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AMERICAN HANDBOOKS OF MUSIC HISTORY:
BREADTH, DEPTH, AND THE CRITIQUE OF PEDAGOGY

The music history curricula taught in American colleges and universities create the requirements for textbooks and, conversely, long-established textbooks shape the curricula in many schools. Among the many factors that affect these texts, this paper will address only three: (1) the American tradition of covering all of music history or “breadth”, (2) the resulting problems of including meaningful consideration of “depth” in these courses and finally (3) a consideration of the “pedagogy movement” in American musicology and its possible effects on music history classes and their textbooks.

1. Breadth: The survey textbook

In the United States, teaching music history to undergraduate music majors is usually centered on a sequence of courses covering the entire history of music from the Ancient Greeks to today. This survey has been the cornerstone of undergraduate teaching since Donald Jay Grout’s seminal text, A History of Western Music published by Norton in 1947. Thus, the basic model of undergraduate music handbooks in America is a single-volume textbook that spans the entire range of music history, often with a set of supplemental scores and recordings. These textbooks tend to focus on a selection of masterworks that are representative of style periods of history (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, etc.) and important genres (opera, symphony, string quartet, etc.). From these books American students are taught there is something called ‘the Baroque Era’ which lasted from 1600 to the death of J. S. Bach in 1750 and all music written during this period share common

stylistic traits. Likewise, these handbooks tend to stress that there is something called ‘the symphony’ and that all works with this title share important common traits. As a result, many students assume that the music of Handel has more in common with Monteverdi than with Mozart, because Handel and Monteverdi are both in the “Baroque” era, while Mozart is in different style period, the “Classical”. In the same way, students are compelled to find connections between works by Stamitz and Mahler which both use the term ‘symphony’ in the title.

2. Depth: Context and methodology

Since the first edition of Grout’s text, the survey of music history has struggled to maintain its viability as a pedagogical model in American colleges, universities, and conservatories as the scholarship of music history continues to reveal new works, composers, styles, and genres. Music historians now study a wider range of popular musics from the past and present than Dr. Grout included (jazz, rock, pop, etc.) and the influences and importance of folk music both in Western countries and worldwide are seen as increasingly important. While style periods and genres allow courses to cover the entire breadth of music history for students who are just beginning their music studies, these approaches do not allow for the study of methodologies and concepts of the professors doing research in music history: music in society, ritual, patronage, development of instruments, philosophy, archival research, etc. In attempt to provide some depth into these topics most American music history books put add asides to the main text under such titles as “Source Readings” or “Further Study”. This creates disruptions to the main narrative text by the insertion of shaded boxes which add information outside the main narrative – excerpts from primary sources for music history such as personal letters, contracts, or theory treatises (see Fig. 1).
The role of comprehensive survey textbooks in American universities created the sense of an accepted canon of musical works in music history. Works in these textbooks and anthologies were privileged as being “central” or “important” and works omitted by these textbooks were seen as peripheral or marginal — especially works by women composers and gay-lesbian-queer composers, or works in popular styles and genres. Teaching from a comprehensive survey book came to be seen by some musicologists as essentially supporting a European-centric, white, male, hegemonic view of music history.

The 2015 meeting of the American Musicological Society included a session provocatively titled “The End of the Undergraduate History Survey?” Melanie Lowe of Vanderbilt University stated the clearest move away from the traditional, central importance of an undergraduate history survey. In the

Fig. 1 – Example of “Source Reading” within text from A History of Western Music, ed. by J. P. Burkholder, D. J. Grout, and C. V. Palisca, 9th ed. (New York, Norton, 2014, p. 448 f.). Used with permission of W. W. Norton.

printed version of her paper, Rethinking the Undergraduate Music History Sequence in the Information Age, Lowe argues: “We’ve long since let go of universalist agendas in our scholarship, and the same aversion to hegemonic frameworks is now informing our teaching. There is an ever-growing body of literature on music history pedagogy that engages questions of not just how to teach but what to teach”.4 Lowe describes the revised history curriculum for Vanderbilt students, which begins with a pair of first-year courses: Music as Global Culture and a writing seminar on a topic in Music in Western Culture. The only survey class is Music of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries and the final capstone class in history is a “research intensive and musicologically oriented” seminar on a topic from the common practice period.5 Lowe argues that this curriculum allows the Vanderbilt musicology faculty to ask two important questions: “First, what music-historical knowledge do our students need to succeed in a wide variety of careers in and around music in the twenty-first century? And second, what music-historical skills do they need to succeed in those various careers?”6 Clearly, a curriculum like Vanderbilt’s has no need for a comprehensive survey text. Nor does such a curriculum create a single canon of Western masterpieces for the students. If more schools adopt this model, the market for large comprehensive survey textbooks would surely decline and the nature of American music history handbooks would change to meet the needs of these new courses.

3. The critique of pedagogy

No matter what we teach (whether depth or breadth), it is closely related to how we teach, and the simple fact is that until recently American musicologists have given little thought to the pedagogy of teaching music history to undergraduates. The assumption has been that the person with a Ph.D. stands in front of the students and lectures to them. It has only been in the last few years that serious scholarship on music history pedagogy has appeared by American scholars including collected essays on teaching by Mary Natvig, James Briscoe, and James Davis; the first journal devoted to music history

5 Ibid., p. 68.
6 Ibid., p. 66.
pedagogy,\(^8\) and dissertations investigating critical aspects of music history teaching. And it is only recently that this growing body of scholarship has had an impact on the American musicological institutions.

The detailed work of the recent dissertations give a new direction to how we can consider teaching music history and the role of the music history handbook. Kristy Swift’s critical study of the Grout text included archival work on the papers of Grout, Palisca, and the publisher, as well as interviews with Burkholder and Palisca’s family.\(^9\) Scott Dirkse’s dissertation is not a study of textbooks, but an analysis of what he calls the ‘Pedagogy movement’ in American musicology; it nevertheless has implications for how pedagogical ideas can affect what and how we teach in the classroom.\(^10\) As more scholarly attention is focused on the pedagogy of music history, the result will be a deeper reflection on textbooks, their creators, and their role in teaching.

The reflective, scholarly study of the handbooks we use in our teaching and their role in what and how we teach are long over due. The critique of our music history textbooks now underway as part of the recent interest in pedagogy shows us that it is only by using the best methods of historical research on our own textbooks that we can begin to understand how they developed, how they are used, and how they can evolve in the future. What these discussions hold for the balancing of breadth and depth in our undergraduate teaching remains to be determined.

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