

Reconsidering Undergraduate Music History: Some Introductory Thoughts

DOUGLASS SEATON

A few years ago it might have seemed eccentric, if not outright perverse, to suggest that music students' curricula should not include a series of courses forming a sequential survey of music history. That is probably no longer so much the case. Although most of our institutions do follow that model—a 2011 survey for the National Association of Schools of Music showed that approximately 90 percent of departments in a representative sample of 101 still required a survey in two, three, or four semesters—one in ten already offered some alternative, and more were considering the possibility.¹ In 2013, at the annual meetings of both the College Music Society and the American Musicological Society, formal discussions in sessions and informal conversations in lobbies and coffee shops highlighted the idea that we might consider eliminating conventional music history course sequences from music major curricula. A new report just out suggests revising the entire undergraduate curriculum to focus students on the future rather than the past, and preparing students for a musical world of global cultural fusion rather than one centered on the repertoire of the Western art music tradition.² And so we find ourselves with the opportunity to explore why this might be appropriate or desirable, why it might be inadvisable or simply dreadful, and what our options are for dealing with these issues.

1. Douglass Seaton, "Core Music Curriculum Components: History and Repertory—A Survey and Some Questions," *Proceedings of the 87th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music*, 2011. For more on the state of music history curricula in North American colleges and universities, see Matthew Baumer, "A Snapshot of Music History Teaching to Undergraduate Music Majors, 2011–2012: Curricula, Methods, Assessment, and Objectives," this *Journal* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 23–47, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/165/308>.

2. *Transforming Music Study from its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors*, Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major, November 2014, http://www.music.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1859 (log-in required).

The reasons for such a discussion include at least four questions, some historiographical and others pedagogical: (1) How do we think of history? (2) How do we do history? (3) What do we want students to know? (4) What do we want students to do?

How do we think of history? In the intellectual context of postmodernism we find ourselves forced to regard any historical narrative with serious skepticism. For us, now in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, time does not march forward along any path—even a halting and detour-filled one—in the direction of either progress or decline. Nor does it consistently and perceptibly swing back and forth between poles—for example, periods of Dionysian emotionalism cyclically rescued from confused disorder by Apollonian intellectualism. We cannot believe that we could produce any coherent pattern out of the mass of evidence left to us by the past. The entire concept of a viable historical narrative has seemingly become untenable.

How do we do history? As a matter of fact, few of us write history at all. Most of our work views moments in the past synchronically, as if seeing the past through a horizontal window. We offer high-definition, vividly colored, multi-dimensional snapshots—as detailed and insightful as we can make them—of a point or short span of time. We write about a piece of music, a treatise, occasionally individuals or groups of contemporaries; at most we write about a few years or a generation, rarely longer. In a 2004 article, James Webster suggested the historiographical issues at work here:

Issues of periodization altogether have been little discussed either by general historians or by musicologists during the last quarter-century. This inhibition has multiple causes: the apparently simplistic, overgeneralizing character of most period-designations, the desire for objectivity in historical writing following World War II, the preference for “thickly textured” history and cultural studies as opposed to the traditional “grand narratives,” the attractions of metahistory and the anti-foundationalist orientation of postmodernism.³

What do we want our students to know? If we ask what our students should learn, would we really say that we intend them to learn a history? More likely, we hope that from our teaching they will learn to bring to their performances or listening some understanding of period styles, performance practices, and cultural contexts. When our music history courses take on issues of music in history, we try to get students to discuss the meanings of works or repertoires in relation to issues of gender, social structures, cultural values, or the philosophy of their contemporary environments.

3. James Webster, “The Eighteenth Century as a Music-Historical Period?” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 48.

What do we want our students to do? Much of the time we probably expect our students in quizzes and tests to recognize styles, define terms, and match composers to their contributions to the canon. We teach them to research information and write essays. We ask them to present a classroom performance and report on the music they perform. We might even put them to work on a musical task such as preparing an edition of a piece. None of this depends on an ability to create history, or even on overall knowledge of the span of history.

Over recent years we have all watched, perhaps with varying reactions, as the musical repertoires of European art cultures of past centuries have lost audience interest and monetary support and live performances of these repertoires have dwindled. If this is the direction of the future, we might argue that we have no business preparing students for vocations based on those repertoires, training them with multiple semesters of study of musical traditions that can no longer form a significant part of actual musical experience and can only very rarely offer a livable income. On the other hand, we could reply, if Western art music remains worth preserving, it must be up to us to enable our students to preserve it.

To a large extent, in fact, we now tend to think of music history pedagogy as oriented toward skills for students' practical future careers rather than knowledge. Knowledge doesn't seem as important as it once did. Whether we feel, cynically, that students won't long remember facts and ideas from musics that they won't perform and might rarely or never hear, or whether we believe that students now have access to information so ready to hand in a wired (or wireless) age that nothing justifies their having to carry it in their heads, historical knowledge seems pretty unimportant.

Our consideration of our students' curricular needs might take up many different questions, including the following:

- Is the postmodern rejection of historical narrative compelling, or is it misguided? After the end of history, might we see new reasons to justify the writing of history?
- Is history something that our students should learn? Is a survey sequence an effective way to teach it? Should our emphasis be on teaching historical knowledge or on skills? What curriculum options make sense to a postmodern and digital generation?
- To what extent do we owe it to our students to help them meet national norms, graduate school expectations, or accreditation standards? What are the administrative resources or obstacles we face in either continuing or abandoning the sequential music history survey course?

The distinguished panelists we bring together here offer very different but also compelling ideas about these issues. What we cannot do, of course, is

provide definitive answers for every music program—that remains a matter of institutional values, specific cohorts of students, and the practicalities of any given department. We can, nevertheless, help to expand the range of possibilities and present options for arriving at some successful focus.