

1-1-2003

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### Recommended Citation

Buchler, Michael (2003) "Joseph N. Straus - Elements of Music reviewed," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. Vol. 17, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcollections.lipscomb.edu/jmtp/vol17/iss1/5>

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## Joseph N. Straus, *Elements of Music*

Reviewed by Michael Buchler

### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Let's be frank: identifying intervals, writing scales, and finding  $B\flat$  below middle C on an alto-clef staff are hardly musical activities. They might be important precursors to attaining musical literacy, but what good is musical literacy if it isn't partnered with a strong connection to aural experience? Teachers frequently broach such elemental topics as abstractions that must be mastered before moving on to any genuinely musical applications. Such musical applications, then, become a carrot dangled before the student as she or he attempts, once more, to spell that diminished sixth above  $A\sharp$ .

But in fundamentals classes, it seems rare that students advance to the point of claiming any real musical prizes. This is particularly unfortunate for non-music majors who take fundamentals classes not to fulfill degree requirements or as prerequisites to first-year theory (often considered the first "real" theory class), but as their single elective that might help them acquire the skills needed to sing in a choir, read from a fake book, or otherwise gain an active musical avocation. For such students, especially, the material they cover in a fundamentals class may mean the difference between participating in music as an adult and not doing so.

I am, therefore, skeptical of both fundamentals courses that cover only written skills and of resources that cater to such curricula. Thankfully, Joseph Straus has given us a new textbook for fundamentals courses: one that fully assimilates aural, performance, and written skills. Moreover, the book's assignments generally foster musical understanding and show why those concepts that we describe as "fundamental" truly are so. Of course, his is not the first textbook to integrate conceptual and aural skills, but it might well be the first to teach these concepts through a limited and well-chosen set of repertoire. Music is thoroughly woven through *Elements of Music*, and the text is accompanied by a compact disc that contains recordings of all featured compositions.<sup>1</sup>

Straus has a canny sense of what material is and is not important in a fundamentals class. *Elements of Music* contains nothing on the harmonic series and other topics in musical physics, there are no grandiose essays on why we study music or on the emotional

content of music, and there is no pretense that sheer nominalism lies at the core of musical understanding. The tone and appearance of Straus's book are also wonderfully appropriate. Quite a number of current fundamentals books look like pre-high school textbooks, and their prose similarly (and more distractingly) condescends. Straus writes clearly, doesn't eschew more sophisticated prose, and steers clear of unnecessary bells and whistles. I cannot convey how happy I am to see a book that takes such a direct and simple path, that shows how genuinely musical the basics are, and that provides more than enough sensible exercises to engage the students' minds and ears.

I do not mean to imply that this book is flawless: I don't always agree with Straus's musical and pedagogical choices, sometimes I think he aims a bit too high, other times too low, and I wish that his musical examples had ventured farther into twentieth-century concert music. The big picture, however, is remarkably good, and were I choosing a fundamentals textbook right now, I'd undoubtedly pick this one. For the remainder of this review, I will write more specifically about the book's content, elaborating on the critical issues just raised.

## SYNOPSIS

Six large chapters, with multiple "lessons" per chapter, form this book's core. The final sixty pages comprise a significant anthology of pieces that are excerpted throughout the book. While I don't want to merely list the chapter and anthology contents, as of this time the table of contents appears on neither Amazon's nor Prentice-Hall's web sites.<sup>2</sup>

The book is broadly divided as follows:

- Chapter 1: Pitch
- Chapter 2: Rhythm and Meter
- Chapter 3: Major and Minor Scales
- Chapter 4: Intervals
- Chapter 5: Triads and Seventh Chords
- Chapter 6: Fundamentals of Harmony
- Anthology

Each chapter is divided into between four and six primary lessons and a single "supplementary" lesson (some of which seem

more primary than supplementary, frankly) for a total of 41 lessons. Most lessons could comfortably be tackled in a single fifty-minute class period, and so the book should be about perfect for someone teaching three days a week in a fifteen-week semester. Each lesson includes a variety of “in-class activities” and “exercises.” The former include singing, playing, and dictation activities (most of which could — and should — be practiced outside of class as well; I don’t quite understand why they have been pigeonholed as things to be done “in class”); the latter include written assignments. There are far too many written and aural tasks to assign, and while abundance is certainly a good thing, I would personally have a difficult time deciding which exercises to skip. Staying on pace would be enormously challenging if, for every topic, one assigned some exercises of each sort (singing, hearing, playing, writing). Those who are fortunate enough to teach fundamentals five days a week should safely manage to get through the entire book without worrying about whether to forgo aural skills for written ones, or vice versa.

The musical anthology includes scores to the following complete pieces:

Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, “Over the Rainbow” (including the introductory verse)

J. S. Bach, *WTC I*, Fugues 15 and 16 in G Major and G Minor

J. S. Bach, Two chorales from St. Matthew Passion

Chopin, Preludes, op. 28, in A Major and C Minor

“Duke” Ellington and Irving Mills, “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (including the introductory verse)

W. C. Handy, “St. Louis Blues”

Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 76, No. 3, third movement (minuet), arranged on two staves.

Scott Joplin, “The Entertainer”

Josephine Lang, “Ob ich manchmal dein Gedenke” (song)

Fanny Mendelssohn, Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 11, second movement

Mozart, Piano Sonata in A Major, K. 331, first movement, theme and variations 1, 3, and 6

Mozart, “Dove Sono” from *The Marriage of Figaro*

Matos Rodrigues, “La Cumparsita” (tango)

Schubert, “Der Tod und das Mädchen” and “Heidenröslein”

Schumann, “Wenn ich in deine Augen seh” from *Dichterliebe*

It is probably this anthology and its accompanying compact disc that most obviously distinguishes Straus's book from its competitors. The repertoire is diverse, and every chapter includes multiple examples drawn from the literature.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there are no musical examples that are *not* drawn from this anthology, which seems great in principle, though perhaps a bit limiting in practice. I occasionally found myself wondering why one composition was used in a particular context when some other (non-anthologized) one might better do the job. However, the overwhelmingly positive effect of having students actually learn a small body of music by listening to and studying the same pieces repeatedly — each time attuned to different musical elements — trumps any troublesome aspects of not always having exactly the right piece for the task at hand.

Straus's repertoire is generally well selected, representing a cross-section of musical styles and genres, but I do wish that he had included at least one twentieth-century modernist work and one relatively contemporary composition in his anthology. With two thirds of the book devoted to topics that are *not* uniquely tonal or tertian, he could have made great use of one or two short post-tonal compositions. Students could have found intervals or labeled pitches, and those tasks could have been more closely translated into genuine analytical statements (about pitch focus, motive, or intervallic prominence) than could similar tasks in pieces that adhere to tonal syntax. Moreover, he could have further expanded students' musical horizons by introducing styles that they might not haven't encountered in any other cultural outlet.

The accompanying compact disc contains wonderful performances of the anthologized repertoire, but it does seem that Straus (and/or his editors) selected performances for their quality and/or cultural importance rather than for how clearly or accurately they realized the printed scores. In particular, Nelson Freire's performance of Chopin's C Minor Prelude uses a C major triad at the end of bar 3, rather than a C minor triad, as found in Straus's edition. This is a well-known conflict, and it would have been easy to find performances that agree with the score. Who can fault Straus for providing one of Judy Garland's performances of "Over the Rainbow" and one of Duke Ellington's versions of his own "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)"? Yet neither recording includes the respective song's (little-known) introductory verse. Both verses are included in the anthology

and both serve as fodder for exercises within the book. Perhaps in future editions, he will consider including alternate performances (without omitting Garland or Ellington) that stay closer to the score.

### **MORE SPECIFIC COMMENTS ABOUT THE BOOK**

*Elements of Music* is unique enough to warrant documenting some facets that either set it apart from its competitors or at least place it in very select company. I will proceed chapter by chapter (keeping in mind that Straus's six chapters might constitute major sectional divisions in other texts), highlighting some aspects that I found pedagogically intriguing, clever, and occasionally problematic.

Chapter 1 covers basic aspects of pitch, including lessons on notation and navigating the keyboard. The very first lesson includes a clear introduction of steps and leaps, and their placement on the staff. From the outset, Straus produces good and creative in-class activities. It is often difficult, especially with this rudimentary material, to reinforce conceptual topics with genuinely musical applications. Even before any clef has been introduced, Straus suggests three useful activities: vocally matching pitch; simple contour dictation with the classifications "up/down," "step/leap," and their combination; and slightly more elaborate contour dictation using the words "low," "middle," and "high."

The second lesson introduces the piano keyboard layout. Whenever I see the keyboard introduced early in a fundamentals book, I worry about its potential use as a crutch. Straus, however, provides the students with clear exercises for hearing and reproducing octave equivalence and diatonic stepwise motion on the keyboard. Teachers who follow these plans will immediately force students to engage with the music and experiment with the concepts at hand: pitch naming, the keyboard layout, step, leap, and octave. Straus's musical involvement of the keyboard differs markedly from countless books that merely use the keyboard as a topographical model to demonstrate pitch and interval relations. Such books often unintentionally foster critically destructive student behaviors like drawing little keyboards above each assignment.<sup>4</sup>

Consigned to the chapter's "supplementary lesson" (that occupies only two pages) are alto and tenor clefs, the octave sign, double flats and double sharps. The introductions to these topics

are pithy, and no exercises or activities follow. Some teachers might be troubled by Straus's marginalization of double sharps and C clefs, but in my experience, fundamentals classes are best when they focus on the most important materials for musical literacy and understanding. While I would prefer a few short exercises to reinforce these topics, I find Straus's approach to be far better than those that artificially conflate little-seen notational conventions.

Chapter two, on rhythm and meter, is well done throughout. Exercises that have students setting poetic excerpts to rhythms seem especially valuable in establishing strong connections between musical and poetic meter, and ultimately, between music and text. Also, they foster genuinely musical thinking even before students know enough to construct simple melodies.<sup>5</sup>

The third chapter, on scales, seems a bit quirkiest than earlier material and, while it should unquestionably accomplish its goals, I wonder whether some of the tasks might have been achieved a bit more efficiently. Straus begins by drawing a quick distinction between diatonic and chromatic semitones, illustrating them at first on a keyboard drawing, and then in musical notation.<sup>6</sup> It might have been more prudent to start with the chapter's second lesson (on the C major scale) and show semitones and whole tones in that scale, thus moving from the scale itself to the intervals it contains. Such a plan could have emphasized the scale as a singular entity rather than as the sum of its intervallic parts.

Straus's narrow focus on the C major scale (and later on the C minor scale) allows him to lead students toward musical explorations before introducing all the transpositions and the notion of key.<sup>7</sup> He invites students to compose their own melodies using the C major scale, and he draws clear connections with the previous chapter by suggesting that students work with their previously rhythmicized texts. Straus's use of a text and the simple discussions of melodic tendencies should be all that is required for students to feel like they are actually composing music. Best of all, the scale is presented as a musical construct, not as a tedious exercise to be mastered for the next test.

While I love this chapter's written exercises, I worry about Straus's choices for sight-singing melodies. He starts off simply enough, with three-note neighboring and passing motions (p. 119) followed by Czerny-like exercises that traverse the entire scale. However the third sight-singing exercise in this lesson (still on

p. 119) has students singing an adapted version of Mozart's aria "Dove sono" from *The Marriage of Figaro*. This tune involves not only the types of stepwise motion drilled in exercises 1 and 2, but also numerous skips (including non-tonic triad skips such as *ti-re-fa* and *mi-do-la-re*). This, as well as the even less conjunct Haydn string quartet excerpt (from op. 76, no. 3, mvt. 3) that follows it (and requires students to sing an octave and a sixth range), amounts to a significant conceptual leap from the appropriately simple singing exercises that have preceded it.

The sight singing improvisations and the dictation and playing exercises that follow these two more difficult melodies are, again, entirely sensible and creatively foster multidimensional musical understanding. While I admire Straus's goals of weaving real music into each lesson and using a select repertoire from his anthology of pieces, students would be better served at this point singing either derived exercises or simpler works from the literature.

Straus's introduction to minor scales is a bit unconventional. Many people have questioned the pedagogical utility of the harmonic and melodic minor scales, but very few other textbook authors have seemed willing to do away with them in their introduction to minor.<sup>8</sup> He certainly deserves congratulations for subverting one of the least helpful heuristics in early theory training: the notion that there *are* three different minor scales. The artificial construction of three minor scales at least implicitly endorses the notion that minor tonality is trivalent. That familiar pedagogy almost invariably leads some students to utter bizarre turns of phrase such as "this piece is in D harmonic minor" or to ask questions such as "how do I know when to raise the submediant when I'm writing in melodic minor?" Harmonic and melodic minor scales do appear, but only in the chapter's supplementary lesson. This marginalization seems an appropriate compromise for the many teachers who, I suspect, will be loath to abandon these concepts.

The fourth chapter covers intervals. Straus begins with generic intervals and branches out to cover the varieties of seconds and thirds, then sixths and seventh, then fourth and fifths. By starting with generic distances, he not only simplifies matters by separating size and quality, but he subtly lays the groundwork for developing a fairly sophisticated musical understanding. Example 21-4 features an excerpt from the introductory verse of Harold Arlen's "Over the Rainbow." Students are asked to label all melodic intervals and



parenthetically told that “each measure contains a leap down from B-flat, and the leaps get bigger each time” (217). The next exercise produces the bass line from Chopin’s C Minor Prelude. This time, Straus incidentally mentions that “this bass line features wide leaps, mostly fourths and fifths” (217). Such analytical observations foster a sense of common types of musical motion.

Another very smart use of intervals to teach tonal concepts comes in Lesson 25 (“Intervals in a major key”). A playing exercise cleverly links diatonic intervals to voice leading, before that topic has been broached:

You are given an augmented fourth (which represents scale degrees  $\hat{4}$  and  $\hat{5}$  in one key) and its enharmonic equivalent, a diminished fifth (which represents scale degrees  $\hat{5}$  and  $\hat{4}$  in a different key). Play the resolution of each interval to scale-degrees  $\hat{4}$  and  $\hat{4}$  in the appropriate key. (260)

Students not only discover that tritones are dissonant, but they learn how to resolve them even before harmony has been introduced. It is too bad that this task is not replicated in the written exercises, since many teachers will not have the resources (either physical or staff) to utilize the many great playing exercises in this book.

The biggest problem with this chapter again concerns the literature provided for sight singing. In Lesson 23 (Sixths and Sevenths), the melodies not surprisingly involve larger leaps. Not only does the music seem more difficult than students of this level can handle, but in the context of this lesson, the book clearly encourages intervallic singing. Especially after the excellent emphasis on scale degree and movable-do solfège in the previous chapter (on scales), intervallic singing seems both unwise and out-of-line with the book’s central pedagogical tack. Below, I have reproduced singing exercise 2f (p. 235) from Fanny Mendelssohn’s Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello, op. 11, mvt. 2. By virtue of its chromaticism, non-tonic leaps, and contour, I would think that this melody would be better suited for second-semester freshman or first-semester sophomores (in a standard core curriculum). Thankfully, the sight-singing exercises return to a more viable level in the fifth chapter, on triads and seventh chords.



The first inversion of a triad is usually a weaker, less stable version of the root position. The second inversion, however, involves a significant difference. Recall that the interval of the perfect fourth is considered either consonant or dissonant, depending on the circumstances. In root position and first inversion, fourths occur among the upper voices and are thus consonant. In the second inversion, however, the fourth occurs between the bass and one of the upper voices—now there is nothing sounding below it and it is considered dissonant. As a result, a triad in second inversion is usually treated as a dissonant chord, and is used only under special circumstances, to be described later. (287)

The final chapter takes on a Promethian task: introducing the “fundamentals of harmony” in about sixty pages. Many introductory textbooks attempt exactly this (often in even less space) and invariably some things are left out while other concepts appear before they should. In many ways, the exposition of functional harmony in *Elements of Music* is both better refined and more useful than in any similar text. Straus begins by cogently explaining the relationship between tonic and dominant; he then skillfully introduces expansions of tonic and dominant in the context of passing and neighboring chords. These two lessons alone seem more musically germane than many (especially older) harmony textbooks’ explanations of the same concepts. Triads and dominant seventh chords are freely mixed, and the emphasis is distinctly on function, not on intervals and chord structures. The only element that seems misplaced is the early introduction of the cadential  $\frac{4}{2}$  in the lesson on “Expanding I and V.” While I am heartened that he introduces it as a dominant chord (using the common notation  $V_{4-3}^{\frac{4}{2}}$ ), it seems ill advised to introduce this formation before addressing suspensions and before introducing predominant-functioning chords.<sup>9</sup>

The very next lesson, on “approaching V,” illustrates the proper use of supertonic and subdominant harmonies.<sup>10</sup> Every progression is paradigmatic and students should come away with a solid sense of how to build straightforward tonic–pre-dominant–dominant–tonic progressions.<sup>11</sup> The penultimate lesson introduces simple notions of phrase and cadence, providing students with

some crucial ways to categorize and understand simple musical structures. Straus avoids more elaborate taxonomies, such as those used by Douglass Green and Steven Laitbz, instead adhering to straightforward designations like “authentic cadence” and “parallel period.” Such broad terms are appropriate to a fundamentals book, and should not contradict the way most teachers explain standard small structures in more advanced theory courses.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Elements of Music* certainly is a wonderful and welcome contribution to the field. It is challenging, well planned, invariably musical, and elegantly written. Joseph Straus not only sets a new standard for music fundamentals textbooks, but he arguably does something far more important. When a senior scholar, best known for creative research, produces a book on the most rudimentary topic college theory professors are asked to teach, it sends a clear signal that (even) this topic should not be taken lightly.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The back cover of the book (which is also quoted on web sites such as Amazon.com) deceptively claims that it “comes with an interactive CD.” This compact disc neither comes with the book, nor is it interactive. The disc is sold separately, carrying a different ISBN; and it is difficult to imagine ways in which recordings are “interactive” (even granting that this word has taken on a rather broad meaning).

<sup>2</sup> I hope Prentice-Hall remedies this situation since the book features a fantastically descriptive table of contents that lists all the concepts (not just the broad topics) that are introduced in each lesson. One would plan their semester using little more than the table of contents.

<sup>3</sup> While the book makes constant use of examples drawn from the anthology, the references are not always made explicit. For example, on p. 87 there are three examples of triple meter. The references are to “Schumann, Song;” “Lang, Song;” and “Haydn, Quartet.” Each of these pieces can be found in the anthology, but why not take just a bit more space to properly document the reference? Surely, we don’t want our students referring to “Der Tod und das Mädchen” simply as Schubert’s “song.”

<sup>4</sup> Seemingly aiding the (negative) cause of tying musical relations to keyboard design, Thomson Publishing — which includes Schirmer and Wadsworth — is now including life-sized fold-out cardboard keyboards in many of their fundamentals texts. If these recyclables serve a pedagogical utility, it is lost on me.

<sup>5</sup> In the following chapter, these rhythmicized texts reappear as templates for simple melodic construction.

<sup>6</sup> Beginning students could potentially be confused by Straus's partial list (in musical notation) of diatonic and chromatic semitones: the text never mentions that the list is incomplete.

<sup>7</sup> In the second edition of his *Foundations of Music and Musicianship*, David Damschroder similarly limits himself to only three major keys (C, F, and G) when introducing scales in his second chapter. By contrast, he introduces the idea of key at the same time as he presents scales.

<sup>8</sup> Again, Damschroder represents a notable exception. Happily, his textbook shares many of the most positive features of Straus's text.

<sup>9</sup> This tricky matter of ordering is also a (rare) problem that I encountered when using Steven Laitz's terrific new core theory textbook, *The Complete Musician* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> It would therefore be easy to reorder topics to cover these chords before teaching the proper use of the cadential six-four.

<sup>11</sup> I did, however, wonder why Straus included the (sadly) usual left-hand keyboard harmony version of I-"IV"- $\text{V}^7$ -I (using the neighboring  $\frac{5}{4}$  "IV" chord and  $\text{V}^{\frac{5}{4}}$ ). I have long thought that theorists should work to eradicate this sorry "harmonic pattern" that is propagated in class piano labs. Straus's labeling also ignores the proper figures, and given that Straus uses the voice-leading explanation of the cadential  $\frac{6}{4}$ , one wonders why he doesn't acknowledge the purely neighboring function of the "IV $\frac{5}{4}$ " chord. This little anomaly simply isn't in keeping with the excellent theoretical background that Straus establishes.