

Reviews

Mary Natvig, ed., *Teaching Music History*
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Reviewed by Jennifer Shaw

Robert Fink opens his contribution to this timely collection of essays with the provocative question, 'How do you teach music history after the end of history?'¹ A little further into his discussion of how, at the Eastman School of Music in the 1990s, he structured a 'Music in Twentieth-Century History' course, Fink explains (p. 47):

The first part of the class took shape as a series of increasingly radical jumps between modernist positions on art as a cultural practice (symbolism, expressionism, fauvism, high modernism, etc.) considered in loose chronological order at the rate of one a week ... Some positions could be seen to 'evolve' out of others, but more often the ideology of a given week flatly contradicted the one I had laid out with painstaking care the week before: Expressionism's spiritual abstraction condescended to Cubism's materialism; the New Objectivity then trashed Expressionism as old-fashioned bourgeois subjectivity; finally Socialist Realism sent the whole crew (except Copland and Shostakovich) packing. (I knew the strategy was working when a puzzled student exclaimed about five weeks in, 'You don't believe in *any* of this, do you?' That is the sound of a master narrative collapsing.)

At this point the reader new to tertiary music teaching who had hoped to pick up a few helpful hints from Fink's essay, or from one of the other fifteen in this collection, is bound to realise not only that the task of teaching will be a challenge, but that the subject matter itself may prove elusive: after all, how, as teachers and as students, do we define what is (and isn't) 'music history?' In fact, although there are certainly many useful ideas, clever teaching strategies, loved pieces, suggested texts and course outlines discussed by the contributors, the collection amounts to much more than just a 'how-to' manual for those new to teaching music history or a checklist for the more experienced.

¹ Robert Fink, 'Teaching Music History (After the End of History): "History Games" for the Twentieth-Century Survey,' 43.

With considerable web space dedicated to reviews of it, study days based on it and courses in teaching music history that have used it as a primary text, the collection's appearance—at least in North America—has made quite an impact. Indeed, given that it is by no means the first time that such a subject has been tackled by means of similarly themed, multi-authored essays, the question we might ask is what makes this collection so attractive?² If we consider the collection itself as an historical document, then we can appreciate its role as an important record of *fin-de-siècle* attitudes to teaching, to students, to ourselves as teachers and to the nature of what we attempt to teach.

So, according to this particular historical document, what might the scholar of the not-too-distant future (but long 'after the end of history') understand these early twenty-first-century teachers to mean by 'music history,' and how might 'Future Scholar' imagine that they taught it? Despite the publication of the essays in a small island off the coast of Europe, Future Scholar might well assume that all music history was taught in North America exclusively by North Americans. She or he might be bemused by the fact that what counted as 'music history' did not seem to include 'music theory' (even though it was rumoured that rogue nations had combined study of these fields) and that these intelligent, highly educated bearers of knowledge worshipped what was then known as 'Western Art Music,' to the exclusion of all other (especially 'popular' and 'non-Western') musics. Future Scholar would, no doubt, admire the ways in which those teachers, faced with too little time and too much course content and assessed by means of mysterious 'teaching evaluation forms' had devised ingenious strategies to transmit this knowledge to their students—all, astonishingly, with the assistance of very little apparent computer technology. Although, from this document alone, Future Scholar would have a hard time reconstructing any images of 'typical music students,' such students nevertheless all seem to have massed in North America for the purposes of their music education. Despite what must have been diverse ethnic origins, family backgrounds and familiarity with the 'Western Art Music' repertoire to which they were then exposed, they appear to have acquired, with relative ease, the ability to transform into a remarkably uniform English-language reading, writing and speaking community of Music Majors and Liberal Arts Non-Majors.

Editor Mary Natvig makes no apologies for this stance, and, indeed, (to return to the present) for the teacher or student who wishes to make use of this collection in practice, the book's deliberately narrow geographical, cultural and topical foci could be construed as its greatest strengths. Like Fink, each author cuts straight to the crisis or problem or success story in his or her recent teaching experiences. While the contributing authors convey only general impressions of the students they teach and the variety of institutions in which they work, most readers will form a strong sense of each author's personality and teaching passions. And this history is personal: mistakes are enumerated, weaknesses exposed, remedies

² See, for instance, the forum on 'Musicology and Undergraduate Teaching' in *College Music Symposium* 28 (1988), essays on teaching music history courses by Mary DuPree, James Parakilas and Roger Rideout in *College Music Symposium* 30 (1990), and essays on teaching music theory by Howard Boatwright, Andrew Imbrie, Michael Rogers and A. Tillman Merritt in *College Music Symposium* 40 (2000). For an alternative perspective to the North American one expressed in these volumes, see articles by Peter W. Schatt, Berthold Urch, Ortwin Nimczik and Karl Heinrich Ehrenforth on teaching and understanding music history in *Musik und Bildung: Praxis Musikerziehung* 32.1 (2000).

suggested. We may not discover details of innovative learning strategies from the brief essays in this collection, but, as teachers, we can certainly take note of creative survival manoeuvres.

Natvig has chosen to order the essays in four sections: 'Approaches to the Music History Survey,' 'Teaching Non-Majors: The Introductory Course,' 'Topics Courses,' and 'General Issues.' Don't be put-off by these rather bland sub-headings. Most of those who have contributed to the collection are experienced teachers and scholars: they know how to communicate directly and with good humour. The first section contains useful essays by Patrick Macey on ways in which to contextualise 'early' music and by Kenneth Nott on bridging gaps in time and familiarity between Baroque music and 'Bright and Interested and Ignorant' undergraduate students. These are followed by Bob Fink's intelligently written and controversial contribution and (my personal favourite) a wonderfully eclectic article by Ralph P. Locke, ostensibly on teaching the Classical/Romantic music history survey course but really an excuse for Locke to list opportunities for viewing Chopin's music through 'windows' of folk, popular, and non-western musics (his is one of the only essays in the collection that attempts to foreground these areas). As Locke admits, some of his strategies are untested, but his enthusiasm is so palpable that I found myself wanting to adopt even the riskiest of his ideas.

Aspects of the introductory 'music appreciation' course (a rare beast in the Australian tertiary sector) are discussed in well-written essays by Maria Archetto, Marjorie Roth and Noël Bisson in the second section. Those familiar with Thomas Kelly's *First Nights* will find Bisson's account of the development of Kelly's famous Harvard course interesting.³ In the third section, devoted to essays on specific topics, Natvig outlines her preferred materials for teaching 'women in music' and her approaches to dealing with problems that may arise for individual students during the course: this chapter alone should be required reading for anyone teaching in this topic area for the first time. Michael Pisani's article on teaching film music contains references to many interesting archival and online sources, and Susan C. Cook's essay on the problems of having courses in American Music accepted as legitimate topics of study by universities and by mainstream professional organisations may resonate with those who have taught courses in Australian/popular/indigenous musics. Along with diversity of subject matter comes diversity of approach: in these first three sections of the book, some writers prefer evolutionary models of history while others opt for more fragmented approaches; some warn of introducing too much historical context at the expense of musical detail, while others argue in favour of contextual depth and breadth or advocate an approach that allows for the consideration of what Locke terms 'wide multiculturalism' (p. 26). This approach allows Locke in his chapter, for instance, to explore art music's role as 'functional' repertoire.

The six essays in the final section address a range of issues, from Mary Hunter's discussion of approaches to teaching music as cultural studies and Vincent Corrigan's cautionary tale of 'myths of music history' (including an entertaining discussion of Leonin, Perotin, Landini and *prosopopoeia*, or the fallacy of personification) to a final word by Russell E. Murray, Jr, on anthologies as repositories of repertoire and their part in the formation of musical canons. Like the collection itself, there has been no attempt to make the collection's single bibliography

³ Selected materials from Thomas Kelly's course have been published as *First Nights: Five Performance Premieres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

stand in place of an all-encompassing reference list, but what has been included is useful and, on the whole, accurately recorded, with full listings of all cited textbooks, articles, recordings and online sources—although it should be noted (as contributors have mentioned in online discussion lists) that some cited internet addresses are, already, no longer active.

The fact that I read Natvig's book at the beginning of the academic year but was unable to write this review until lectures and exams ended ten months later (with apologies to *Context's* patient editorial team), did, however, allow me to put some of the ideas expressed in its essays into practice and to assess their merits. In the end, essays in the collection's final section by Carol A. Hess, Pamela Starr and J. Peter Burkholder had a profound impact on my own teaching. All three authors consider issues of peer learning, or what Starr terms 'teaching in the centrifugal classroom': others writing and teaching in Australian tertiary institutions have termed this approach 'student-focussed learning.'⁴ In versions of this model the teacher may attempt to give students more control over their own assessments and assignments, or over other ways that provide students with opportunities to design how they understand, practise and apply important concepts. I read these three essays just days before writing my courses for the 2003 year and hastily restructured a couple of my seminars to take account of aspects common to the models discussed by these authors. For instance (and this is just one example of several I borrowed from their essays), I asked students to keep weekly research journals which I collected and marked several times each semester. The results were well worth the last-minute changes: most of the students loved writing in their journals and I looked forward to reading them. Many students also claimed that the weekly act of writing about music—not an activity that comes easily to many students, and especially not to students to whom English is a second language—also helped them to write about music in exams and gave them the confidence to come up with their own ideas in their research essays. Plagiarism (a topic not, to my surprise, addressed in Natvig's collection) became a non-issue (or, at least, not as readily detectable as in previous semesters). From my point of view, the journal component contributed to undergraduate classes in which I had few students miss exams or turn in late essays, where each student appeared to be improving, and where (in those all-important and ubiquitous teaching evaluations) course satisfaction scores were uniformly high; so, in other words, a winner for the students, for me, and for my institution's overtaxed musicology unit. Perhaps if I read the book again immediately before next semester begins, I'll be brave (foolhardy?) enough to try similar strategies, as Burkholder does, with large lecture groups.

Teaching, like learning, should be both a cumulative and a reflective process but, as Natvig's confessional comments reveal in her introduction, as teachers we don't always get it right. Sometimes we need encouragement and new ideas, whether, as many of the collection's authors acknowledge, in the guise of practical assistance from postgraduate teaching assistants and tutors, from our colleagues and from university teaching and learning centres, or in the form of these 'war stories'—where teachers and students alike appear to triumph over the system. With this book in hand, Future Scholar might end up with a skewed picture of our concept of 'music history,' but he or she would be sure that we used our best efforts to teach it.

⁴ See, for instance, the work of Australian-based academic Paul Ramsden, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 1992) and Ramsden and Noel J. Entwistle, *Understanding Student Learning* (London: C. Helm/New York: Nichols, 1982).