Teaching Music History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong: Course Content, Textbooks, and Online Tools

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In this essay, I discuss three issues related to teaching the undergraduate music history survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I begin by suggesting the obvious: that the way we title our courses should accurately describe their contents. The choice between teaching "Western art music" and "music in Western culture" might significantly alter an instructor's approach and the students' perspectives. In the second section, I explore the merits of traditional textbooks compared to more focused readings that favor depth over breadth of knowledge. Finally, I share reflections on various online tools and their potential value to teaching and learning.

Course Titles and Content

The music history survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is taken in the second year of a four-year degree program. It is titled "A History of Music in Western Culture," the same title given by Mark Evan Bonds to his widely-used undergraduate textbook. In teaching "A History of Music in Western Culture," it is acknowledged that classical music is no longer an exclusively "Western" tradition. One could argue that it never was; classical music, at least of the common practice period, has been deeply engrained in cultures outside of Europe and the Americas for some time. The majority of students at CUHK and in other programs in Hong Kong have studied and performed Western classical repertoire since childhood. At the same time, many have only limited knowledge of traditional Chinese musics—like me, they are unacquainted with the instruments, notation systems, and performance practices.

Should musicologists in Asia continue to focus on Western art music in their courses? The answer to this question is self-evident, but the fact that classical music is more or less a global practice raises a host of fresh questions. Should our focus on Western art music embrace *histories* of that music that

extend beyond the West? Instead of "A History of Music in Western Culture," should we teach "A History of Western Musical Traditions" as the latter does not impose artificial geographic or cultural boundaries? Practically speaking, do we have the resources to discuss the composition, performance, and reception of Western art music in places like Mongolia or Lebanon? In short, we must decide individually or as institutions whether our teaching should center on "Western art music" or "music in Western culture." Acknowledging considerable overlap between the two, the focus of each could and probably should differ in significant ways.

Teaching Materials

Students at CUHK often complain that assigned readings in the textbook include topics not discussed in class. The instructor's rationale is clear enough: a limited amount of content can be presented in lecture (our history survey spans from antiquity to the present and is taught over two fourteen-week terms). Textbook readings are thus intended to supplement classroom content. From the comments received in course evaluations, it seems that students object not because they are lazy, rather that they prefer to explore fewer topics but in greater depth. I am hardly an expert on the education system in Hong Kong, but my impression is that secondary school assessments often prioritize memorization over a deeper synthesis of knowledge. By the time students reach university, many understandably view "history" as a body of facts that can be retrieved from online sources as needed. But while they openly disparage rote learning, they also seem leery of exams that assess critical thinking and writing.

With this in mind, we might ask if standard textbooks—whether in print or accessed through publishers' websites—are still effective. Should we consider assigning more targeted readings, even in our introductory courses? *Grove Music Online* provides far greater depth than textbooks, while electronic databases such as *JSTOR* and *IIMP* offer access to recent scholarship in full text. Without a doubt, assigning such readings would save students considerable expense at the bookstore. Using readings would also allow the instructor to approach topics from multiple perspectives and to ultimately encourage conversations that move beyond dates and definitions. But what is sacrificed when we favor depth over breadth of knowledge? Should we still value breadth in an age when recordings and scholarship are so easily accessed? How do we balance teaching students *what* they need to know with teaching them *how* to find the information they need? With increasingly sophisticated research tools at our disposal, the balance appears to be shifting toward depth and toward training students how to approach historical issues from several angles.

Online Teaching and Learning

At CUHK, relatively few music students use a laptop computer in the classroom. Those who wish to take notes increasingly do so on small-screen devices: mobile phones, iPads, or comparable products. If this trend has not already reached my colleagues' courses in Europe and North America, I suspect it will soon. What does this mean for the instructor? If you are experienced with an online class management service such as Blackboard, you should familiarize yourself with the company's mobile app—if not through personal experience, then by reading user reviews. Presently, Blackboard's app garners an uninspiring two-and-a-half stars out of five on iTunes and Google Play. If you are eager to capitalize on Facebook's ubiquity by creating "Pages" for your courses, you might need to test the notification system and adjust your privacy settings. At the moment I prefer Edublogs.org, a free service that facilitates access to course-related materials and provides a virtual space for discussions. Throughout the term, I ask students to write short posts on assigned topics, some of which involve independent fact-finding (e.g. finding information related to a composer's conducting career) while others are more reflective in nature (e.g. making comparisons between opera productions). Students also share materials related to their research projects and can read updates about their classmates' work.

Online platforms are not necessary for effective teaching, but they are an efficient way to provide access to syllabi, lecture slides, links to videos, translations of song texts, and so on. They are also excellent tools for promoting an interdisciplinary approach in our courses. When teaching music from sixteenth-century Italy, one might ask students to compare pictures of Renaissance and Baroque cathedrals and virtual galleries of paintings by Tintoretto and Rubens. The study of Debussy's *Prélude á l'après-midi d'un faune* can be paired with the poetry of Mallarmé and works by Renoir. Such exercises help foster a deeper understanding of the socio-historical contexts in which musicians and composers lived while circumventing some of the limitations of textbooks. Although such comparisons can be made through traditional means (e.g. paper handouts and PowerPoint), services like Facebook and Edublogs create a secondary platform for students to learn—both from the instructor and from one another. We may need to acquaint ourselves with new technology every few years, but the benefit to our students makes it well worth the effort.