

# Rethinking the Undergraduate Music History Sequence in the Information Age

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I cut my teaching teeth in the most luxurious of undergraduate music history curricula. Until 2010, Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music offered a four-semester music history sequence—two full academic years, 60 weeks of class time—devoted to the historical survey of Western art music: a one-course overview of the common practice period followed by a three-course chronological survey from antiquity through the late twentieth century. And yet, even with all that time and all the truly wonderful, useful, and increasingly variable teaching materials available, the perennial problem remained insurmountable: too much music and not enough time. My pedagogical strategy within that curricular framework will likely sound familiar. I would blast through tons of content, trying to cram it “all” in there, while strategically lingering every now and then on carefully chosen issues, ideas, persons, pieces, or contexts to get at the “thick history” of Western music. My pedagogical mission was always to show how the “there and then” of this history still speaks to us musically and otherwise in the “here and now” of today.

Part of the problem is the notion of an “all” at all. Not only is there too much of it “all,” but also we in our discipline can’t decide what it “all” would actually be—nor should we, of course. We’ve long since let go of universalist agendas in our scholarship, and the same aversion to hegemonic frameworks is now informing our teaching. There is an ever-growing body of literature on music history pedagogy that engages questions of not just *how* to teach but *what* to teach. And much of this literature challenges long-established grand narratives of music history, most notably the constructions of canon and chronology.

My purpose here is not to rehearse or rehash any of those arguments. Instead, I will share with you some of the philosophical, pedagogical, and practical issues that shaped Vanderbilt’s recent core curricular redesign in musicology and ethnomusicology. I should confess, though, that it hasn’t all been smooth sailing. The curriculum we teach is as much a product of compromise and concession as it is one of innovation and collaboration. It’s also early in its implementation.

We are currently in our fifth year of teaching this new curriculum, so we've graduated only one class of students who went through the program from start to finish. And it's still very much a work in progress. We're constantly tweaking and even wholly reworking parts of it. So after sharing the reasoning behind our redesign and explaining briefly how the curriculum works, I'll offer some reflections about its successes and some brutal honesty about ongoing challenges.



Two guiding questions launched our curricular redesign. First, what music-historical *knowledge* do our students need to succeed in a wide variety of careers in and around music in the twenty-first century? And second, what music-historical *skills* do they need to succeed in those various careers? Acquiring knowledge and acquiring skills, while interrelated, are ultimately different curricular goals and require different pedagogical strategies.

As to the first goal, acquiring knowledge, a vast ocean of music-historical information is now always instantly available. It's literally at our students' fingertips (sometimes even during music history exams). So, in this information age, the purpose of a music history curriculum needs to shift somewhat. To be clear, I'm not suggesting for a second that the mere memorization, recitation, and regurgitation of "facts" masquerading as knowledge ever defined undergraduate music-historical learning for any of us in whatever kind of curriculum we teach. But then neither would I maintain that learning some "facts" is a pointless waste of time or is irrelevant for our iGen students. In our curricular rethink at Vanderbilt, we found that the second goal—the acquisition of skills, particularly information literacy skills—overtook, but did not obliterate, the first. We needed a curriculum in which students learned how and where to *access* reliable music-historical information, how to *evaluate* the information they find, and then how to *use* that information productively, meaningfully, and imaginatively across a stunning array of musical practices, contexts, disciplines, and ultimately careers.

That stunning array of vocational applications—what our students do and what they want to do when they leave us—led to a third curricular goal: to encourage and empower students to reflect on their own educational needs as part of their musicological and ethnomusicological curricular experience. Our students need to learn how to determine what music-historical information, critical methodologies, research skills, and analytical orientations they need to be successful in whatever musical endeavors—be they daily or lifetime, performance or poetic—they choose. This is not a wholly individual matter at the undergraduate level, but neither is it one-size-fits-all. So, while we agreed that there is at least some music-historical knowledge, some kind of shared experience, and an essential

skill set that students earning bachelor's degrees in music should have, we also required curricular flexibility and variability. To accomplish these somewhat conflicting core-curricular goals, we jettisoned the two-year mythical journey from Euripides to Jennifer Higdon and in its place constructed a new four-course core experience in musicology and ethnomusicology.

In their first semester, all incoming freshmen take a lecture-discussion course called Music as Global Culture. This course exposes students to indigenous musical cultures from around the world, considers Western musical cultures alongside them, and introduces various methods of ethnomusicological inquiry. Students then engage their newly acquired (if elementary) ethnomusicological skill set to contemplate music—both “world” music and “Western” music—as *global* culture. Projects for the course include doing fieldwork in or around Nashville, writing an ethnography, and composing or performing a piece of “Western” music that incorporates “other” music (however that “other” is defined personally by the performer or composer).

The second course in the sequence, taken by second-semester freshmen, is a writing seminar called Music in Western Culture. Enrollment is capped at fifteen students. This course is organized around issues and ideas, and each instructor approaches it differently. My syllabus is non-chronological; the organizing themes are religion, politics, narrative, technology, socialization, gender, and the like. Beethoven, even, is one of my themes. Students learn much and varied repertory in this course and they acquire some bits of the knowledge base that goes along with the repertory. In the religion unit, for example, we study the structure of the medieval Mass and the history and musical flavors of the Protestant Reformation. But we also revisit the politics theme, and consider some intersections of political expression and religious musical practices and forms from various historical periods. That discussion ends up returning to the Mass—one by William Byrd and one by Leonard Bernstein.

While exploring these intersecting themes in and around music history, our first-year students are learning to speak about music, many of them for the first time, in a small and hopefully safe environment. They've had a chance to get to know their classmates and peers by this point, and most are becoming reasonably comfortable taking risks with ideas as they begin to find their own musical-intellectual voices. Our first-year students also start to learn how to write about music in this course. Because most of them have never written about music before, the writing exercises have to be carefully structured, incremental, and integrated not just into the content of the course but into the classroom activities as well. To accomplish so many and varied curricular objectives in this one course, lots of music simply gets cut. Those are really hard—and often painful!—decisions. But the idea here is that undergraduates acquire transferrable music-historical skills that they can then apply to different music literature according to their own

individual needs, wants, and interests as they develop into more critically savvy students and musicians.

The third course in our sequence is Music of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. This is the only chronologically oriented course in our musicology and ethnomusicology core, and it's just what it sounds like: a semester-long survey of the past century of Western music in a lecture–discussion format. The decision to devote a full semester to this slice of music history was partly inspired by an observation that a member of our performance faculty, a cellist, made about graduate school auditions. In a conversation about a school-wide curricular redesign, he remarked: “The twentieth century is the new nineteenth century.” He was referring to the University of Michigan graduate school audition, but he could easily have been observing recent trends in our field. For many reasons then, some applied and some musicological, we devote one quarter of our curriculum to the music of the most recent past century. The two required texts are Alex Ross’s *The Rest is Noise* and the third volume (the twentieth-century volume) of J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca’s *Norton Anthology of Western Music*.<sup>1</sup> I don’t teach this course, but my musicology colleagues at Vanderbilt report that our students are more receptive both to modern and contemporary music and to the course itself because their experiences in our first course, Music as Global Culture, have provided them with a more useful framework for engaging music that many of them find aesthetically challenging.

The fourth and final course in our sequence is a capstone experience that the students choose from an ever-expanding menu of course options. These courses are the most research intensive and musicologically oriented in the core, and they focus almost exclusively on the common practice period. Some are small seminars with enrollments under ten and others are medium-sized, lecture–discussion courses. Listed below, in no particular order other than catalog numbering, are the titles that we currently offer. The variety of content and approach should speak for itself.

- Opera in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries
- Opera in the Nineteenth Century
- Mahler Symphonies: Songs of Irony
- Music in the Age of Beethoven and Schubert
- Haydn and Mozart
- Brahms and the Anxiety of Influence
- The String Quartet
- Music in the Age of Revolution
- J. S. Bach: Learned Musician and Virtual Traveler

1. Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Western Music*, vol. 3, 7th ed. (New York: Norton, 2014).

- Robert Schumann and the Romantic Sensibility
- Music and the Construction of National Identity

By exploring a single topic in appreciable depth, these courses model methods of deep musicological inquiry. The idea here, as in *Music in Western Culture*, is that the skills students acquire are transferable (or at least applicable) to other music repertoires, contexts, and histories. Further, this variable capstone course invites students to take more ownership of their music-historical learning. In consultation with academic advisors, applied studio teachers, and sometimes parents, administrators, and peers, the student selects which of these courses aligns best with her own particular educational needs and vocational aspirations.

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Five years into this curricular experiment, I see many true successes from my vantage point as a professor and a musicologist. First, and to my mind by far the greatest, is that our music majors—more than ever before—seem to genuinely enjoy and greatly value their musicology and ethnomusicology coursework. The evidence is not just a dramatic and palpable improvement in attitude. Many of our students come back for more, choosing to take additional elective courses in musicology and ethnomusicology beyond their degree requirements.

Second, the curricular flexibility enjoyed by our students extends to the faculty as well. Freed from the obligation to teach the same survey courses every semester of every year, we offer the capstone courses in a rotation. I can't speak for my colleagues' experiences, but a year or two away from a course serves only to revitalize that material for me; my teaching is rejuvenated as I return to the content with new and different energy. Another welcome consequence of the flexibility and rotation in the capstone courses is that a sizeable percentage of the students enrolled are juniors and seniors taking the courses as music electives. Students in these capstone courses thus have a range of different experience levels and a variety of different motivations for enrolling, creating a healthy balance that enriches the learning experience for everyone.

It's hard for me to narrow the successes down to just a few, but I will mention one more that I notice every day just walking around the music building, eavesdropping on the undergraduate chitchat: in their everyday conversations, our students are more articulate about music in general. To be sure, there are lots of things they just don't know, and sometimes those holes in their knowledge are frightfully wide and difficult to ignore when overheard during a stroll down the hall. But what our students *do* know, they have considered in appreciable

depth for undergraduates, and they speak about a variety of music and musical cultures intelligently, creatively, and with great confidence.

Now to the ongoing challenges. The most common curricular complaint comes predominantly from our applied faculty: many of our colleagues are quite concerned that their students will not pass graduate school music history placement exams. My short and snarky answer is: “So what?” Too many of these exams are outdated and, even under the best of circumstances and with the most comprehensive preparation deliverable from an undergraduate music history curriculum, it’s still hit-or-miss as to which music-historical memories the student can dredge up from courses taken as freshmen and sophomores. This answer doesn’t placate my colleagues, of course, and neither does it tamp down the very real anxiety felt by graduating seniors. Further, it serves only to antagonize potential faculty allies. The more productive answer is to refer all concerned to Cynthia Cyrus’s report on graduate music history placement exams, published in the 2011 *NASM Proceedings*.<sup>2</sup> Among her many startling conclusions are the following: “cramming for the first week of graduate school is the most cost-effective study that a student can do”; and “too often [these exams] measure content, but not the ability to apply that knowledge: they treat musical knowledge as a form of trivial pursuit, but do not assess a student’s cognitive readiness.” In other words, the “exams are not measuring what a school really wants to know,” but instead “seek to learn the places where the student’s memory is faulty and the textbook knowledge of the past has leaked away.”<sup>3</sup> That said, our students still have to take these exams and we are all invested in them passing. My best answer for this one is simply to have patience, for as Cyrus’s report also shows, many graduate music schools are redesigning their placement exams to try to assess what students can *do* rather than limiting assessment to what they *know*.

The other challenge comes from within, and I will now offer up that promised brutal honesty. Sometimes it’s just plain hard to get out of my own personal music-historical and pedagogical comfort zone. This headspace includes dependence on chronological thinking, linearity in course design, assigning occasional agency to musical style, the analytical orientation of my own scholarship, and the inclination to broadly survey content with which I am less familiar. So while I have designed courses and have helped to design a curriculum that bears witness to contemporary intellectual contexts, reflects an increasing discomfort with hegemonic frameworks, and dodges or disrupts music-historical master-narratives, I often find myself falling back into the safety net of those more known spaces and comfortable stances, even as I question them. From

2. Cynthia Cyrus, “The Content of Graduate Placement Exams,” *Proceedings of the 87th Annual Meeting, 2011* (Reston, VA: National Association of Schools of Music, 2012), 43–46.

3. Cyrus, “Content,” 45–46.

casual conversations with colleagues to my perusal of syllabi in purportedly “progressive” curricula, it seems that I am keeping some good company here. Perhaps this persistent unease is both inevitable and okay, so long as we keep our curricular and pedagogical sights set squarely on the needs and futures of our students, rather than on the pasts or even the presents of their professors.