

# Teaching Music History at the School of Music at Soochow University: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Western Music as a Living Tradition

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How we answer the questions posed to the panel will vary according to the type of school or program in which we teach. My institution, Soochow University, has recently expanded its department of music into a school of music with a largely international faculty in performance, musicology, ethnomusicology, theory, and composition. Because the performance majors in the school will focus primarily on Western art music, we have designed the history curriculum to center on this tradition. Our four-semester survey course uses a traditional textbook (Grout/Palisca/Burkholder) that we supplement with more specialized articles and book excerpts.

With minimal alteration, the questions posed to the panel could also be posed to professors in geographical centers outside of Asia. Questions of incorporating non-Western and vernacular musics into our teaching and the usefulness of traditional textbooks must be addressed by each professor teaching music history in a college or university, given the expansion of repertoires, methodologies, and objects of study during the last several decades. Our task here is to consider specific challenges or issues concerning the teaching of musicology in Asia.

One of the most important roles of a music historian in the Asian context, I would claim, is to reconstruct the social and cultural conditions of past forms of music. This differs in some respects from the role of the historian in the United States or Europe. For instance, I would suggest that “interdisciplinarity” is even more pressing when teaching students who have less familiarity with Western literature, philosophy, and visual art. Broad landmarks in cultural and intellectual history (“Humanism,” the “Renaissance,” “Romanticism”) need to be defined and characterized with representative figures and artworks. Among more specific or local examples, when I introduce instrumental music in the Renaissance period, I show students Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in which instruments are used as tools of torture to those confined in hell, to discuss the association of instruments with the body, dance, and in

this context, the sin of lust. In a later period, Johannes Vermeer's *A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman* ("The Music Lesson"), which depicts a man and a woman left alone in the same room, suggests a similar association of instruments with the body and physical intimacy. The madrigal allows for a discussion of forms of poetry and subject matter (the Petrarchan sonnet, lyric poetry, the pastoral imagination, gender) as well as the study of text depiction.

An interdisciplinary approach helps hold the students' attention and make history courses more productive and culturally relevant. One tendency among students I have encountered is to adopt a "memorization approach," as if Western music exists in a vacuum as a series of either value-neutral or monumentalized mythical figures and facts. Emphasizing cultural contexts by exploring the visual arts and literature not only enhances students' interest in Western culture but also prevents them from thinking of the construction of music history as socially irrelevant and one-dimensional.

I also want my students to learn to engage with Western art music as a living tradition and not an antiquarian phenomenon enshrined in a museum of "classical masterpieces" from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Emphasizing relevance, for me, is a key issue in teaching Western music history in East Asian countries. One way to do this is to draw upon contemporary musical examples, whether from "art music" or from film, pop culture, and mass media. Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*, which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music, can be presented as a contemporary manifestation of the Baroque suite. Drawing upon contemporary musical works that have a clear association with the past can help students understand the continuity and evolution of the Western art tradition. Shaw's *Partita* also includes a prominent use of overtone singing and other vocal traditions and may be used to introduce ideas of cross-cultural exchange.

Non-Western musics or techniques may be introduced as they occur within the traditional narrative: well-known examples include Turkish "topics" in the music of Viennese classicism (Mozart and Beethoven) and Indonesian music as it influenced Debussy. The history of music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries becomes increasingly engaged with these East-West connections; the film music and operas of Tan Dun, for instance, may be presented as case studies of such cross-cultural connections. Shaw's use of overtone singing in *Partita* may be traced back to Stockhausen's *Stimmung* as well as Inuit "throat-singing" traditions. One can also compare how the "exotic" is constructed by composers of different periods: Mozart's use of "exotic" characters and musical idioms in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) differs sharply from Rameau's use of "exotic" subject matter in *Les Indes galantes*. Adopting this comparative approach in introducing non-Western musics may provoke students to think about motivations and cultural issues of using non-Western musical influences or borrowings in Western art music.

Some might ask how qualified we are to engage with non-Western culture. My answer is that we are not presenting histories of non-Western musics independently, on their own terms, which would be presented in a different class (ethnomusicology). Focusing on the interaction of East and West makes use of our training as musicologists.

Teaching students how to listen to diverse styles developed in Western music history remains a fundamental task for a music historian. Practices of score reading, musical analysis, and close listening are linked to the “literate” tradition that students study in their performance studios. Music history classes should deepen their understanding of this living tradition at the same time that they open up new potential repertoires from the past.