Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy

Volume 35 Article 6

1-1-2021

Teaching Music Theory: New Voices and Approaches by Jennifer Snodgrass

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Teaching Music Theory: New Voices and Approaches

by Jennifer Snodgrass
New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 311 pages + xviii.

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Jennifer Snodgrass acknowledges the increased interest in music theory pedagogy and claims that "the time for dialogue regarding new philosophies, teaching approaches, and curricula is now" (ix). The goal of her book is "to continue that dialogue with a comprehensive text highlighting general approaches in teaching both music theory and aural skills, including topics in curriculum, assessment, classroom environment, and other points of relevance such as undergraduate research and professional development for the graduate student" (ix). In her 1987 review of Michael Rogers's seminal 1984 book, *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory*, Dorothy Payne expresses her "most hoped-for goal" of "bringing the book to the attention of the bright, young graduate student."[1] Snodgrass's book (with the wealth of additional online material[2]) is an excellent textbook for any graduate music theory pedagogy course, as well as a valuable resource for current teachers and undergraduate music majors, both those interested in pursuing graduate work in music theory and music education majors preparing to teach high school music theory.

The "new voices and approaches" methodology in this book grew out of Snodgrass's Effective Teaching Project, a study of theory teachers similar to Ken Bain's 2004 book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*.[3] Both Snodgrass and Bain identify highly effective teachers—Snodgrass studies 96 and Bain studies 60–70, but only "three dozen of them extensively."[4] The procedure Snodgrass uses to assemble her impressive list of instructors from a variety of institutions appears less rigorous than that of Bain's,[5] and her study differs from his in the amount of time spent with each instructor; whereas Bain observed his participants for a semester or more, Snodgrass

1 Payne (1987, 200).

2 I am limiting my remarks in this review to the printed book. While the online materials provide abundant additions, evaluating them is beyond the scope of a single review.

3 Bain (2004).

4 Bain (2004, 4).

5 Bain (2004, 181–90).

observed each participant for one or two class periods. Her work, however, replaces the depth achieved by Bain with a breadth of studying more instructors in various circumstances.

Snodgrass lists "the teachers represented in this text, whether through an on-site observation, in conversation, or in survey responses" together with their institutions (xi-xv). The following table provides an overview of the number of teachers in each institution type and the number of institutions and states represented to illustrate the scope of her two-year study accomplished through her teaching observations in 17 states.

Institution Type	*Instructors*	*Institutions*	*States*
High Schools	27	27	12
Community Colleges/2-Year Institutions	2	2	2
Liberal Arts/Private Colleges & Universities	18	12	8
4-Year State Institutions (Teaching Intensive)	21	12	8
4-Year Institutions (Research Intensive)	19	11	11
Conservatories	6	4	3
Other	3	2	2
Totals	96	70	26

Table 1
Overview of Participants in the Effective Teaching Project.

The author combines her research in the field of music theory pedagogy, her 20 years of college teaching experience, and her observations of the participants by presenting examples from her own teaching and descriptions of other effective teachers. Her writing style is concise, straightforward, and easy to understand, with thought-provoking detail and relatable, pertinent narratives. The book contains general teaching advice and its application to music theory (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9), the "nuts and bolts" of teaching music theory (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7), and broader, more general topics (Chapters 10 and 11).

In Chapter 1, "The Golden Circle: 'Why,' 'How,' and 'What,'" Snodgrass stresses the importance of asking these questions in order to establish a "mission" for teaching. Throughout the book, the author stresses their application at every level—the curriculum, the course, and the individual lesson. Snodgrass uses her answers and those provided by colleagues in her study to advocate for theory curriculum reform

at both the college and high school levels. She is interested not merely in effective teaching, but effective teaching utilizing new approaches based on this reform. Chapter 2, "Why and How: Curriculum and Content," continues the examination of curricular reform, relying heavily on survey responses (both the author's and other researchers). The first section of this chapter ends by summarizing her survey results, concluding that the vast majority of the teachers in her study consider curricular change essential. The final section presents theory curriculums from three different institutions and a detailed discussion of the theory curriculum reform at her own institution, Appalachian State University, illustrating four approaches to curricular reform. Chapter 3, "The Classroom Environment," begins with valuable, general advice pertinent to all teachers; topics include respect and rapport, discussion-based classrooms, group/collaborative work, technology, and preparing for the first day. In addition to descriptions of specific classroom observations, the author also includes specific assignments and technology activities from her own teaching. The chapter concludes with a section on syllabus design. After an overview of what a syllabus should include, the author provides four complete, detailed syllabi from faculty members at different institutions which provide several exemplary models for new theory teachers.

In Chapter 8, "Assessment," Snodgrass examines various methods of assessing and evaluating student progress[6] and provides examples of each type. Her discussion of each method clearly demonstrates the respect she has for her students, and she concludes the chapter with sound advice:

> It is neither appropriate nor productive to give evaluation to exhibit power, to advance a hidden agenda, or to establish a course's reputation as a weed-out course. Evaluation and assessment should be used to determine students' learning and growth, and all assignments must be designed for that purpose by using a multitude of assessment styles (255).

Snodgrass begins Chapter 9, "Empower the Undergraduate," by juxtaposing two extremes in college professors—those whose "passion lies in teaching core classes to all musicians" and those who "tend to go through the motions while teaching the undergraduate core classes, leaving an abundance of time for their research endeavors," but acknowledges that the vast majority "tend to fall somewhere in between these two groups" (256). She then describes the undergraduate music major based on research, personal experiences, surveys of undergraduate students, and responses from the

6 This chapter focuses exclusively on assessment of individual student performance, with no discussion of curricular assessment of either a particular course or curriculum.

faculty participants. The chapter addresses the important issue of student motivation and ends with examples of engaging undergraduate students by fostering research and providing teaching experiences. While both endeavors are worthwhile, the latter may not be possible in all situations.

The true "nuts and bolts" of teaching music theory are covered in Chapters 4 through 7, with many detailed teaching methods used by the author and her study participants. Chapter 4, "Teaching Theory on the High School Level," begins with an overview of high school enrollments, observing that the vast majority of students who participate in high school music programs, including students in Advanced Placement (AP) Music Theory classes, do not major in music. The author thoroughly describes the AP Music Theory Exam, including a list of ten institutions' policies for using AP Exam scores. While most of the teaching examples come from AP Music Theory classes, they are applicable in non-AP Music Theory and college classes; however, there is no discussion of the more general (non-AP) high school theory class. This chapter offers college faculty insight into the experiences of the high school teachers, with tables illustrating the typical high school and college professor daily schedules and highlighting the different challenges each encounter (103–4).

The teaching suggestions begun in Chapter 4 are significantly increased in the next three chapters: Chapter 5, "Pedagogy of Fundamentals and Diatonic Harmony," Chapter 6, "Pedagogy of Chromatic Harmony and Form," and Chapter 7, "Pedagogy of Aural Skills." Snodgrass begins Chapter 5 by stating: "Most music educators and theorists strongly believe in the constant integration of theory into the aural skills classroom; however, it seems that in terms of pedagogy, the art of teaching written theory deserves significant individual discussion" (125). While never explicitly articulated, it is clear throughout the book that Snodgrass also embraces the corollary of this statement: there must be a constant integration of aural skills into the written theory classroom. Snodgrass includes advice for including a variety of aural examples—both traditional music from the classical canon and more recent popular music. Unfortunately, most of her examples appear after the section on fundamentals, where it is especially important to connect the concepts (basic pitch notation, key signatures and scales, intervals, and chord construction) to sound from the very beginning. The next section treats the teaching of diatonic harmony (Roman numerals, harmonic function, and voice leading). While neither section presents a comprehensive approach to all of topics covered in a freshman theory class, Snodgrass presents especially creative ideas that would be helpful to any theory instructor. The author acknowledges near the end of the chapter that "while many of my colleagues

were moving away from part-writing in the traditional sense, they were not moving away from the teaching of voice leading" (155). She describes two voice leading classes—one exclusively at the keyboard using harmonic function, and the other in a more traditional setting using part-writing "rules." Both examples illustrate that "it is through musical experience that students are understanding the process of part-writing and how the voices interact to create true harmonic progression" (155).

In Chapter 6, Snodgrass attempts to cover a significant amount of material, and her approach is somewhat imbalanced. She begins by restating the importance of connecting the aural experience: "'Always start with sound.' That was a sentiment heard over and over from some of the most effective theory teachers I observed. There is no exception to this rule, regardless of the topic taught" (161). Her detailed method of teaching secondary function demonstrates her commitment to beginning with sound. Using lead sheets with popular music and Disney tunes to present secondary functions allows her students to discover concepts aurally, before reading textbook explanations. Snodgrass next presents an overview of how she uses similar music to introduce mode mixture and borrowed chords, but the treatment is brief and much less detailed. The author offers a thorough methodology for teaching augmented sixth chords, but much less specificity for teaching the Neapolitan chord; she suggests several musical examples for teaching the latter chord, but none for the augmented sixth chords.

After an overview of several textbook definitions of modulation, Snodgrass provides the results of an assessment given to 63 of her students who were asked to identify the specific location of modulations in both notated scores and listening examples without notation. She concludes that "we start the study of modulation with the ear, allowing students to aurally understand what is happening before the function is brought into the discussion, before we talk about the different types of modulation. Perhaps we should not start with the pivot chord because it is the hardest to hear" (178). The author provides three popular music examples illustrating non-pivot chord modulations, without any suggestions for teaching the concept.

Snodgrass introduces counterpoint, stating that "more and more instructors are integrating it into the undergraduate core curriculum, specifically at the freshman and sophomore levels," and later in a footnote: "Counterpoint can be introduced before any discussion of harmonic function. The observation and discussion are placed in this chapter because the topic is not a uniform part of the core, but they could certainly be included in the material in chapter 5" (178–9). Her teaching example describes a species counterpoint lesson, apparently from a diatonic harmony class. This section

lacks any examination of the various approaches to counterpoint (species counterpoint vs. 18th-century contrapuntal forms) or its benefit in the theory curriculum. The next section includes three classroom examples involving phrase structure, one-part form, and sonata form analysis. All three provide impressive pedagogical models, but lack any discussion of the relationships among the topics. Snodgrass acknowledges that "there are multiple publications and textbooks that deal specifically with the teaching of large-scale form," but she references only two (183).

Chapter 6 concludes with two short sections—one on modes and jazz theory and one on analysis. The former offers a brief explanation of the modes and what items one might include in a section on jazz theory. The final paragraph offers some general remarks on the nature of musical analysis. The author provides abundant examples of effective teaching by a variety of expert teachers, but uses multiple strategies in her presentations. In some cases, she provides procedures for teaching (secondary functions and augmented sixth chords); in others, a philosophy of teaching but without classroom examples (modulation); and, in others, class descriptions without either a methodology or philosophy (modal mixture and the Neapolitan chord).

Chapter 7, the final "nuts and bolts" chapter, focuses on aural skills—sight singing, rhythmic performance, melodic and harmonic dictation, and error detection. Snodgrass covers these skills separately, but constantly emphasizes their close connections and interrelatedness. The chapter opens with an overview of the various performance methodologies—sight singing systems (fixed do, movable do, numbers, and letter names) and rhythm counting methods ("1 e and a," McHose/Tibbs, Takadimi, Kodály, and Gordon). She presents a clear overview of the pros and cons of the various solmization systems, concluding that "the population and goals of the students may dictate the system used because of the students' earlier training. However, it is important to understand why you have chosen a particular system beyond a reasoning of 'This is what I am most comfortable with' or 'This is how I was taught'" (194). Unlike the impartial presentation of solmization systems, the author's preference for counting method, based on her own teaching experience, is the Takadimi system; she describes the weaknesses more than the strengths of the other systems. While she states no preference for solmization method, all of the teaching examples in this chapter apply a movable-do approach (including Kodály hand symbols). The vast majority of the teaching examples are in the major mode, without addressing do-based minor vs. la-based minor.

Snodgrass addresses a variety of activities for responding to aural stimuli—melodic and harmonic dictation, error detection, and contextual listening. The suggestions for

assisting students with dictation are helpful, and based on the belief that "there is great importance in having students figure out the solfège and rhythms away from the paper" (209) for melodic dictation and teaching "true function with harmonic dictation" (211). Snodgrass acknowledges that error detection is "often missing from most aural skills texts" even though it is "perhaps one of the most valuable skills that should be taught and evaluated in an aural skills class," but she includes few suggestions for developing this skill (215). Her discussion and three sample assignments for contextual listening are very detailed, and provide multifaceted opportunities for the practical application of aural skills. Snodgrass provides three different classroom illustrations of improvisation activities, offering excellent approaches.

The book concludes with two chapters containing advice of a broader nature—Chapter 10, "Taking the First Steps into Academia," and Chapter 11, "What the Effective Music Theory Instructors Do." Chapter 10 treats beneficial habits students should develop in graduate school, followed by advice for pursuing positions in academia, including issues often encountered in a first job. Because of the numerous types of graduate programs (and graduate students) and the many types of teaching positions, the advice, while very good, is general, and most appropriate for the undergraduate or beginning graduate student. The final chapter returns to the issues raised in the first chapter and provides a brief summary of the main points presented throughout the book.

The field of music theory pedagogy has progressed significantly since my first exposure to teaching in 1978, when the introductory graduate assistant meeting consisted of receiving the textbook, the previous year's syllabus, and detailed instructions for operating the mimeograph machine. We in the field no longer accept "that expertise and recognition in one's field automatically equate with excellent teaching" or the "notion that nurturing the minds and abilities of young musicians is somehow separate from, secondary to, and less challenging than the pursuit of musical scholarship."[7] Jennifer Snodgrass presents a truly significant contribution to the field, one that every music theory pedagogy class, both graduate and undergraduate, should seriously consider as a primary textbook.

7 Payne (1987, 204).

Works Cited

Bain, Ken. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Payne, Dorothy. 1987. Review of *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory*, by Michael R. Rogers. *Music Theory Spectrum* 9: 200–4.