

Whither our Undergraduate Core Curriculum in Theory?

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Article abstract

In this paper, the author considers three aspects of the core curriculum: the mixture of poetics (the craft of music making) and apologetics (the argument for a canon of masterworks), the theoretical training of literate musicians, and the vehicles for bringing about curriculum change. Within this framework, the author addresses the theory text of Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, as well as essays by Christopher Lewis, Richard Wollheim, James Clifford, and Estelle Jorgensen. The author finds in the present curriculum an uncomfortable balance of craft and argument, and an orientation toward rote learning of a canon rather than a critical approach to knowledge skills. He finds as well little or no scholarly mechanism for curriculum development.

WHITHER OUR UNDERGRADUATE CORE CURRICULUM IN THEORY?*

Murray Dineen

Whither our undergraduate core theory curriculum? Whither but to more questions: What constitutes a “core” and what is its relation to, for lack of a better term, the non-core? (That our usage lacks an antonym shows the frailty of the notion.) In these post-colonial days of cultural sensitivities, is the monopoly on undergraduate theory held by a Teutonic, High-Baroque homophony – the Lutheran four-part chorale – still to be countenanced, or is it suspect of serving vested cultural interests?¹ Is the aim of Canadian undergraduate training in theory to produce competent performing musicians? (And thereby what models of competence to evoke when symphony orchestras are folding like paper fans?) Or, like our colleagues in literature and art history, are we in the business of *belles lettres* – criticism and apologetics? Are we, at heart, in the business of musical literacy, and what does that entail: reading (surely), writing (hopefully), but also the mastery of a certain body of works – *literate*, as in well-read – and if so, then whose body? Given a consensus about core and canon, what can Canadians do to effect a change in core curricula? Should the Canadian University Music Society have a mandate here? Or do we leave the “whither” to industrious representatives of foreign textbook publishers? Herewith, a few reflections on such questions.

* This paper is a set of reflections born of the discussion “The Undergraduate Core Curriculum in Theory: What Can Be Taught? What Should Be Taught?” moderated by Charles Morrison at the 1992 meeting of the Canadian University Music Society in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

1 If the assault on the great canon of university undergraduate humanities – witness the uproar over Stanford’s “Western Culture” curriculum – is accurate, how has it so missed the mark with Canadian music curricula? To sample the uproar, see Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992) and by the same author, “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” *Lingua Franca*, September/October 1992: 45–51; Nathan Glazer, “Canon Fodder,” *The New Republic* 3: 840 (22 August 1988): 19–21; and Michael Stanford, “The Stanford Library,” *The New Republic* 3: 898 (2 October 1989): 18–20. See also “Contemporary Culture and the Academy: Notes Towards a Research Strategy,” by the musicologist Simon Frith, in *Critical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 1–7, and the Modern Language Association’s “Statement on the Curriculum Debate,” in the *MLA Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (second series, Summer 1991).

To the Core

The current notion of “core” theory seems an uncomfortable compound of two elements: *poiesis* (as the technique or craft of writing) and *apologetics* (as style analysis). By *poiesis* I mean, adapting Stravinsky’s *poetics* or *poétique*, the doing or making (in this case, of harmony), “the knowledge and study of the certain and inevitable rules of the craft” (hereafter referred to simply as *poetics*). By *apologetics* (again after Stravinsky), I mean the justification of personal views or “dogmatic confidences” justifying musical “masterpieces.”² My point is that the two might be taught to greater effect as separate core studies in the classroom, or else be taught as one without any pretence to “core”-ness.

Consider the workhorse of the undergraduate theory curriculum – harmony as taught from the model of the four-part Bach chorale. There are essentially two aspects that recommend the study of chorales in our classes. The first aspect is poetic: chorales have a transparent texture, narrow confines, and a strict technique susceptible to simple rules that ought to ease the poetics or craft of harmonization in any tonal form. The second aspect is apologetic: devotion to Bach is a central tenet of our literature, for his work is the rock and foundation of our aesthetic inheritance. The style of his four-part chorales encapsulates much of the genius and ability writ large in other works. Therefore the chorales are worthy of emulation through the harmonization of melodies in the style of Bach.

To mingle poetics and apologetics is dynamite. Witness the following excerpt from a theory text (Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter’s popular *Harmony and Voice Leading*), which, without fail, turns my undergraduates to rubble. The point under consideration is the resolution of a diminished fifth to a perfect fifth in the progression vii^{o6} to I or I⁶, which, being like a succession of hidden fifths, is to be avoided (italics are mine):

If the dissonance is a diminished fifth, *Bach tends to* resolve it normally, for the progression diminished fifth-perfect fifth creates hidden fifths. As part of the diminished fifth, [scale degree] 4 will *normally* move up to [scale degree] 5 only if the bass moves up to [scale degree] 3 in parallel tenths, thereby bringing in the tone of resolution in another voice but very prominently. *This voice leading occurs very frequently.*³

2 Igor Stravinsky, *The Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 4–5.

3 Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), 104.

There are two understandings at work here:

1. Simple guidelines for writing that direct the student in solving a compositional problem: *Resolve the interval of a diminished fifth between scale degrees 7 and 4 by contraction to the interval of a third between scale degrees 1 and 3, and double scale degree 3 so as to avoid the succession of diminished to perfect fifths. Allow for one exception, where the bass moves to scale degree 3.* By itself, this would be harmony according to a set of stylistically neutral guidelines, a rule-generated harmony.
2. Canonic style practices derived from the statistical analysis of Bach's style (à la McHose): "Bach tends to ... normally ... very frequently." This is harmony as a predetermined set of patterns with norms and exceptions, harmony ruled by the style characteristics of a finite, canonic literature, a positivist's harmony built on the comparative method and Hempel's covering laws.

Simple voice-leading guidelines are artificial, often arbitrary, and vary markedly from text to text, like this one. And so they should be artificial. A curriculum of learning to work at first under imposed artificial guidelines, then creating one's own artificial guidelines in exercises, and ultimately learning to devise guidelines that would solve problems outside the classroom seems to me the essence of learning at the undergraduate level. On the other hand, teaching a canonic style practice – fitting a set of patterns (condoned by the technique of a long-dead master) below a melody – challenges the student's ability at imitation. The merits of teaching by imitation to one side, the teaching of style practises as definitive ("Bach tends to ... normally ... very frequently") and privileged (as had from the Master) is fraught with difficulty. Variance among theory texts would question a definitive analytic understanding of Bach's chorales, while the notion of canon seems to be taking flak from all sides. Even to assume one homogeneous style appropriate to all of Bach's chorales and to elevate said chorales above chorale settings of a greater economy (those of Praetorius, for example) is to commit errors both reductive and anachronistic.

Aldwell and Schachter's intent is not merely to introduce the student to a set of guidelines but also to sanction these with reference to the complex practice of a great master. Killing two birds with one stone, they set out to impart both technique and aesthetic – poetics and apologetics. Herein lies the problem that plagues a text fast becoming our theory core's *vade mecum* but that nonetheless leads students and teachers to characterize it as confusing. What are the authors trying to accomplish? Are their guidelines simply artificial creations for the sake

of pedagogy? Or do they belong in a complex apology for *Bach-fons-et-origo*'s four-part chorale-writing style? As I say, the compound of the two – poetics and apologetics – works upon my students like explosives.

In truth, Aldwell and Schachter's principal task, conducted under the sanctity of the great "canon" of masterpieces, is to teach the student "to understand the language the great composers spoke with such matchless eloquence, the language that embodies some of the greatest achievements of the human spirit."⁴ Laudable goal perhaps, but to be achieved rather like teaching the English language according to the practise of the Shakespearean sonnets. Is it "core"? Yes, if the core curriculum in physical education includes running the four-minute mile.

I am in sympathy with Aldwell and Schachter's project, but only as two separate undergraduate enterprises. One of these would be an appreciation of Bach (albeit with caveats or liens upon the canonic notion of "Master"); the second, the teaching of harmony according to a set of stylistically neutral guidelines. Different enterprises they are indeed and would be better taught as such, not joined under the rubric *harmony*, which seems counterfeit. To blend the two is to embark on a task fraught with such methodological difficulties as to make me question its place in the undergraduate curriculum at all.

At the heart of the definition of core (and my distinction between poetics and apologetics) lies the question, "What constitutes musical literacy?" Consider the following from the late and sorely missed Christopher Lewis:

The goal of the music theory program is not the training of composers of tonal music, as was once the case, but the encouragement of musical literacy within the strictures of a broadly based, but narrowly regulated, humanistic curriculum.⁵

For Aldwell and Schachter – and for Lewis too, I believe – literacy would seem a compound of at least two skills: literate as being able to read and write, and literate as being possessed of learning, as familiar with a literature. To be able to compose a good four-part chorale harmonization (poetics) is in the first sense to be musically literate, while to be able to admire the chorales of Bach (apologetics) is a skill in the second literary sense. Lewis emphasized this second literary sense when referring to a body of literature called "real music."

4 Aldwell and Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, vii.

5 Christopher Lewis, "Beginning Harmony: the Post-Schenkerian Dilemma," *Canadian University Music Review*, no. 9/1 (1988): 139.

By being exposed to real music and real musical problems from her very first theory class, the student is made aware that musical understanding requires the cooperation of intuition and intellect.⁶

But what constitutes a real or bona fide musical literature in our day, and what is counterfeit music or at least lies beyond the pale? For Lewis, real is distinct from *ersatz*:

Classroom work simply cannot be restricted to technical “hothouse” exercises – not to the writing of *ersatz* chorales, not to the writing [and realization] of figured bass exercises, not to the writing of Fuxian counterpoint.⁷

Real music is canonic – a literature sanctioned by criteria beyond those of the classroom. The problem with *ersatz* chorales is that they are somehow counterfeit, passed off on unsuspecting undergraduates as real.

Now I am not so devious as to pass off counterfeits in my harmony classroom, and I traffic regularly in *ersatz* chorales. Drawing the distinction between two types of literacy, I do not pretend that harmonization at a core undergraduate level has, nor need have, an immediate relationship with a “real” music, much as I would not teach undergraduates to write in Iambic hexameters as if it were “real” poetry. I suspect that by the study of “real music” Lewis meant the hybrid of poetics and apology – craft and style – I have been addressing. The teaching of “real music” as “harmony” in the core theory curriculum I find as troublesome as Aldwell and Schachter’s dialects-of-the-great-composers. I do introduce my undergraduates to “real” or concert music (and indeed try to introduce the fraught question of what constitutes “real” music) in addition to chorales in my core harmony courses. But perhaps it would be best to do so under a rubric other than *harmony*, which (as I suggested above) might better concern itself simply with creating and solving artificial guidelines and problems in preparation for solving real, extracurricular problems by means of real guidelines. And perhaps it would be best to postpone, or at least relocate, this tricky question of “real” outside the core. Or should we simply introduce the complex question “What is real music?” on day one and forget about any pretence to “core”-ness?

The problem, to reiterate, lies in trying to teach Bach’s canonic style (literacy as mastery of a hallowed literature) under the rubric of a technique (literacy as the ability to write). A composition teacher once suggested (after an attempt on

6 Lewis, “Beginning Harmony,” 155.

7 *Ibid.*, 139.

my part to write “something in the style of Richard Strauss”) that style is achieved, not cultivated. Style is achieved by solving particular problems or working around particular constraints that arise individually with the given work. Although we can teach our undergraduates to recognize a style as it characterizes a body of literature (and to understand something of the particular problems that give rise to that style), learning how to write in a “real” style cannot be taught, since it arises in mastering “real” problems, and the problems posed in the classroom are by default *ersatz*. To pass off compositional classroom exercises as “real” compositional problems – thereby confounding poetics and apologetics – is to train *ersatz* composers.

Whither the core curriculum? Two modest proposals:

1. Teach a poetics of harmony. Treat a stylistically neutral harmonic practice and a simple Fuxian counterpoint as an elementary stream of poetics, an artificial compositional training preparatory to the composition and analysis (and performance) of real music. Treat the argument for Bach and the rest of the canon as a separate theoretical undertaking (under the rubrics of aesthetics, criticism, and sociology). Consider poetics and apologetics as the core foundations for a later, mature synthesis in the study of a real literature. Can a “core” course in harmony be taught with minimal reference to style, a minimum of apologetics? Yes, with a stylistically neutral, or at least unprivileged literature and a set of stylistically neutral guidelines. William Benjamin once directed me to chorales in treatises and collections by Bach’s now largely forgotten contemporaries (Johann Walter, for example) as a literature for four-part writing and analysis – far easier, less stylistically idiosyncratic. (And indeed the new and very practical anthology *Music by Women for Study and Analysis*, edited by Joseph Straus, contains a literature that poses the question of canon more forcefully than I do.) As we have this body of stylistically anonymous chorales, do we also have a set of anonymous guidelines for harmonizing chorale melodies? Sechter, Louis and Thuille, Schenker, Schoenberg, Mitchell, Piston, Forte – is there some larger consensus among them, despite idiosyncrasies? Is there a pedagogical (and thereby a stylistically neutral) “common practice” in the teaching of harmony? A simple craft – the mortises and tenons of harmony – devoid of canonic literary associations?
2. Teach the apologetics of harmony. Make no pretence of core, but engage immediately in the practice of argument based on stylistic justification. Pick a canon and teach students to defend it through harmony and counterpoint. For Lewis, style (as defined by Schenker) is fundamental to the core. He starts from the “[inescapable] conclusion that when we teach ‘tonal harmony’ we

are teaching Schenkerian theory in some sense, since we are teaching a style defined in Schenkerian terms.”⁸ Accordingly, teach from models defined as canonic practices (rather than guidelines). Adopt Donald Martino’s comparative edition of Bach chorales where several versions are arranged in one grand system – the simple at the top and the more complex, those with further-reaching prolongations and diminutions, arranged successively toward the bottom. Teach the stylistic progression from top to bottom (simplicity to complexity) as an aesthetic progression toward greater mastery, toward greater insight into the furthest reaching contrapuntal possibilities of a *cantus firmus*. Do all this, but surely not under the rubric of core.

Canons Going Off

By *literate*, we mean the ability to read and write, but also the mastery of a literature, and it was the latter that warmed the discussion in Charlottetown. “They don’t know any music,” came the cry – “they” being our undergraduate populace. The sense of the term *to know* is unclear. In fact they do know music, at least in the sense of having met it. Thanks Mr. Edison, but it is impossible in our day not to have met the stuff, if only in elevators, taxis, or coming through the apartment’s walls – of one’s own volition or not. The problem does not have to do with “knowing” in the sense of having met, since few undergraduates would readily confuse music with elevator conversation, taxi horns, or the neighbours’ usual din. The putative problem of “not knowing music” would seem to be that the average undergraduate has not mastered a canonic literature of “real” music.

To “know” music, what can it mean? A composer at my undergraduate university once sighed, “They don’t know any Beethoven symphonies.” My tacit response: “Know precisely what about them?” At graduate school, my much bemused colleagues in theory found themselves enrolled in a musicology seminar given on the quartets of Haydn. Since it was to be given in fifteen weeks, the last five devoted to student presentations, week one would address the early quartets up to op. 20, week two op. 20 itself, week three op. 33, ... All this, when in our analysis seminar we worried the first movement of the *Eroica* symphony for most of a term. “Know” what about real music? The question of knowing is not deflected by Kerman: “As the embattled defenders of the traditional canon of Western art music in a world echoing with music of all categories, classes, eras, tribes, and cultures, the analysts seem to want to look more and more closely at less and less music.”⁹ Would Kerman have us sacrifice focus so as to look less

⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 71.

and less closely at more and more music? Or double tempo, would he have us look more and more closely at more and more music? There are only so many weeks in a term, and surely a lifetime's supply of good quartets. . . . Knowing, in the sense of mastering a literature, is surely another variable in our notion of a core curriculum.

The problem put succinctly: once we had a manageable canon of "real" music (at least following brokers such as Schenker) and with it a theoretical, analytical apparatus of finite ends to teach our students. But now, were we ever to agree upon a canon (or even to cling to the old one), our theories and analytic tools are too refined to make the acquaintance of a tenth of it in a lifetime. What do we mean by *know*: is it like knowing the well-worn route to school, or the route of the Grand Tour? Do you often travel the Beethoven symphonies? Yes? But how often do you visit Berg, and, by the way, have you been to Bali? Here follow two points of view about literacy and knowing, one from the art historian and theorist Richard Wollheim, the other the anthropologist-sociologist-literary critic James Clifford, both gleaned from a literature not having to do with music. I turn to extramusical thought because I believe our basic notion of musical literacy is seldom broached in our literature. In art criticism and in anthropology, I find reference to a form of knowing not tied to a given, finite literature (the opus of the great masters), but rather to a stance that we might teach our students to adopt with any literature. Being literate is not being acquainted with a literature or knowing how to write in a canonic style, but rather the ability to enter into a discourse with a literature, and if need be to invent grammar and syntax appropriate to that discourse.

The art theorist Richard Wollheim, in his essay "What the Spectator Sees," addresses a type of knowing that is canonically neutral. Wollheim is not concerned with training artists *per se* but with a kind of high ground between poetics (practice) and apologetics (art) – "understanding painting when it is practised as an art."¹⁰ His thesis is concerned with artists who, in order to paint, put themselves in the perspective of the spectator. Wollheim's point: painters must in fact have a notion of the spectator, indeed position themselves in front of the painting, feet squarely on the floor to know as if a spectator. This I take to be a truly literary posture: it combines poetics, the ability to create (their metier as artists), with apologetics, the spectator's ability to appreciate – combines craft and aesthetics. Since painters paint for themselves – cultivate the ability to see into a painting as if they weren't painters – their appreciation need not have reference to external criteria of value, need not be canonic.

10 Richard Wollheim, "What the Spectator Sees," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, ed. N. Bryson, M.A. Holly, and K. Moxey [taken from R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)] (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 101.

By way of illustration, Wollheim compares artists and drivers. Both operate *with* their eyes. But while drivers follow fixed routes for some other end (to get groceries or to the golf course), artists paint *for* their eyes – as these operate from the perspective of a spectator. In lieu of following a route, they put a part of themselves into a receptive posture complimenting their creative stance. Perhaps we treat our students like drivers, sending them down some preordained, canonic route in search of understanding and literacy (knowing the Beethoven symphonies), when in fact we might treat them like Wollheim’s artist, teach them to know *whatever music they encounter* (*ersatz* or real, in our harmony classes or elsewhere) from the twin points of view of artist and listener. It is not enough for them to know Beethoven symphonies in detail simply because we esteem them to be worth knowing (and I do), but more so because our students might thereby engage in a long tradition of argument having to do with how one listens to music creatively as well as receptively, an argument between musician and listener. As Gerald Graff tells us from the perspective of the English department (in a measured response to Alan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*), critical reading is “knowing” by discussion and argument, not by fiat. It does not suffice to have Aldwell and Schachter doing our arguing for us – deciding that the resolution of the bass to scale degree 3 is acceptable because it follows Bach in bringing “the tone of resolution in another voice by very prominently.” This is a judgment call on Aldwell and Schachter’s part, as much a critique, a *Bach-rezeption*, as it is a voice-leading prescription. Such decisions ought to be worked out in the classroom, in a debate between the teacher and an advanced student reaping the rewards of a canonically neutral core curriculum.

James Clifford’s “Traveling Cultures,” oft cited in the social science disciplines, is phrased largely in the anthropological terms of fieldwork, but I find it germane to theorists who teach for literacy a canon rooted in a distant European field. Clifford’s point: hard data from the field, be it Port Moresby or Leipzig, is not so hard and inflexible as we once thought it. Old ethnographic studies used to minimize or ignore the distance – the space – between laboratory and field; one simply landed and began to study a village, getting it by rote. Newer ethnographic studies are not so quick to elide this space. The process of getting into the field and how it shapes what you find there is of great concern. After all (Clifford cites the anthropologist Geertz), “anthropologists, as Geertz has written, don’t study villages, they study *in* villages.”¹¹ You can’t just parachute into Port Moresby and begin to learn – get it by rote. You must first learn how to know – how to know customs, how to know your interlocutor’s thoughts and

11 James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 98.

whether they agree with his testimony, and, for Clifford, how to know this mercurial phenomenon called language.

Like it or not, there is a certain ethnographic bent to our curriculum, that the home of “real” music in great part is displaced some thousands of kilometres to the east of our universities. And what we do in effect is ask our students to parachute (some of them for the first time) into the Viennese outback and begin operating by rote according to a language learned from Aldwell and Schachter. Some of best of them are never heard from again – *pace* Mr. Kurtz.

Clifford’s thesis brings him to the question of literacy, and here you will find the line of questioning I’ve been following. Literacy, mastery of language and literature, is a slippery thing; the tension between *langue* and *parole* renders all abilities doubtful. For Clifford there are many languages, there would be many Viennese dialects, many Bach variants, even Bachish idioms for speaking to the writers of harmony texts. Now Aldwell and Schachter’s goal is “to understand the language the great composers spoke with such matchless eloquence... ”¹² One language? Did the masters themselves agree on syntax? Did Aldwell and Schachter get the straight goods on this language, or was something lost in their translation of Bach? Indeed, is their understanding their own, or are they building on previous linguistic reports, some of shady repute? They build on Schenker, surely, but is McHose lurking in the bushes?

This opens a rather large can of worms: *the* language, singular, as if there were only one? What does it mean to learn or use a language? How well can one learn a language in a few years? What about stranger talk, the specific kind of discourse used with outsiders? What about many anthropologists’ continuing reliance on translators and explicators for complex events, idioms, and texts? ... It’s worth pointing out, ... the fallacy, culture (singular) equals language (singular). This equation, implicit in nationalist culture ideas, has been thoroughly unravelled by Bakhtin for whom a language is a diverging, contesting, dialoguing set of discourses that no “native” – let alone visitor – can ever learn.¹³

“... no ‘native’ – let alone visitor – can ever learn.” Now that’s pretty strong stuff.

My point, following Clifford: it is a tall order to introduce students to the language of the great composers as *one* language and as a “core” endeavour, especially through a textbook on harmony. “The language,” according to whom? A canonic language? I think it possible to introduce students to a set of linguistic-

12 Aldwell and Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, vii.

13 Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, 99.

like procedures – harmony – built upon a common practice so general as to apply to all cases of four-part writing but to no individual composer in particular. But the very notion of great composer’s language implies a great idiom – a *parole* as complex as the great composer who articulated it. To promise so-called “common practice harmony” in a textbook and then to teach the great idiom is to send one’s students to Vienna armed with a forty-page Fodor’s guide and set them to work retracing Beethoven’s path to the chemist’s shop near the Kärntnertor on or about 19 February 1796.

Clifford is not advocating pulling up stakes and quitting fieldwork, nor do I think he would have us quit Vienna or Leipzig. But his goal is comparative cultural studies, and in many ways it could be our goal too – Bach the High-Baroque Teuton in a twentieth-century Canadian context. And as he puts it: “A comparative cultural study needs to work, self-critically, with compromised, historically encumbered tools.”¹⁴ Among our “compromised, historically encumbered tools” are the premises of a canon and Aldwell and Schachter’s notion that a language “of matchless eloquence, the language that embodies some of the greatest achievements of the human spirit” can be taught with a textbook on harmony.¹⁵

Let us not presume a simplistic, canonic knowing when we demand our students “know” more symphonies or come to know the language of the masters. Following Wollheim, knowing or understanding is the act of putting, or at least projecting, oneself into a particular receptive posture, an act that distinguishes art from the quotidian. Wollheim’s knowing would seem essential to the sense of literary as writing and reading (letting the spectator or auditor’s knowledge serve as a guideline for creation). It would seem essential as well to the sense of literary as mastering a literature (one knows or understands a way of listening to Beethoven from the posture or attitude of a listener). Is it not better to concentrate on skills such as Wollheim’s understanding, rather than to attempt to teach a language as a fixed commodity – a knowable set of norms – since, following Clifford, such a language is under constant negotiation and thus not fixed at all?

The Theory Excise

Our academic bastions are regularly stormed by press representatives pushing “core” textbooks – Prentice Hall, Holt Reinhart, Norton. One spots the tell-tale

14 *Ibid.*, 110.

15 Studies of such tools are beginning to appear in the critical research literature of music theory. Worth noting for its footnoted bibliography is Littlefield and Neumeier’s “Rewriting Schenker: Narrative – History – Ideology,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 14, no. 1 (1992): 38–65.

signs a mile away: power clothes that betray an outsider, attaché cases stuffed with catalogues, business cards sprinkled through corridors like confetti. My colleagues, heeding the old maxim, "Beware of strangers bearing gifts," dodge them like the plague. But I have a special fascination for these wayfarers – a genuine interest (not just for the free desk copies they pass around like candy). Their presence always calls to mind the question, "How does our theory curriculum change?"

Any influence on our text-centred core curriculum is as much the responsibility of the press and its editors as it is the responsibility of any well meaning pedagogic consensus among us. It is they – through the textbooks they disperse – who announce change to our curriculum, in absence of any scholarly body to do so in their stead. And so I meet them with a sense of foreboding, usher them with great ceremony into my office, and attend with breath bated the oracles they bring to show me.

In truth, one must think of the representatives as merely unwitting bearers of tidings from the victors of foreign theory wars. The changes noted in undergraduate theory texts are only the muffled report of great battles fought elsewhere, in other corridors and warmer climes. One notes the changes, but like flotsam, has to know how to read them to get a broader picture of the battle's pitch. That a recent, posthumous edition of Walter Piston's once ubiquitous *Harmony* makes note of its shortcomings in linear theory is one such sign.¹⁶ We might be tempted to wonder if the text's adoption of a linear approach to harmony is the product of a consensus among educators, arising from cool, dispassionate attempts at forging a common understanding so as to better undergraduate literacy – a consensus communicated as an appeal to editors and authors alike, with the resultant changes being a product of a scholarly academic mechanism for self renewal and improvement. Caveat emptor. In truth, William Rothstein's "The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker" paints half-seriously a more accurate representation of empires in musical thought expanding and receding, conquering older bastions, and being conquered in turn – "the wars of the Schenkerian succession" – and press representatives figure uncomfortably in his story too.¹⁷

It's not that we lack standards or guidelines for cool, sober curriculum evaluation. Estelle Jorgensen's "The Curriculum Design Process in Music" comes immediately to mind as a model – succinct, but not simple. Her task is to set forth ideally how to make the leap "from philosophical premise to practical

16 Walter Piston, *Harmony*, 4th ed., revised and expanded by Mark DeVoto (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), xiv–xv.

17 William Rothstein, "The Americanization of Heinrich Schenker," in *theory only* 9, no. 1 (1986): 6, and especially 12–13.

reality.”¹⁸ But Jorgensen is a Music Educator, that is to say not one of our gang.

A tacit given in theory: one must be an initiate into the higher realms of research and abstract thought to better understand the practicalities of undergraduate curricula, to plum the core. This assumes a direct connection between research and curriculum. There is a connection, but, like the phone line to the battlefield, it is rarely clear. In fairness to Aldwell and Schachter, they have tried to integrate elements of advanced thought about the style and practice of Bach into their text. But these missives from the front keep getting mixed up with mundane directives from the base camp, and there is no mechanism to sort out the two and save the much bemused undergraduate (or her frustrated teacher). I would have few qualms about a connection between advanced and elementary theory, if such a connection were two-way, phrased clearly, and evaluated at length from time to time by a body of theorists and theory pedagogues. Some tacit understanding among us would seem to forbid this.

In lieu of a balanced, unbiased forum for curriculum evaluation run by real theorists, we would seem to have invented instead a fictive arbiter, an imaginary theorist to whose fictional tastes and prejudices we incline in curriculum decisions and wherever we feel uncomfortable with an innovative development, be it an inspired but eccentric student or a curriculum. I shall call this theorist “Rollo,” after Ives’s character. Wallace Berry, I think, would have called him a Philistine.¹⁹ Rollo picks up our curricula, or worse the transcript of one of our graduates and says: “Three years of harmony, three of aural skills. But wait, this kid’s missing a third year in sixteenth-century counterpoint, she’s only got six terms of keyboard proficiency, and what? Only five terms of fugue? What are they trying to pull off at Wawa U.? We’d better have her do a make-up, probationary year – repeat a few courses, just so we can keep an eye on her. ‘Cause those Wawa U. people, why they’ve got no standards.” And he’s right: they’ve got no standards, at least external ones to fall back on, except for their own sense of right and good.

It is for lack of such standards that we engage in what I call the theory excise wars over our transfer students, graduate and undergraduate. Rollo talking: “Yes of course you can come and join our school, glad to have you. But of course you will have to meet certain standards. Only five terms of undergraduate fugue? Better sit in on Fugue 1, just to brush up and be certain you’ve got the fundamentals. You’ll need them, you know, if you go on. And oh, by the way,

18 Estelle R. Jorgensen, “The Curriculum Design Process in Music,” *College Music Symposium* 28 (1988): 94–105.

19 Wallace Berry, “Dialogue and Monologue in the Professional Community,” *College Music Society* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 90.

sorry but we can't give stipends to students in remedial years." Uncertainty – lack of trust, lack of independent standards – leads us to exact a deadly toll of time and energy (and money) on our students. And the problem confounds itself. Rollo, in the back of his mind, is thinking not just of his standards but also of another Rollo elsewhere. He's thinking, "If Wawa U.'s standards are lacking, are *my* standards up to snuff? What will Rollo down the way think if this student transfers again? Maybe I'd better have her add a course in advanced fugue and invertible counterpoint. Surely there'd be no question then?" And so on and on with inflation.

Now I'm not an advocate of an excise-free trade. If I feel a student is lacking in "core" credentials, I will demand remedial work. But it would be worth having some sort of theory G.A.T.T. to apply in cases of uncertainty, and retrospectively to apply to the evaluation of our own curricula. And to come to such an agreement ourselves, instead of having it dictated by the survivors of foreign theory wars and their press representatives, or fictive gremlins sitting in stuffy offices with balance sheets. Or we could leave things the way they are, and change will float down from on high – flotsam and jetsam – read like tea leaves to divine the fortunes of the battle.

The alternative is to sit down again at the Learned's and to start talking coolly about standards and responsibilities, and whither the core theory curriculum. No simple task, since the temperature of the hall in Charlottetown heated rapidly during the discussion. We would be taking upon ourselves the task set forth by the late Wallace Berry in his invited address to the S.M.T. 1980 at Denver: while accepting "the thesis of a variously problematic status quo," make it our duty to "encourage ameliorated conditions of discourse," which is what I think Charles Morrison, Wallace Berry's student, set out to do.

Abstract

In this paper, the author considers three aspects of the core curriculum: the mixture of poetics (the craft of music making) and apologetics (the argument for a canon of masterworks), the theoretical training of literate musicians, and the vehicles for bringing about curriculum change. Within this framework, the author addresses the theory text of Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, as well as essays by Christopher Lewis, Richard Wollheim, James Clifford, and Estelle Jorgensen. The author finds in the present curriculum an uncomfortable balance of craft and argument, and an orientation toward rote learning of a canon rather than a critical approach to knowledge skills. He finds as well little or no scholarly mechanism for curriculum development.