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Striking the Right Chord (or applying first aid to the wrong one) in the Day of a Theory Teacher

Dorothy Payne

As a grateful and deeply honored recipient of the third Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Lifetime Teaching award, I am pleased to have been asked to contribute to this issue of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. I should also express my gratitude to the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy and the School of Music faculty and students for their warm and gracious hospitality during my three-day September residency as a visiting lecturer. It was indeed a rewarding experience in every way and has greatly increased my already considerable admiration for the Center's pioneering work. The above title was suggested by the Director of the Center for my September 20th lecture at the University, and since I rather fancied it, I am revisiting it for this article.

My approach will be informal, very personal, somewhat eclectic, and will draw upon the wisdom of others with whom I have crossed paths. I wish to pay tribute here to two musician / teachers who have been very influential in my life. One is Michael Rogers, a former faculty member at Oklahoma, whose book *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory* (Southern Illinois Press, now in its second edition) is a veritable treasure trove of pedagogical and philosophical truths, meaningful for any teacher of any subject. The other is the late Janet McGaughey who was my esteemed colleague at the University of Texas for several years. Janet, a musical giant if ever there was one, was at one and the same time homespun and sophisticated, brilliant and humble, energetic and contemplative, and possessed of truly amazing aural acuity. It was a joy and a privilege to be her colleague.

I suspect and hope that some of my own homespun observations, references, and suggestions will resonate with those of others whose views are represented by readers of, and contributors to, the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. My remarks are made within the context of a long-standing and passionately held belief that the so-called "music theory" courses found in the basic music major curriculum (embraced by some, dreaded by others, but inevitably inflicted upon

all) represent the most important training an aspiring musician will ever receive. This assumes, of course, that the teaching consistently relates the material presented to the music itself, which inspired the student to pursue his or her craft in the first place.

Clearly the course designation of “music theory” is a misnomer in terms of what goes on in the lower division classes. The term “musicianship” comes somewhat closer to describing the goal we seek. There is nothing “theoretical” or indeed “creative” about mastering scales, intervals, chords, and key signatures. At the same time, these fundamentals must be firmly ingrained before the creative and exciting process of becoming an enlightened musician can begin. Music literacy requires both skill and knowledge. Whereas skill allows a musician to perform with facility, knowledge makes it possible to perform with insight.

Beginning on a somewhat irreverent pedagogical note, I wish to share with you an excerpt from a speech by one of my all-time heroes, the late, great Robert Shaw. I was fortunate enough to secure a copy of an unpublished speech presented at a 1955 meeting of the Music Teachers National Association in St. Louis. This remarkable and eminently lovable musician was also blessed with an impish sense of humor. In alluding to an earlier speech delivered to the Music Educators National Conference, also in St. Louis, Shaw offers the following observations:

There are differences between the present occasion and that earlier one. The first is the difference of auspices. That one was in conjunction with a conference of music educators, and this one I understand is with a convention of music teachers. On the flight out I was trying to figure the difference between the two, but since arriving, I have noticed the agendas abound in “critical-analytical orientations” and “diagnostic and therapeutic implications,” and it has rather knocked my theories into a mortar board.

I figured that a teacher was one who taught that which he knew, while an educator was a person who was so well qualified that he could teach anything, even that which he didn't know. Education, in essence, is the science of getting there first – without necessarily anything at all. The reason education is necessary is because some people

just don't want to learn anything. A person who wants to know something can be "taught," but a child who doesn't want to know anything at all has to be "educated."¹

The question of what should be considered essential in an undergraduate theory curriculum continues to be a challenging one, particularly since the arrival of CMP on the scene with its exciting and sometimes daunting breadth. It brings to mind a memorable presentation at an NASM meeting in 1987. Many of you will know the name of Donald Harris, a composer who, immediately before his retirement, was Dean of Fine Arts at Ohio State University. Don's presentation, entitled "Predicting the Future," postulates a fictitious NASM meeting that might have been held in 1787 (200 years earlier). The deans of music schools who were attending the meeting would likely have been in their fifties, and would have not only experienced the improvisation of the great J. S. Bach at the Thomaskirche, but also the premiere of *Don Giovanni* in 1787. As they met to discuss issues relative to their programs and curricula, questions would undoubtedly have been raised about the problem of putting clarinet teachers on tenure tracks, since no one had any assurance that this instrument would stand the test of time; what should we do with students demanding to be taught the piano, when we had so many tenured but under-subscribed harpsichord teachers on the faculty; how might we solve the unending problems of equal temperament; and should we be teaching our students to write fugues and cantatas, or symphonies and sonatas. Harris (a student of Nadia Boulanger), alluding to the clear analogies to be drawn, suggests: *La plus ca change, la plus c'est la meme chose* ("The more things change, the more they stay the same."). He then concludes by observing that rather than trying to predict the future (which we of course cannot), "we should rather fulfill our responsibilities as educators to provide a willing, receptive, and comfortable climate for learning, one that is neither prescriptive nor preemptive. Far more important than predictions of what will take place in the future is the simple fact that we need to provide forums for the free investigation of creative thought, the very nature of which is unpredictable."²

¹ Robert Shaw, unpublished lecture presented at the MTNA meeting in St. Louis, February 14, 1955.

² Donald Harris, *Proceedings of the 64th Annual Meeting of NASM*, pp. 30-35

I commend to your attention the thoughtful article by Robert Gauldin, found in volume 17 (2003) of *JMTP*. Not only was Bob my predecessor as recipient of the de Stwolinski Prize, but he also served as departmental chair during my ten years as a member of the Eastman theory faculty. His article, entitled “Some Personal Reflections On Past Methods of Teaching And What They Can Tell Us About Current And Future Initiatives,” traces pedagogical practices in music theory during the last half-century, as well as providing observations and commentary on current directions in the field. As a master teacher himself, Gauldin reinforces my conviction that one should never take the mastery of fundamentals for granted. Freshly-minted teaching assistants are often lulled into thinking that fundamentals are easy to teach—after all, they are so basic—while young students are inclined to take them less seriously because they can be—well, boring. Also, young musicians’ priorities usually center around time spent in the piano practice room or the voice studio, preparing for that future national competition or Met audition. This being the case, I have chosen to share a few favorite teaching techniques as well as some observations.

As an example, I routinely conduct a speed drill on key signatures during the first class meeting of a freshman or sophomore course. I set a tempo in four-four time, give them a key on beat 1, a free beat, and they respond on beats 3 & 4 (with varying degrees of unanimity). For example: “F# – beat – six sharps; B – beat – 5 sharps, etc.” When I switch to minor keys, one hears a low groan throughout the room and a concomitant drop in unanimity of responses. Since this is a group activity, it usually does not traumatize the students, but it does alert them to the fact that they won’t have five minutes to figure out these things when dealing with “real” music. By the way, you are probably aware that there is a dangerous myth out there that as long as you can do everything in C major, you are fine. The same myth suggests that minor scales are much harder than major scales. I urge you to get into the habit (if you are not already doing that) of shunning C major whenever possible, and trying to revel in the idiosyncrasies of the minor mode every chance you get. The same type of speed drill is helpful with isolated triads of various types, especially spelling them from the fifth down, or using inversions to avoid always building from the root. Seventh chords of course create a whole new set of challenges. The philosophy here is to take your students off of “automatic pilot” by adding a level of difficulty to what is otherwise a routine and somewhat mechanical exercise,

thereby forcing the brain (we hope) to get into the act.

Remarkably enough, one common (and vexing) mistake made by students in taking dictation is that of confusing scale degrees 1-2-3 with 1-3-5. I suspect some of you have encountered that phenomenon; I surely don't want to think it is a musical malady confined to South Carolina. I have made use of a little exercise involving "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (or "God Save the Queen"). The students are asked to sing the tune with scale degree numbers (or solfège syllables) but with the following caveat: they are to sing aloud *only* scale degrees 1-3-5 when they occur, while silently audiating the others. The teacher provides appropriate harmony but without playing the melody notes themselves. It can be a challenging exercise, especially when the situation is reversed and students sing only the "other" notes, *omitting* 1-3-5.

I confess to being most interested in the early development of music literacy, and especially ear-training skills. Although I am not an official card-carrying Dalcrozian, I have adopted a number of ideas from Emile Jacques Dalcroze whose work in this area was seminal. The above exercise, for example, reflects some of the principles touted by Dalcroze. At the time he taught at the Geneva Conservatory, the only students admitted were those with perfect pitch and extraordinary performance abilities. The Dalcroze method is in some ways an earlier manifestation of the thrust toward comprehensive musicianship. CMP courses have sought to synthesize and relate experiences in composition, performance, analytical listening, and theory. Dalcroze saw the weakness in separation of musical studies as do we. He planned for the development of a kind of musicianship that included not only accurate performance of the musical score, but a sensitive expression of all the interpretive elements of the music: dynamics, phrasing, nuances, and shading. Improvisation constitutes an important part of the training as well. Eurhythmics, the only entirely new subject in the Dalcroze method, has always been associated with the name of Dalcroze and is frequently considered as the sole area of study in his method.³

Dalcroze stated that "Education does not consist of creating faculties which the pupil does not possess, but rather enabling him to obtain the utmost possible benefit from those he does possess."

³ Beth Landis and Polly Carder, *The Eclectic Curriculum in Music Education: Contributions of Dalcroze, Kodaly, and Orff* (Music Educators National Conference, 1972), 8.

The method is designed to develop the ability (1) to act rapidly, as well as refrain from acting too rapidly; to act slowly, as well as refrain from acting too slowly; to pick up a habit fast, and drop it again with equal rapidity; to make a rapid response to a question; and to concentrate at length.⁴

A simple exercise might involve the following activity. The teacher performs a 4/4 measure of music; in the next measure the students imitate the rhythmic pattern by clapping. A second measure with different rhythm is played, then clapped by students, followed by three or four different patterns. Then the teacher initiates a rhythmic canon, i.e., as the students are clapping a given measure, the teacher is playing the following measure (perhaps the same, perhaps different) so that the student is always clapping a measure and listening simultaneously to the measure that lies ahead. If space permits, having the students “walk” the rhythmic patterns is challenging and usually fun.

Another typical “Dalcrozian” exercise might involve the folk song “Frere Jacques.” After having students sing it through with scale degree numbers or solfège syllables, divide the group in half. Have group #1 sing the odd-numbered measures in C major, while the even-numbered measures will be sung in C minor. Next: have group #1 sing odd-numbered measures in C while group #2 sings even-numbered measures in the key of E-flat major! This provides some interesting challenges (and it is fair to trade off keys between the two groups). Now have both groups sing the piece through together in the keys of C and E-flat simultaneously. You might even live dangerously and divide into three groups, the added group performing in G major (or perhaps a more exotic key). Finally try “passing the tune” around by having each class member sing a quarter note beat; a rest or extended note gets a clap. This challenging exercise helps develop the critical ability to provide a rapid response.

The above exercises involve a kinesthetic awareness of the process, an important component of the Dalcroze method. Edwin Gordon refers to the critical importance of this physical involvement in the learning activity and its effect on rhythmic and musical understanding as he states:

⁴Marie-Laure Bachmann, *Dalcroze Today* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 87.

The theory of music is to a practical musician what the theory of electricity is to a competent electrician. Neither the musician nor the electrician necessarily needs to know or use the information that theory provides. Without theoretical understanding, one could still intelligently read, write, and listen to music. It seems odd, therefore, that some music educators stress the theory of music at an early stage of students' musical achievement...theoretical understanding is NOT a readiness for music reading, as some music educators believe. Indeed it is pernicious for a student to engage in the discipline of music theory without first demonstrating aural/oral understanding. Such an activity can only result in the solving of music crossword puzzles and the excessive memorization of rules.⁵

A comparable philosophy was articulated by William Schuman in his introduction to *The Juilliard Report* published in 1953 during his presidency there. He states:

During the years that I taught at Sarah Lawrence College, I learned very quickly that for education to be meaningful, the student has to undergo an emotionally valid experience. While I am not qualified to know whether such a statement applies to other fields, in music the absence of a "felt" reaction means that the composition, even if its techniques were understood, did not "register" with the student...this should not be construed to mean that the study of music can be a non-intellectual pursuit – an emotional bath – but rather that "feeling" includes the sensed application of all intellectual data to the living organism of the art.⁶

Having been trained as a pianist, I feel strongly about the importance of basic piano skills as a critically important foundation for the study of musicianship. With very few notable exceptions, one finds that the traditional keyboard harmony component of the undergraduate musicianship core has significantly dwindled during the last few decades, and in some cases, disappeared

⁵ Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1993), 101

⁶ William Schuman, *The Juilliard Report* (New York, 1953), Introduction

altogether. It may well be an inevitable casualty of the broadening of subject matter that came along with comprehensive musicianship, in which the prescribed breadth of coverage made concomitant skill development virtually impossible. Having begun my teaching career more than thirty years ago, I am keenly aware of the depth of learning and musical literacy which has somehow been diminished along the way. I will add parenthetically that during those years one could reasonably assume at least a passing acquaintance with, say, the Beethoven Fifth Symphony. That is no longer the case, a fact that exacerbates the problem of helping the student relate the course content to milestones of music literature.

In years past, there were varying mechanisms for incorporating keyboard harmony into the curriculum. In larger and/or more specialized institutions, there was an independent keyboard harmony course. In other cases, the teaching of keyboard harmony was left up to the class piano instructor and often failed to complement the work taking place in the theory classroom. Those institutions having an integrated core combining harmony, analysis, ear training and sight singing, might schedule a ten-minute keyboard "audition" with a graduate assistant once a week. The exercise to be performed would ideally reflect material being dealt with in the regular class meetings.

I am reminded of a particularly challenging assignment devised by the coordinator of sophomore theory classes, while I was serving as a graduate teaching assistant. The acceptable literature for study at that time, and at that particular institution, was limited to the chorales of J. S. Bach (not atypical of many music programs during the first half of the century), and the topic at hand was "the suspension." The assignment was memorable, not only because of the howls of protest which it elicited from the students, but also because of the quantum leap in written and aural skills which took place immediately after its completion. The students, including "non-pianists," were asked to perform at the keyboard the first phrase of the chorale *Danket dem Herren, denn er ist sehr freundlich*; which is a veritable treasure trove of suspension usage; and be prepared to play the work not only in its original key of a minor, but also in the keys of g minor and b minor.

I mention the foregoing example without in any way suggesting that it would be appropriate (or even possible) for today's typical sophomore theory classes, but merely to cite one example of the background study and prior experience that some of us took for

granted. It must of course be noted that many of today's entering students bring with them different kinds of skills and experiences, and have often developed keen listening abilities, although perhaps not in the more traditional sense. It is important for us, as teachers, to acknowledge and respect their accomplishments, while at the same time seeking to inculcate them with what we believe to be enduring musical truths.

I have alluded briefly to the study of improvisation as an important tenet of the Dalcroze method. While it is expected that our students will gain experience with both improvisation and composition in the course of their baccalaureate study, there is something that causes some of us to feel uneasy about taking on this challenge. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is our tendency to associate the term exclusively with jazz. We need to keep in mind, however, that our jazz majors often develop their improvisatory skills by painstakingly transcribing recorded improvisations by renowned jazz artists and using these as a springboard for their own creative efforts. This technique is also a time-honored tradition among those engaged in more classically oriented improvisation. Gerre Hancock, former organist at St. Thomas Church in New York, and renowned as a masterful improviser as well as a virtuoso performer, has written a book titled *Improvising: How to Master the Art*. He discusses the importance of studying model pieces by favorite composers, writing out a personal adaptation in both musical and nonmusical outlines, and then practicing, at the keyboard, what you have written down. Hancock goes on to say: "In the end, improvisation cannot really be taught but only suggested. The musician becomes his or her own teacher."⁷

Improvisation skills as an aid to memorization, along with other topics, are presented in *Mapping Music: For Faster Learning and Secure Memory*, by Rebecca Shockley. The techniques described in her book and frequently featured at workshops here and abroad reflect the above philosophy and have proved particularly effective in strengthening confidence in performance.⁸

Whatever the subject matter may be, one essential quality that

⁷ Gerre Hancock, *Improvising: How to Master the Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), viii.

⁸ Rebecca Shockley, *Mapping Music: For Faster learning and Secure Memory* (Madison, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, Inc. 1997).

seems to characterize successful teachers of almost anything is that of “prizing the student.” Obviously this was the approach for Gail Boyd de Stwolinski (or “Dr. De” as she was referred to following the completion of her PhD). Carl Rogers, in his book *A Way of Being*, describes such an involved teacher as:

One who can accept students’ occasional apathy, their erratic desire to explore by roads of knowledge, as well as their disciplined efforts to achieve major goals. When the teacher has the ability to understand each student’s reactions from the inside, then the likelihood that significant learning will take place is increased. This kind of understanding is sharply different from the usual evaluative understanding, which follows the pattern of, “I understand what is wrong with you.” When the student does not feel as if he/she is being analyzed or judged, successful learning is much more likely to take place.⁹

Along with these observations which have guided my own teaching philosophy, I would also offer this caveat: a teacher should always try to teach to his or her strengths and in a style of presentation that feels comfortable. While it may be tempting to try and replicate the teaching techniques of a master teacher you have observed, you may be less effective in the classroom or studio than you would, were you to select or devise particular techniques and approaches that resonate within you and cause your own creative juices to flow. That does not mean that you cannot benefit greatly from adopting ideas from some of the fine teachers that are in the field today, but just to suggest that the more comfortable you are, the richer the experience will be for your students.

Insofar as possible, it is essential that we take each student from where he/she is at the time, and move forward from that stage to allow the student to develop his/her abilities to the fullest, realizing of course that all will not necessarily achieve that same level of accomplishment. Often, however, it is those students who have struggled with a subject who, upon achieving success, are better qualified to teach it to others because of having overcome their own challenges.

⁹ Carl Rogers, *Away of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), 272.

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We also need to remind students of the critical role played by the arts in developing the whole person, one who is prepared to make a significant contribution to society, whether or not he/she chooses (or is qualified) to pursue music as a profession. We should model a willingness to take chances with new ideas and approaches and (perhaps most important) maintain a sense of humor, determining not to take ourselves too seriously.

I would like to close with remarks by the late Robert Trotter, a seminal figure in the CMP movement and revered pedagogue, who said:

I try to develop in myself and my students “indispensable musicianship.” This phrase means to me: developing modest competence in performance, composition, and perceptive listening, along with a desire and ability to relate all three to each other and to all of life. If we aim at developing indispensable musicianship in ourselves and our students, we can make it; to aim at less is to be irresponsible, bored and boring.¹⁰

¹⁰ Transcript of informal spoken comments at a meeting of students and faculty during a workshop held at the Eastman School, June, 1969