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TEACHING MUSIC THEORY: THE UNIVERSITY

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There seems little doubt that significant changes are taking place today in the pedagogy of music theory at the college level. At The University of Texas the changes in progress seem to result from the influence of two primary sources. First of these is the Comprehensive Musicianship program, initiated by the Contemporary Music Project of the Music Educators National Conference. The second significant influence for change stems from the effort being made by some scholars to perform the challenging task of identifying, amid the complexities of advanced theoretical systems, those basic operations which may be introduced in terms comprehensible to beginners in the study of theory; with this aim achieved it then becomes possible to build a curriculum which unfolds logically as the learner's capacity for more abstract and generalized thinking

develops. Although it might be assumed that these two sources would tend to suggest contradictory kinds of change, that has not been our experience; rather, the second is playing an important role in helping us implement what have emerged in our case as the most significant curricular innovations adopted as a result of the experimental CMP program.

It has been the essence of the Comprehensive Musicianship idea that it is not a "method" but an attitude, giving rise to an effort to break loose from teaching patterns which were not preparing students to deal with the demands of musical careers today. Many practices were initiated in the various participating schools. Some succeeded and have survived; others failed but taught us something of value in their failure. At this school we attempted to implement the following:

1. Use of the "common elements approach" to survey the widest possible spectrum of periods and styles in early college training, reserving study in depth of limited segments for upper division and graduate work.

2. Derivation of materials for teaching the rudimentary skills from very early music, from works displaying current innovative practices and a wide variety of sound sources, and from non-Western music, as well as from tonal music of the major-minor system and from folk, popular, and jazz sources.

3. Emphasis on the constant elements in the processes of teaching-learning musicianship from earliest childhood on through advanced professional study with the aim of improving quality in the entire continuum.

4. Promotion of communication with the other faculties concurrently teaching the same group of students in order that reinforcing relationships might be established between studies in theory, music education, history-literature, and applied music, both solo and ensemble.

Hardest to achieve of these is the last, in a school as large as ours, especially with our faculty housed in widely-separated buildings. (Fortunately our building program is moving forward at a promising rate.) Some progress is being made through such things as preparation of a glossary so that terminology used will be more consistent; we have just begun to use the device of the "faculty retreat" where an opportunity is provided

for a group sharing common concerns to talk without interruption for a reasonable period of time.

The practice which has been refined and adapted so as to become an established segment of our theory curriculum is the second item. Our first semester of freshman theory is an intensive course in basic skills. In addition to relating these skills to all types of music, we cultivate from the outset the use of a vocabulary which will permit the student to be at home with terminology applicable to progressively more sophisticated analysis and explanation; I refer to terms such as pitch class, interval class, and pitch set.

I cannot say that we have developed impressive means of implementing the third principle, the purposeful relating of how the student is being taught with how he will teach in turn, that is to say, how he will help others to learn. Unquestionably the Contemporary Music Project forced us as never before to look at the wasted years of prime learning time in the usual teaching of music to children in this country. Certainly the fact that basic music skills are most readily learned by children is painfully borne in on college students struggling to learn in the late 'teens what some fellow class members assimilated with ease many years ago. This remains an important consideration in our curricular planning, relevant not just to the music education major but to all young people preparing for professional careers in music, since virtually all of them will have some opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the quality of early music-learning in the school, the private studio, or the home.

I arrive last at the item listed first, the "common elements approach" which occupied such a central position in the experimental ventures of CMP and which has given rise to a kind of organization which is shared by a number of recently-published textbooks. I do not mean to suggest that our theory faculty has abandoned this kind of thinking entirely. It is, after all, implicit in the first semester freshman course which I have mentioned. We mean for this purposeful cultivation of the wide view of musical periods and styles to affect all subsequent semesters of the three-year sequence of theory courses required of all music majors, to the extent that opportunities to draw parallels will be recognized and used to enhance learning of current subject matter. This can have special impact when it relates work being carried on in a theory course to musical experiences shared by students in hearing or participating in concerts which feature important examples of various kinds of music.

What has not survived in our curriculum is the practice of attempting to provide students with professional skills and secure academic knowledge through a continual sweep across centuries of Western music. Undoubtedly, this works for some classes, probably small classes with a consistently high quality of pre-college preparation. Certainly this kind of teaching has its delights, especially in the discovery of unexpected relatedness between apparently dissimilar kinds of music. But when this is the predominant type of activity in an instructional program, it is very easy to have students emerge who are not ready either to proceed into more advanced levels of formal study or to assume responsibility for their own continued learning, as professional needs and intellectual curiosity may require.

It was when we realized that our situation was leading to this kind of failure with some students that we began the process of combining the solid discipline of established systems of musical explanation with gradual cultivation of the wide view. The process is by no means finished; nevertheless, it is possible to describe in general terms what we are doing.

Following the widely-oriented first freshman semester of fundamentals, our plan is to work for the next three semesters essentially within tonal music, treating each successive stage of study in terms of securely established procedures amply demonstrable in the literature. In terms of texture we move from melody to two- and then three-voice writing, analysis, aural recognition, and parallel performance in associated laboratory work, arriving at the larger textures as needed to support learning of new subject areas in harmonic and contrapuntal treatment. To enumerate all of these areas would be both cumbersome and unnecessary, since in general the order is fairly predictable; moreover, a certain flexibility has to be maintained to accommodate differences among classes. It will be profitable, I think, to speak of a few categories of subject matter and their gradual enlargement as the curriculum moves forward.

Introductory acoustics in the first freshman semester is followed by introductory tuning and temperament in the second. This class of topics is stressed next in semester five, the beginning of the junior year, when acoustics is studied in greater depth and electronic music is treated; the latter involves introduction of musique concrète, synthesized sound, computer synthesis, and notation. Another area whose progress may profitably be traced is that of types of contrapuntal association. (It should

be mentioned here that independent courses in sixteenth- and eighteenth-century counterpoint are offered for students in certain major fields.) From combining two melodies in one-against-one texture, the second semester moves to neighboring and passing functions, enlargement to three-voice textures, imitation, and canon, while the third semester introduces fugue and invention. In semester five, when the vocabulary is that of the twentieth century, such matters as mirror writing and palindrome appear. Of course the growth principle of the curriculum implies the gradual generalization of contrapuntal techniques (prolonged counterpoint). A chain of topics worthy of brief mention moves from the introduction of "lead sheet" realization (along with figured bass) in semester three to jazz in semester four and "third stream" in semester five.

It is our objective to make the fifth semester an intensive study of post-Impressionistic twentieth-century materials and styles; in consequence the fourth semester is planned to bring to a close the unfolding study of conventional tonal vocabulary with its characteristic treatments and the forms articulated by tonal relationships and also to encompass Impressionism as well as jazz. The sixth and final semester is to be reserved for large-scale projects in analysis and/or composition and for broadening knowledge of style; particularly important is the individualization which should be an inevitable concomitant here, stemming from the uniqueness of each student's needs and from the importance of his becoming independent in supervising his own learning.

The test of all that has gone before will lie in the readiness of the sixth semester students to deal with the scope and diversity of the work encountered here. Responsibility for providing this readiness rests squarely on the faculty teaching the earlier semesters. If we have presented basic techniques and concepts with clarity and cultivated their learning with imaginative and varied teaching devices; if we have seized opportunities to show relationships between classroom experience and experience as performers and listeners; if we have consistently used complete works of music so as to provide a real perspective about the literature encountered, how it is like or unlike music of earlier or later periods or of different styles, and how it is affected by performing medium or other variables; in short, if we have managed to study music while trying to cultivate excellence in all aspects of the student's behavior as he demonstrates his understanding, then our core theory program will have become what we would like for it to be.