

The Value of a Music History Survey

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I am amused that on this panel I have been cast as the defender of the music history survey. When I spoke on panels about the undergrad curriculum at the joint meeting of fifteen scholarly music societies in Toronto in 2000 and at the National Association of Schools of Music meeting in 2001, I was the voice for change. Both presentations were later published, in the *College Music Society Newsletter* and *NASM Proceedings*, respectively.¹

On both panels, I pointed out the problem we all felt then, summarized in the opening sentence of the *College Music Society Newsletter* article: “The most significant issue for teachers of undergraduate music history and literature courses is that there is far more music history and literature than there used to be.” I gave some of the reasons:

- more music of all eras is available in good editions and recordings;
- we have much more information about the past, from composer biographies to patronage and social roles for music;
- we want to include repertoires formerly excluded, such as music by women; music from Spain, Britain, Latin America, and the United States; and popular music, jazz, and film music; and
- we want to go beyond the traditional history of musical style to discuss music in its contexts.

I suggested some possible ways to restructure the curriculum, including giving students more choice. The article in the *NASM Proceedings* also suggests ways to deal with the vast expansion of the field of music history *without* changing the courses, and instead changing the material we include and our historical paradigms. Over the past fourteen years, I have taken that latter

1. J. Peter Burkholder, “Curricular Ideas for Music History and Literature,” *The College Music Society Newsletter* (September 2001): 7–8, http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=3334:curricular-ideas-for-music-history-and-literature&Itemid=1262028; J. Peter Burkholder, “Reconsidering the Goals for the Undergraduate Music History Curriculum,” in *Proceedings of the National Association of Schools of Music: The 77th Annual Meeting 2001* (July 2002): 74–79.

course. I continue to teach a survey, and I continue to think that the survey format has important strengths.

I teach in a school of music, and all my students are music majors. During their careers, whether playing in an orchestra, touring as a soloist or in a chamber group, conducting a choir or band, or teaching, they are likely to encounter a wide range of music, and they will not have the time to explore the deep historical background of every piece they come across. They need to have an overarching framework into which they can fit each new piece they encounter. That framework is what a survey can give them.

In order to be a good performer or teacher, you need to know the history of your craft. Almost every question you can ask about music is in part a question about history: from how to perform a trill, to why a piece has a particular form, to what a musical gesture means. Those who know the history of the music they perform or teach will be much better performers and teachers.

For both performers and listeners, another reason to know the history of music is because it brings music alive and makes it more meaningful. History can be a way of imagining what it must have been like to be a person living in a certain place and time, with experiences in some ways very different from our own. If we imagine ourselves back into their world, we can hear and understand in their music something of what they heard in it. That makes it come alive in ways we might never experience otherwise.

For example, I play my class the opening section of a mazurka by Frédéric Chopin as performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy, and I ask them to conduct in the air in time to Ashkenazy's performance.² They quickly discover that the beats vary greatly in length. So I ask: "Why is this performance so uneven? How could a recording company give Ashkenazy a contract when he can't even keep steady time?"

Then I show them what the dance was like. I ask for a female volunteer, and teach her a mazurka that fits Ashkenazy's performance, using steps from a mazurka I learned in college. The students get the point immediately. It takes much less time to execute some running steps than it does to lift my partner up in the air and put her down gracefully, or to have her turn around. This is a dance with a varying beat, reflecting the variety of moves the dancers may execute. That unevenness is coded into the music through trills and rhythmic patterns that suggest taking a little extra time, alternating with sections that suggest going faster.

2. Mazurka in B-flat Major, op. 7, no. 1, on Vladimir Ashkenazy, *Chopin: Mazurkas* (London: London 417 584-2, 1987), CD 1, track 5. This same recording appears as no. 134 on the *Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music*, 7th ed., ed. J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, vol. 2, *Classic to Romantic* (New York: Norton, 2014).

Of course, what is true for the mazurka is true for all dance compositions; whether it is a gigue by J. S. Bach or a furiant by Bedřich Smetana, you have to know each kind of dance, at least a little, and understand how the characteristics of each dance are reflected in the music. This matters if you are listening to music, if you want to understand how a mazurka differs from a waltz and how it reflects Chopin's Polish background. If you are a performer or a teacher of music, it matters even more. You have to know the background to the music you play or sing, because if you do not know the experiences and thinking that went into the piece, you cannot communicate that to the audience.

"Sure," my students might say, "I'll study the background to the pieces I perform. But why should I study the history of pieces I don't perform? Why, for instance, study music for an instrument other than my own?"

Well, composers write music all the time that imitates the sound or technique of other instruments or of pieces written for other media. Think of a Biagio Marini sonata imitating operatic recitative, a Bach organ fugue borrowing ideas from Antonio Vivaldi's violin concertos, Maurice Ravel's Violin Sonata evoking the blues, or "Cool" from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* combining cool jazz and bebop with modernist atonal and twelve-tone methods. If you do not recognize these allusions to styles outside your own instrument or repertoire, you will miss the very point of the music, and your performance is likely to be flat and uninteresting.

"Okay," my students might respond, "When I study the background to the music I play, I'll include other music of the period. But why should I study the history of music in periods whose music I don't play?"

The answer is that there is lots of music that evokes or imitates music of earlier times. For instance, in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, Donna Elvira comes on the scene just after Don Giovanni has persuaded Zerlina to accompany him back to his castle with the promise of marriage, and she sings an aria in which she says "Flee the traitor, don't let him tell you another thing; deceit is on his lips and falsehood in his eyes. From my sufferings learn what it means to trust him; and be warned in time by my plight."³ The words say one thing, but the music says another. This aria lacks any of the characteristics typical of Mozart, like *galant* style, periodic phrasing, or constantly varying rhythm. Instead, it has long overlapping phrases, counterpoint, the same rhythm in every bar, an orchestra of strings only, and so on. These traits mark it as an aria in the style of Domenico Scarlatti or George Frideric Handel from two or three generations earlier. Mozart is using an out-of-date style to satirize Elvira, who is striking a pose in this aria that is at odds with her real feelings; she would take Giovanni back in an instant if he wanted her, and the old-fashioned music helps us see right through her. This is a comic aria, not a serious

3. No. 8, "Ah, fuggi il traditor," from act 1, scene 3 of *Don Giovanni*.

one. But you have to know the history of eighteenth-century opera in order to catch the reference and get the joke, and to create a performance that treats this as a comic moment that reveals something about her character.

Studying Mozart is not enough. In order to give a convincing performance of *Don Giovanni*, and of a great many other pieces, you have to know enough about other music, including music from earlier eras, in order to recognize all the allusions and understand what is going on.

In other words, you need to have a framework for understanding this piece, and that framework consists of knowledge of other pieces with which you can compare it; of musical styles and genres; of terms and concepts that relate to these pieces; of how these pieces were performed and what their social function was; and of the social values these pieces reflect. Having such a framework is essential for every working musician, every performer, every teacher of music.

I cannot possibly teach everything every one of my students needs to know about the history of every piece they will play or teach during their career. I don't even *know* most of the music they will encounter in their lives as musicians. What I have to offer is this overarching framework, an overall view of music and its history, which they can use to understand and to place any music they do encounter. That is the point of a survey course. The students will not remember every fact from the course, and they do not have to. Rather, they use the pieces we examine in the course to build their own sense of how music history goes and where any piece they may encounter fits into that picture.

This is why I think the survey still has an important role to play, especially an expansive survey that encompasses the entire historical span of the Western tradition and includes everything from art music to popular music and jazz, musical theater as well as opera, the Americas as well as Europe. A comprehensive framework like this cannot be built by letting students take two or three narrow topics courses.

Of course, the survey course has to be designed so that students focus on creating this framework for themselves. I try to make this happen by

- articulating goals, objectives, and themes for the course that focus on creating this framework, and reminding students of these objectives and themes almost every class day;
- linking each topic we encounter to these objectives and themes; and
- designing in-class activities, quizzes, exams, and projects that address these objectives and themes, using active learning techniques whenever I can.

The Appendix shows the goals, objectives, and themes for my music history survey in Fall 2014. The goals are broad: enriching students' knowledge of music in the European tradition (including in the Americas), their understanding of music in its context, and their sense of what the people who made, heard, and

paid for this music valued in it and what this music meant to them. By focusing on what people valued in this music and what it meant, I hope to engage students in thinking about their own values for music and the meanings they derive from it. The objectives translate this broad goal into testable objectives, a specific set of skills, like the ability to compare pieces, to describe music with appropriate vocabulary, and to draw connections that make sense.

The themes help to weave a fabric of history, linking days that seem far apart in time but are close in theme. The first three themes are the most all-embracing:

- the people who created, performed, heard, and paid for this music;
- the choices they made, why they made them, and what they valued in music; and
- how their choices reflect both tradition and innovation.

These themes have been central to my teaching for almost thirty years. They are the main themes that suffuse my textbook, and they are discussed toward the end of the *NASM Proceedings* article.⁴ These show up almost every day.

The others come up on some class days but not others. One example is the fifth theme:

- the means of disseminating music.

This comes up in relation to the oral transmission of plainchant, troubadour song, early polyphony, the blues, and other repertoires; the development of notation; the impact of music printing on music from sixteenth-century madrigals to Tin Pan Alley; the role of recordings and radio in fostering rock 'n' roll; and so on. By invoking these themes as we take up each new topic, I remind students that each era or region or composer or repertory we study has a place in a chain of development that led up to the music they are engaged with today.

The themes for the course include the concerns of the traditional music history survey, such as these:

- styles and genres people developed, and how they changed over time;
- forms; and
- music theory.

But they also include aspects of the “thick history” we increasingly want to teach:

- where music happens and what functions it serves;
- aspects of performance; and
- interactions with other arts.

4. See Burkholder, “Reconsidering the Goals,” 77–78, and J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York: Norton, 2014), xxxi–xxxii.

And they also include two of my favorite subjects, which are increasingly the focus of scholarly research and discussion:

- borrowing and reworking existing pieces to create new ones; and
- musical expressivity.

All of these themes are designed to make connections, between class days or repertoires and, perhaps even more important, between people and pieces from the past and the current concerns of my musician students.

Of course I cannot do justice to any of these themes in one semester or year. But I can introduce them to my students and let them know there is much more to explore around each of these topics and themes. A survey is a smorgasbord, a feast in small bites, designed to let you know what kind of food is out there and give you a taste. The joy of a comprehensive survey is that it offers a kind of map of music history, with everybody on it, so that all the students in the room—from viol players to trombonists, from singers to composers, from classical performers to jazz and pop artists—can locate themselves on that map and discover unsuspected connections to many of the other kinds of music that preceded or followed their own. That sense of a shared universe of music, with an understanding of what all of these musicians do, why they do it, and what they value in the music they perform, compose, and pursue, is what a survey can achieve.

APPENDIX: Survey Course Goals, Objectives, and Themes

Excerpts from Fall 2014 syllabus for History and Literature of Music I:
Antiquity to 1800

<http://courses.music.indiana.edu/m401/AboutM401.html>

Goal:

The goal of the class is to enrich your experience of and knowledge about music in the European and American tradition by exploring the music of the past and the circumstances and values of the cultures and people who produced it. By understanding music in its historical context and learning about its inherent value within a certain culture and time, you will become more sensitive to its meanings and to how to interpret it and perform it. By tracing the themes (listed below) through centuries of musical life, you will become more deeply aware of how issues in your own engagement with music, from what moves you to perform music to how it moves your feelings, are rooted in music's history. Even if your main focus in your professional life is on music after 1800, learning about earlier music will help you understand why later music has the shape it has, for every aspect of music has historical roots, often extending back centuries.

Objectives:

With this as an overall goal, we will focus on developing a specific set of skills. By the end of this semester, you should be able to hear or see the music of an unfamiliar piece from Europe or the Americas before 1800 and

1. compare it to other pieces you know from this period;
2. describe its principal stylistic features;
3. recognize its genre or compare it to genres you know;
4. suggest a possible composer and approximate date of composition;
5. place it in an historical context;
6. describe its probable social function;
7. describe the probable circumstances of its performance, including where, when, why, how, and by whom such a piece might have been performed; and
8. say something about what those who created, performed, heard, and paid for music of this type valued in it.

Themes:

We will focus on several themes:

- the people who created, performed, heard, and paid for this music;
- the choices they made, why they made them, and what they valued in music;
- how their choices reflect both tradition and innovation;
- where music happens and what functions it serves (church, court, city, private performance, public concert);
- the means of disseminating music (memory, notation, manuscripts, printing);
- performance (improvisation, virtuosity, ensembles, amateurs, professionals);
- styles and genres people developed, and how they changed over time;
- forms (patterns of repetition and change);
- borrowing and reworking existing pieces to create new ones;
- musical expressivity (depicting text, conveying emotions, heightening drama);
- music theory (scales, modes, counterpoint, chromaticism, harmony, tonality); and
- interactions with other arts (poetry, dance, visual arts, theater, stagecraft).

Each class day will engage several of these themes, tracing them like threads through time.