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Developing the Musical Ear

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Conference Report

Developing the Musical Ear
Mannes College of Music, September 9, 2000

By J. Kent Williams

T he conference opened with welcoming remarks by Joel Lester, Dean of the Mannes College of Music.

Morning Session 1: Rhythm and Hypermeter

Numerical Rhythmic Articulation: A Longy Legacy
Christopher Stone (Mannes)

Stone described Numerical Rhythmic Articulation, a method of rhythmic solmization devised by Mme. Renee Longy-Miquelle and taught at the Longy School in Boston, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, the Juilliard School in Manhattan, as well as at Mannes. The method does not rely on durational fractions but instead emphasizes proportions. Students are taught to recognize a finite number of basic durational patterns. Stone noted that this approach seems more suitable for "right-brain types" because it engages the senses before the mind.

Stone provided a handout that showed how Numerical Rhythmic Articulation would be applied to exercises from Robert Starer's *Rhythmic Training*. In counting, the student reads the basic pulse (Takt) and the subdivisions within that pulse. Each note is counted with a numeral and only notes are counted. A subdivision pulse is not counted unless a note begins at that time point. The word "dash" is used to indicate subdivisions within a note. The word "check" is used to acknowledge a rest.

It's About Time: Hypermeter in Aural Skills Training
Gary Karpinski (University of Massachusetts-Amherst)

Karpinski, described how concepts of meter and hypermeter are developed in courses at UMass. Entering students are given a diagnostic placement exam which includes clapping to a recorded excerpt. Those who can clap at least one pulse level are placed in the main sequence of courses; those who cannot are placed on a remedial track. The emphasis in all courses is on developing a strong aural sense of meter without recourse to notational symbols. Pulses are conceived as points in time and represented in proto-notation by vertical lines of varying length. Durations are represented as horizontal lines of varying length. Students represent the meter and rhythm of a heard passage with a combination of pulse and duration symbols. Once a plausible meter signature has been chosen, their symbols can be translated into conventional notation. In addition to traditional dictation skills, students also learn to perceive and represent higher levels of pulse and metric grouping (hypermeter) as well as significant metric events such as hemiola and elision. Karpinski provided a thirteen-page handout that contained several examples and an extensive list of references from research literature for music theory and music cognition.

Morning Session 2: Pitch and Solmization

What's the Use? Practical Applications of Fixed-do
Robert Fertitta (SUNY-Purchase)

Fertitta began by reminding his audience that solfège syllables are merely substitutes for the letters of the musical alphabet in English and German. Syllables are preferred over letter names because: all syllables begin with a consonant, four vowel sounds are represented, and three pairs of syllables rhyme (do-sol, mi-si, fa-la). Fixed-do syllables are usually not inflected to acknowledge chromatic alterations. For example, "do" can represent C natural, C sharp, or C flat.

Fertitta asserted that the goal of the fixed-do approach is to sing melodic lines with no hesitation, to "declare the music as it appears in the score." He also claimed, however, that the method encourages one to hear tonal function as well as melodic and harmonic relationships. To demonstrate, he sang melodic and bass lines from the opening of Brahms's Third Symphony but admitted that significant musical properties, such as interval size and quality, modal pitch inflections, and tonal function were not accounted for by his syllables. Awareness of these properties is, however, assumed to be "automatic."

Fertitta also discussed the problem of enharmonically equivalent keys. He recommended that singers adopt a practical approach and reckon their syllables from the pitches of the notated key even if the enharmonically equivalent key is more "correct." An example would be Schubert's respelling of Fb major (bVI of Ab major) as E major.

Fertitita sang lines from J. S. Bach's Fantasie in G Minor for organ to demonstrate the advantage of the fixed-do approach in modulatory contexts. By reckoning syllables from nameclass letter names, the singer avoids the problem of naming pitches in terms of their scale-degree function in a fluctuating tonal environment. Awareness of tonal function is, again, assumed to be automatic. In Fertitta's words, "The educated listener will know that a certain pitch has a certain tonal or harmonic function."

This reviewer, an advocate of moveable-do, would question whether teachers can assume such a high level of awareness. It would seem that an instructor's task is to develop awareness and sensitivity to tonal context. Modulatory contexts are often difficult to navigate with moveable-do syllables, but they are not impossible as Fertitta would have us believe.

The Thinking Ear
Drora Pershing (Queens College, CUNY)

Pershing began by describing and demonstrating the moveable-do system as she teaches it. She reviewed the Guidonian hexachordal system and called attention to terms and slogans that pertain to

tonal function and voice leading. She then noted that the modern moveable-do system is simpler than Guido's system but just as practical. In her opinion, all solmization systems have their advantages. The advantage of the moveable-do system is its explicit regard for tonal function.

Pershing has her students sing scales during the early weeks to develop tonal fluency and a sense of basic tonal concepts. Later, they sing short pitch patterns first collectively, then individually. In her approach, listening, hearing, and notating are merely different views of the same problem.

The presentation continued with a discussion of features of the moveable-do system that remain consistent across all major and minor keys: tonal function of the various scale degrees, and voice-leading tendencies. Moveable-do syllables clarify the relations between chromatic chords and their diatonic antecedents, for example V/V vs. ii. The do-based minor system (Pershing's preference) encourages the conception of parallel major and minor keys as one large key area.

Pershing showed how the modulations are navigated in the moveable-do system, by using the same technique as Guido: double-name the pivot tone, then continue in the new key. Using "Auf dem Flusse" from Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, she also demonstrated solmization of music with third-related key areas.

In her conclusion, Pershing allowed that no system is perfect. Moveable-do is best for tonal music, but it has limitations in highly chromatic tonal idioms, and is unsatisfactory for atonal idioms. She opined that the best approach is to learn all of the extant systems and utilize each for the musical style(s) it facilitates. A short question-and-answer session followed during which an audience member asked how to cope with students who possess absolute pitch. Pershing responded that students with absolute pitch don't need moveable-do to audiate pitches, but they do need it to acknowledge tonal function.

Absolute and Relative Pitch: The Best of Both Worlds?
Donna Doyle (Graduate Center, CUNY)

Doyle began by positing that musicians fall into three groups: those with relative pitch, those with absolute pitch (AP), and those with quasi-absolute pitch. In her opinion, musicians need to develop both senses: absolute pitch and relative pitch. Absolute pitch (AP) enables listeners to maintain a sense of tonal balance in registral pitch space and adds pleasure to the musical experience. Relative pitch contributes meaning and affect.

Doyle noted that few viable methods exist for developing absolute pitch. She advised singing scales with pitch-class letter names and finding the tonic of sightsinging exercises from a remembered pitch. Above all, the student must be attententive and persistent. Her procedure for identifying absolute pitches and keys in tonal music involves comparing a remembered pitch (for example, middle C) to a heard tonal context and determining whether the remembered pitch is a diatonic scale degree in the heard key. If it is not, the remembered pitch is raised or lowered a semitone to become diatonic. The scale degree function of that tone is then determined by relative pitch. Students with AP need to develop a sense of relative pitch. To do so, they should sing and take dictation using scale degree numbers.

During the subsequent discussion Gary Karpinski noted that research studies have not shown that adults can acquire AP. The issue of historical performance was also raised. How do musicians with AP cope when hearing or performing music played at lower pitch level? Finally, several audience members with AP noted that their sense of pitch has risen gradually as they have aged.

Afternoon session: Advanced Applications

Memory, Improvisation, and Species Counterpoint
Ford Lallerstedt (Curtis Institute of Music)

Lallerstedt began by noting that about twenty years ago he asked himself, "What is it that I know about music?" Having taught from

a draft of Aldwell and Schachter's *Harmony and Voice Leading* during his first two years at Curtis, he was impressed with Schenker's idea that species counterpoint is the foundation of tonal music. Since then he has devised a set of dictation exercises to develop his students' sense of tonal memory.

The method begins with first species examples where students listen for relative motion, first between two voices, then among three voices. Second species exercises are introduced by omitting the second half note and playing only the first beat of each measure. When the requisite proficiency has been attained, the second half notes are inserted and students are required to acknowledge melodic/voice-leading function of those tones, presumably using terms from Salzer and Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition*.[1] Lallerstedt reported that this approach has proved successful. His students can notate 5-6 measure exercises in three-voice second species.

He has also used this approach for improvisation exercises. Here the goal is to improvise an acceptable solution (one with correct voice leading) in a prescribed number of voices and species, repeatedly play the solution, sing each line, then notate the result. Lallerstedt reported success with problems involving first through fourth species, but noted that students found combined species exercises much more difficult.

During the ensuing discussion period, one audience member asked how students refer to the vertical sonorities in their exercises. Lallerstedt answered that they use figured-bass numerals. Joel Lester noted that Lallerstedt's approach has historical precedent: species counterpoint was used to teach singers to improvise.

From this talk and a question posed by this reviewer, it would seem that Lallerstedt teaches his students to hear and conceive polyphonic textures in terms of melodic intervals, harmonic intervals, and relative voice motions. Awareness of tonality is apparently deemed less significant or deferred to a later stage in the process. Lallerstedt's presentation would have been clearer if he had provided a handout with musical examples to illustrate his method.

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[1]Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 43-47.

Similarities and Continuites:
Stravinsky, Schoenberg and the Goals of Ear Training
Michael Friedman (Yale University)

Friedman began by quoting Stravinsky:"Music that is based on ontological time is generally dominated by the principle of similarity."[2] Friedman noted that remembering is the first step toward understanding. As listeners, we should ask, "What does the composer want us to hear?" To illustrate, Friedman provided a handout containing brief score excerpts and analytical reductions. For the opening of Schoenberg's *Piano Piece*, Op. 33a, the crucial point is the replication of the framing interval (11 semitones) in the first and last chords within each measure. When this initial phrase is restated later in the piece, the focus is upon textural thickening and registral expansion. Using Bartok's Minor Seconds, Major Sevenths (*Mikrokosmos*, VI: 144), Friedman showed how the structural dyads form an expanding wedge of odd-numbered interval classes. In the opening phrase, a listener can distinguish between "principal and dependent sonorities" and these distinctions have important implications for the music that follows.

At the conclusion of his talk, Friedman noted that aural skills pedagogues should occasionally pause and reflect upon the question, "What are we training ears for?" He recommended that we encourage our students to ask, "What are the nuts and bolts of the composer's message?" and "How can I as a performer train my listeners' ears to grasp that message?"

Concluding Session 1: Open Discussion

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion among members of the Mannes Techniques of Music Department and Mary Anthony Cox of the Juilliard School. In his opening remarks, Robert Cuckson observed that a composer never finishes developing

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[2]Igor Stravinsksy, *Poetics of Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 31

his or her musical ear. Ongoing tasks for all musicians include learning to pay attention correctly and learning how to direct attention.

Cuckson went on describe the Mannes curriculum in general terms. He noted that all music majors take essentially the same skills courses, and that some topics are addressed in separate courses while others are treated in a single course or course sequence. Elizabeth Aaron followed with a more detailed description of course requirements and pedagogy. She noted that the Mannes emphasis upon fixed-do solfège, score reading using all seven clefs, and "visual immediacy" in both sight-singing and dictation is inherited from French conservatories.

David Gagné talked about his intensive ear training class at Queens College CUNY. Gagné uses moveable-do, which would seem more compatible with Schenker's theories of tonal structure. Mary Anthony Cox provided a brief description of the Juilliard aural skills program, which is similar to that of Mannes. She also described her recent visit to Cuba where she observed some impressive musicianship under development in that country's Soviet-style approach to music education.

The discussion gradually widened to include audience members' questions and statements. When the question of the historical authenticity of fixed vs. moveable-do solmization arose, Peter Urquhart, a musicologist from the University of New Hampshire, observed that in the post-Guidonian era, letter names and hexachordal syllables were used concurrently. Musicians used the former system to fix the position of pitches in absolute pitch space and the latter to orient their ears to hexachordal pitch space, the antecedent of our tonal, or relative, pitch space.

The Mannes faculty and administration are to be commended for mounting such a wellrun and informative conference , and for being such gracious hosts.