Pedagogy of Music Theory K. Scott Eggert
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The goal of a well-crafted undergraduate aural skills program should be to cultivate maximum fluency in the tonal languages of Western music, and the maximum skill level in sight reading and listening comprehension. With regard to the first of these, this somewhat unquantifiable goal is achieved through a partnership between aural skills and various other curricula, including theory, musicology, composition, and special topics. For the rest, aural skills training will play a primary role in student education.

Over the years of my professional life, I have wrestled with the problem of what makes an effective training in aural skills, for two reasons. First, because I was born with perfect pitch, I do not have a true sense of the struggle your average musician has to develop relative pitch. I don't believe that perfect pitch can be developed through practice—it is more in the form of a natural ability that one either has or not—but good relative pitch can be, and it is an invaluable asset to a professional musician. Yet since I have not needed to develop it myself, I can only theorize—or, perhaps, intuit—what I believe would be a set of most effective practices. This comes from my own experiences in deepening my understanding of the nature of music, which leads me to my second reason: I believe strongly in the necessity for a musician to understand the *natural properties* and the *physiological effect* of tone.

By "natural properties," I am referring to the harmonic series—the source for all systems of tuning the world over. The intervallic foundation of our twelve-tone system is found in three intervals: the octave, the perfect fifth, and the major third. Examining the origins of these intervals in the harmonic series, we see that they are not just pleasant sounds; they are, in fact, laws of nature. Yet, for the sake of our twelve tone system, we have detuned them—twisted them slightly out of shape in order to suit the needs of piano tuning and the man-fashioned rules of tonality. I believe this is important for music students to understand, along with the phenomenon of *resonance*—the manner in which the vibrations of tone interact with the world around them.

I do realize, of course, that as a teacher of standard Western music theory there will be a multitude of material to impart to students within the confines of basic curricula, which makes adding anything to it quite a challenge. However, it is my earnest belief that Just Intonation and alternative EDO tunings will gain more and more traction in the world of Western music as time goes by, because there is simply very little ground left to cover in the field of harmony within the context of 12-tone equal temperament. If composition is to continue its progression into uncharted territory, it will require a further loosening of restrictions. Also, because I believe that education should train us to think critically as well as assimilate information, we need to encourage experimentation and a questioning spirit among our students. So in terms of revision and innovation, I am hoping for the space to be made for JI and alternate EDOs in music theory curricula.

All that being said, there are several things I believe to be essential to the teaching of a good aural skills class:

1. A good variety of activities and teaching techniques.
2. Sensitivity to individual student needs and learning styles.
3. Plenty of class time devoted to rhythmic fluency.
4. Improvisational exercises to cultivate musical intelligence.
5. Participatory learning.
6. A focus on skills that will be assets in the "real world" of professional music.

The first two of these (and the fifth) are undoubtedly linked. A variety of classroom activities—group exercises, solo work, performance, dictation, etc.—will enable the teacher to assess the individual needs of students, through observation as to how each student responds to the planned activity. Thus, going forward, the teacher may strategize as to how best to design each class, in order to come as close as possible to meeting those needs in an equitable fashion. Full engagement with the classroom activity, by my judgment, is at least equally as important as satisfactory academic performance. Engagement reveals passion, and passion fuels the drive to succeed in what is certainly a difficult professional field.

The third and fourth are also linked, in the sense that they both address what I believe to be deficiencies in standard music theory training. Most of music theory has been devoted to the analysis of tonal relationships, with far less time devoted to the study of rhythm. Although part of my undergraduate training included two semesters of Eurhythmics, I found far more value in workshops that I pursued outside of college (West African drumming classes in particular) in terms of building my own rhythmic performance capabilities. Also, improvisation, which once had a place at the heart of Western musical practice (basso continuo), has now been all but written out of the curriculum. As a teenager from a rock/jazz/music theatre background, I was astounded to find out that most classical performers had no experience with improvisation—and in fact believed that they could not do it! Improvisational skills are necessary to life, and necessary to being a well-rounded musician. All composition begins as improvisation. It cultivates musical intelligence, the benefits of which extend far beyond just becoming a competent performer, or a mere technician able to effectively reproduce what is read on the manuscript page.

The last of these, I believe, is essential to any good collegiate music program. Much of the pedagogy in music academia only pertains to academia, as opposed to properly preparing a student to go out into the professional world of music beyond the university. For example, this is an exercise a bass player I knew in New York City would give his students: "You have to be at a recording session in an hour. Riding the subway gives you about forty minutes of uninterrupted time for preparation. You do not have sheet music or a chart; you have a recording of the song on your iPod. So you have forty minutes to learn the song well enough to play it for the session. Go!" This is a perfect example of a *real world* professional situation that players can find themselves in on a regular basis,

and all too often it is the sort of thing we only learn *on the job*, because education did not adequately prepare us for it.

Finally, I would say that my primary goal as a music teacher would be to inspire students to become *active seekers*, not merely competent professionals. The treasures of musical study are inexhaustible, and can lead to incredible discoveries about the world, people, culture, philosophy, and our inner selves. It is not just a vocation by which we earn a living. My passion for music defines my life, and has led me on a journey of discovery that continues to enrich my experience on a daily basis. My approach to this journey is that all of life is school; the class does not end when the bell rings. Your education will be what you put into it. It is not merely something you pay money and show up to *get*. If I can inspire students to adopt this attitude, to be hungry for learning, then I will have done my job correctly.