"Send Help!": Aural Skills Instruction in U.S. Colleges and Universities

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The two most critical issues in teaching aural skills are methods and materials. The primary purpose for this study was to provide ear-training teachers with basic information about current methods and materials for teaching aural skills in colleges and universities in this country. The collection and dissemination of this kind of data is a necessary first step toward future experimental studies comparing the efficacy of different teaching methods (e.g., fixed-*do* versus movable-*do*). Such initial descrip-tive work will also reveal the uniformity or diversity of philosophies held by college faculty regarding aural-skills instruction. A secondary purpose for the study was to compare results with earlier studies to identify changes in aural-skills instruction in the last decade.

Related studies were conducted by Irma Collins in 1979 and Rosemary Killam in 1987. Collins sent surveys to 346 colleges and universities whose music departments held full membership in the National Association of Schools of Music.[1] (233 schools responded.) In addition to analyzing pedagogical attitudes and curricular trends, her study revealed that movable-*do*, scale-degree numbers, and the neutral syllables "loo" and "lah" were used most often to teach sightsinging.[2] Music of the common-practice period was cited as the staple of the sightsinging repertory and *Music for Sight Singing* by Robert Ottman[3] was the textbook of choice among sights-inging instructors.[4] Comprehensive Musicianship and "integrated theory classes" were the curricular norms in 1979.[5]

In 1987, Rosemary Killam mailed surveys to 127 U.S. colleges and universities listed in *The College Music Society Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities, U.S. and Canada, 1984-86* as offering graduate degrees in either theory or composition.[6] (67 institutions responded.) The purpose of Killam's study was to determine the most-used theory and

aural-skills textbooks in U.S. colleges and universities. Like Collins, Killam found that Ottman's *Music for Sight Singing* was the most-used sightsinging textbook. *A New Approach to Sight Singing* by Sol Berkowitz, Gabriel Frontrier and Leo Kraft was the second most-used sightsinging textbook (21 institutions vs. 22 for Ottman).[7] *Ear Training: A Technique for Listening* by Bruce Benward was cited as the most-used textbook for ear training by instructors who did not use their own materials for dictation practice.[8] Unlike Collins' survey, Killam's revealed that most aural-skills instructors used materials they had developed rather than a commercially published textbook. All but four of the institutions that participated in Killam's survey requested copies of the results "confirming [her] hypothesis that there is a nationwide need for [this] information . . . ."[9]

During this study, several research questions were formulated including:

1. What types of organizational approaches are used to administer the logistics of aural-skills classes (are there separate classes for aural skills? How often do they meet?, etc.)?

2. What materials are being used to teach sightsinging, how are they selected, and what do teachers think of them?

3. What methods (e.g., scale-degree numbers, movable *do*, etc.) are being used to teach sightsinging and how are they selected?

4. What materials are being used to teach dictation?

5. What materials are being used to teach error detection? (Error detection was defined as the ability to recognize discrepancies between notation and performance.)

6. Is class time divided evenly between sightsinging, dictation, error detection, and recognition/identification?

7. To what extent are computers being used to develop aural skills?

8. What computer materials are being used to develop aural skills and what do teachers think of them?

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To collect data, a survey instrument was designed according to guidelines outlined by Dillman.[10] To guarantee the validity and clarity of proposed survey questions, a copy was sent to fifteen colleagues who were either teaching or supervising aural-skills instruction at colleges and universities in various parts of the United States. Once the content had been validated by this group, a copy was sent to all coordinators of music theory at colleges and universities in the country that offer any type of baccalaureate degree in music. According to the College Music Society's *Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities, U.S. and Canada* (1988-90), this group included 908 schools.

Approximately two weeks after the survey had been mailed, a follow-up postcard was sent reminding them of the survey and outlining procedures to follow if they had not received it. From the original list of 908 schools, 336 institutions representing 45 different states responded (37%). Of these 336, 30 contained single or multiple blanks leaving 306 useable returns that translated into a margin of error of + 4%.

The first research question, which dealt with approaches for organizing aural-skills classes, included several subtopics. The first one addressed separate classes for aural-skills instruction. 60% of those schools responding schedule separate classes for aural-skills training while 39% incorporate aural skills into another class such as "written theory." The remainder (1%) did not teach aural skills, per se, in any class but did not report evaluating it as part of another class. Separate freshmen aural-skills classes typically included 100 minutes per week of instruction (61%) while 16% meet for 150 minutes per week. (The range was from 50 to 250 minutes per week.) Overall responses averaged 177 minutes of instruction per week. Sophomore aural-skills classes were similar: 57% reported 100 minutes of instruction per week and, again, 16% reported 150 minutes. (The mean average was 111 minutes; the range was 50-250 minutes per week.) Typical institutional degree requirements (75% of those reporting) included four semesters. Only 4% of the separate classes were further subdivided into specific classes for one aural skill (e.g., sightsinging). Including graduate teaching assistants, the average number teaching aural-skills at a given institution ranged from slightly under two at schools below 50 music majors to nearly seven at institutions above 200 majors.

The second research question addressed what materials are being used for sightsinging. Table 1 indicates there are three principal texts: *Music for Sight Singing* by Ottman; *A New Approach to Sight Singing* by Berkowitz, Frontrier, and Kraft; and *Sight Singing Complete* by Bruce Benward.[11] Respondents were asked to rate each text on a 1-5 scale with 1 representing

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"strong" and 5 representing "weak." All averaged a rating of approximately 2. Not surprisingly, at most schools where more than one instructor teaches sightsinging and ear training, the same text is used across multiple sections. Only 31% use different texts for multiple sections.

Table 1. Sightsinging Textbooks

	TEXT	AUTHOR(S)	*n*	RATING*
1.	*Music for Sight Singing*	Ottman	97	1.97
2.	*A New Approach to Sight Singing*	Berkowitz et al.	70	1.82
3.	*Sight Singing Complete*	Benward	67	2.38
4.	*Music for Sight Singing*	Benjamin et al.	15	1.87
5.	*Ear Training and Sight Singing*	Lieberman	11	2.18
6.	*Rhythmic Training*	Starer	10	1.90
7.	*Elementary Training for Musicians*	Hindemith	10	1.70
8.	*Fundamentals of Sight Singing and Ear Training*	Fish	10	2.10

*1-5 scale w/1=strong

The third question attempted to determine what systems or methodologies are being used to teach sightsinging. Table 2 shows that, overall, the use of scale-degree numbers where 1 is tonic in major and minor was the most frequent response. Because respondents were allowed to check *all* of the systems they were using, it was decided to calculate percentages with the number of respondents (Column 2) and the number of total responses (Column 3) as the denominator. Therefore, Column 2, which totals more than 100%, shows the percentage of people who use each system but not necessarily that system alone. Column 3 lists the percentages of all responses for a given system.

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Table 2.

FRESHMAN

n	% of 279 respondents	% of 518 responses	
122	44	24	Scale–degree numbers (1=tonic in major and minor)
98	35	19	Movable-*do* (*do*=tonic in both major and minor)
96	34	19	Neutral syllable such as "lah"
89	32	17	Moveable-*do* (*do*=tonic in major; la=tonic in minor)
33	12	6	Inflected letter names (e.g., "G-sharp")
27	19	5	Fixed-*do* with chromatic inflections (*do*=C, *di*=C# etc.)
18	6	3	Non-inflected letter names (e.g., "G" for G and G#)
15	5	3	Fixed-*do* without chromatic inflections (*do*=C and C#)
14	5	3	Scale–degree numbers (1=tonic in major; 6=tonic in minor)
6	2	1	Another system (e.g., C=1, C#=2, D=3, etc.)

SOPHOMORES

n	% of 279 respondents	% of 518 responses	
125	45	23	Scale–degree numbers (1=tonic in major and minor)
111	40	21	Neutral syllable such as "lah"
95	35	18	Movable-*do* (*do*=tonic in major and minor)
78	28	15	Moveable-*do* (*do*=tonic in major; la=tonic in minor)
36	13	7	Inflected letter names (e.g., "G-sharp")
28	10	5	Fixed-*do* with chromatic inflections (*do*=C, *di*=C# etc.)
21	7	4	Non-inflected letter names (e.g., "G" for G and G#)
19	7	4	Fixed-*do* without chromatic inflections (*do*=C and C#)
14	5	3	Scale–degree numbers (1=tonic in major; 6=tonic in minor)
8	3	1	Another system (e.g., C=1, C#=2, D=3, etc.)

COMBINED

n	% of 279 respondents	% of 518 responses	
247	45	23	Scale-degree numbers (1=tonic in major and minor)
207	37	20	Neutral syllable such as "lah"
193	35	18	Movable-*do* (*do*=tonic in major and minor)
167	30	16	Moveable-*do* (*do*=tonic in major; la=tonic in minor)
69	12	7	Inflected letter names (e.g., "G-sharp")
55	10	5	Fixed-*do* with chromatic inflections (*do*=C, *di*=C# etc.)
39	7	4	Non-inflected letter names (e.g., "G" for G and G#)
34	6	3	Fixed-*do* without chromatic inflections (*do*=C and C#)
28	5	3	Scale-degree numbers (1=tonic in major; 6=tonic in minor)
14	3	1	Another system (e.g., C=1, C#=2, D=3, etc.)

Among the 306 respondents, 258 teach sightsinging to both freshmen and sophomores. Of these, only 38 use a different system or combination of systems for the two groups. One hundred sixteen (116) use only one system with both groups and of those, movable *do* with *do* as tonic in major and *la* as tonic in minor occurred most often (34). Thirty-one (31) use movable *do* with *do* as tonic in both major and minor. There is less internal departmental consistency regarding systems than texts. Of the respondents, 42% indicated that individual teachers select the system in their own class while 45% of the respondents use a system arrived at by group consensus and 11% reported using a system designated by a coordinator.

Materials used for dictation and error detection (research questions 4 and 5) are indicated in Table 3. From these tables, it is evident that among commercially available material, Benward's *Ear Training: A Technique for Listening* dominates the market. Material developed by the instructor was second among responses for both dictation and error detection practice.

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Table 3. Error Detection and Dictation Materials.

DICTATION Texts/Materials	AUTHOR(S)	n
1. *Ear Training: A Technique for Listening*	Benward	84*
2. Developed by instructor	_____	62
3. No text used	- - - - -	23
4. *Music for Sight Singing*	Ottman	11
5. *Programmed Ear Training*	Horacek	11
6. CAI Software	- - - - -	11
7. *A New Approach to Sight Singing*	Berkowitz et al.	8

ERROR DETECTION Texts/Materials		
1. *Sight Singing Complete*	Benward	82
2 Developed by instructor	- - - - -	53
3. No text used	- - - - -	29
4. CAI software	- - - - -	10

Respondents were then asked to compare the amount of class time in each area, ordering them from most to least. Because the pilot study had indicated that respondents spent a great deal of time on a fourth area, the category "recognize and identify" (e.g., chord qualities, scale types, intervals, inversions, etc.) was added. Results indicated that for freshmen, sightsinging was clearly the activity teachers emphasized most. Dictation and recognition/identification were nearly identical in reported time. Error detection was clearly the least practiced activity. Of those responding, 84% indicated it was the least practiced skill during freshman aural-skills classes. Responses regarding sophomores indicated that dictation and sightsinging were emphasized almost equally. Recognition/identification and error detection received the least amount of instructional time.

The final area of investigation addressed computer-assisted instruction (CAI). Of those responding, 37% reported optional use of computers to augment in-class instruction, 34% require computers, and 26% do not use computers. Only 4% use computers to substitute for in-class instruction. Table 4 shows that the Apple II(+/e) is the most-used piece of hardware for CAI.

Table 4. Computer-Based Aural-Skills Materials

	TITLE	PUBLISHER	n	COMPUTER	RATING*
1.	Harmonic Dictator	TAP**	29	Apple II+/e	2.16
2.	Ear Training	W.C. Brown	27	Apple II+/e	2.36
3.	Interval Mania	TAP	22	Apple II+/e	2.20
4.	Melodious Dictator	TAP	22	Apple II+/e	2.40
5.	Chord Mania	TAP	16	Apple II+/e	2.40
6.	Guido	U. of Del.	14	IBM	1.78
7.	DoReMi	TAP	14	Apple II+/e	2.17
8.	Sir Wm. Wrongnote	TAP	13	Apple II+/e	2.09
9.	MacGamut	Mayfield	12	MacIntosh	2.42
10.	Basic Music Theory	MECC***	12	Apple II+/e	1.90
11.	Arnold	TAP	11	Apple II+/e	2.00
12.	Practica Musica	Ars Nova	11	MacIntosh	2.00
13.	Listen	Resonate	11	MacIntosh	2.00

*1-5 scale w/1=strong
**Temporal Acuity Products, Bellevue, Washington
***Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium

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The final question called for open-ended responses. Although the percentage of people making specific comments about any particular given topic was relatively low and probably should be treated as anecdotal material rather than data-based truth, some of the comments summarized the feelings of many of the aural-skills instructors surveyed.

First, several respondents emphasized the problems associated with teaching aural skills. Perhaps this was best characterized by the plea of one respondent to "Send Help!" Other teachers stated that aural-skills instruction is not fully appreciated by many students, teachers, and administrators. This particular frustration was also evident in Collins' study.[12] Finally, it was interesting to note the number of instructors who currently teach in a integrated program but prefer separate classes, and vice versa. Perhaps the difficulty of teaching something as elusive as aural skills makes another approach inviting.

Several trends in teaching aural skills are evident based on this study. First, most institutions require two years of instruction in ear training for music majors with two to three fifty-minute periods per week as the norm. With respect to organizational approaches, 60% of the schools surveyed schedule separate classes for aural-skills instruction. The pendulum has swung away from the integrated approach favored a decade ago.

Three sightsinging textbooks—Music for Sight Singing by Ottman; *A New Approach to Sight Singing* by Berkowitz, Frontrier, and Kraft; and *Sight Singing Complete* by Benward—continue to dominate the market. Overall, respondents indicated that they generally are satisfied with the quality of these texts.

Among approaches to teaching sightsinging, movable function as opposed to fixed function is preferred by an overwhelming majority of instructors. In order, scale-degree numbers, movable-*do* where *do* is tonic in major and minor and "lah" are the systems of choice.

Among those instructors who use a commercially published text to teach dictation and error detection, Benward's Ear Tra*ining: A* Technique for Listening is the dominant text almost to the exclusion of all others. Many instructors still choose to develop their own materials for dictation and error detection practice. Given this degree of creative activity among instructors, a mechanism for distributing this material comparable to the public domain distribution of software would significantly benefit instructors.

Also, error detection is the least practiced activity in aural-skills classes. Considering the frequency that students will use this skill (e.g., as conductors, classroom and studio instructors, adjudicators, etc.), it is rea-

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sonable to suggest that more time should be devoted to developing this vital skill.[13]

Finally, we discovered that 71% of the respondents either require students to use computers to supplement in-class instruction or at least make them available. Although it is not surprising to find that most students use Apple II's because of that machine's large installed base, it is interesting to speculate about hardware and software choices of the future. If the hardware and software employed at the recent College Music Society's Institute for Electronic Technology and Music Instruction is any indication of trends, future computer-assisted instruction will take place on MacIntosh and IBM personal computers.

Ear-training teachers indeed are grappling with vexing pedagogical questions. These questions can begin to be addressed through data-based research and future experimental studies that compare the efficacy of specific teaching methods. Perhaps then we truly will be able to "Send help!"

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NOTES

[1]See Irma Collins, "Current Attitudes and Trends in the Teaching of Sight Singing in Higher Education," D.M.A. in Mus. Ed. dissertation, Temple University, 1979.

[2]Collins, p. 52.

[3]Robert W. Ottman, *Music for Sightsinging*, 2nd ed. (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967).

[4]Collins, pp. 193-196.

[5]Ibid. For a recent discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of CMP, see Michael R. Rogers, *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory: An Overview of Pedagogical Philosophies* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1984): 19-24.

[6]See Rosemary Killam and others, "Survey and Results: Most-Used Theory Texts in U. S. Colleges and Universities," The University of North Texas, 1987. (Mimeographed.)

[7]Sol Berkowitz, Gabriel Frontrier, and Leo Kraft, *A New Approach to Sight Singing*, rev. ed. (W.W. Norton and Company, 1976).

[8]Bruce Benward, *Ear Training: A Technique for Listening*, 2nd ed. (Wm. C. Brown, 1983).

[9]Killam, p. 11.

[10]See Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

[11]Bruce Benward, *Sight Singing Complete*, 4th ed. (Wm. C. Brown, 1986). Because respondents did not specify which edition of the text they were using, the latest edition is assumed here. Often, just the name of a textbook author (e.g., Ottman or Benward was listed).

[12]Collins, pp. 193-196.

[13]For a list of creative error-detection techniques, see Rupert Thackray, "Some Thoughts on Aural Training," *Australian Journal of Music Education* (October 1975).