is the background and ability to be interested in the problem, to organize his thoughts and to expound them in a well-organized book. Therefore the leading books on theory were written by composers when their own creative imagination clashed with the rules of yesterday: Jean-Philippe Rameau wrote the first treatise on harmony in 1722: Johann Joseph Fux, the first and long-lived treatise on counterpoint in 1725: Hector Berlioz, the first and still vital book on orchestration in 1839; and the latest theoretical books came from Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Hindemith (MTNA, Proceedings for 1940, 35th series, p. 60).

I have often wondered just what Sachs meant by this passage. The only rationalization I have been able to make concerning it is that he must have been thinking of the theory of music as practical or applied music theory, or what might be called textbook music theory designed for the training of composers. Whatever we may think of Sach's pronouncement from this point of view, of one thing we can be reasonably sure: he did not refer to what I have called the theory of music theory. One has only to page through his most recent posthumus book, The Wellsprings of Music (Ed. by Japp Kunst. The Hague, 1962), to realize that he was himself an outstanding music theorist — particularly in the areas of melody, rhythm, and polyphony.

In my own Introduction to Musicology (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1941) I adopted the epistemological concepts of space and time and divided the subject matter under the two main headings: systematic and historical. Music theory is, in a sense, the principal section of the systematic orientation. "Dealing directly with the work of art and leaning heavily on all the auxiliary sciences it attempts the descriptive analysis, if not the explanation, of the musical composition in technical terms" (p. 10). The historical approach, in terms of temporal sequence, supplements the systematic approaches and together they constitute the two axes in the frame of reference in relation to which musical knowledge and insight may become explicit. Although

the emphasis may vary from time to time or from one research project to another, normally the two approaches are inextricably entwined so that it is only for the purposes of such introspection as we are undergoing here that they may need to be distinguished.

If one has any doubt as to the concern of contemporary musicology for problems of musical theory, one need only glance at the list of topics in the Report of the Eighth Congress of the International Musicological Society, New York, 1961 (Kassel, 1961). In practically every paper and discussion there is to be seen a blending of the theoretical and historical orientation in the treatment of the immediate problem. A striking example is the round table devoted to the "Awareness of Tonality in the 16th Century."

In closing, there is perhaps little that I need to add concerning the general nature and purposes of advanced graduate studies in music. They are basically the same as those in other disciplines; namely, mastery of subject matter and skill in the techniques of research as evidenced in a dessertation (the result of independent research) which adds to the sum of human knowledge or presents results that have enduring value. But, as one graduate catalogue aptly puts it, "Neither the accumulation of facts, however great in amount, nor the completion of advanced courses, however numerous, can be substituted for this power of independent investigation and proof of its possession" (The Graduate School, The University of North Carolina Record, No. 642, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1962)p. 53).