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SETTING PLACES AT THE TABLE

A recent survey by the National Endowment for the Arts found that only 2% of Americans listen to “Classical” music with regularity, and fewer practice or play art or historic music even once in a year. United States schools own one instrument for every 50 students.¹ Europeans probably listen rather more frequently, but a similar trend might concern Europe as well. At question perhaps is the radical explosion of technologies, learning habits at odds with traditional ones and especially disrupted sequences of learning, and challenges to a culture that ultimately deleterious if well-meaning persons and institutions hold static. And yet, a solution inherent to the 21st century is at hand, one that upon first consideration appears to spell doom. The rotating kaleidoscope of new technologies, repertoires, interpretation, and cultural values can become not an ultimate bewilderment, a nail in the coffin of art and historic music, but a powerful tool for revitalizing how it engages persons of all age groups and how it can broaden its understanding.

We have to set many places at a large table to achieve such an audience, and we have to keep them rotating. In a moment let me propose strategies that can avoid disarray over such continuous change. These places are set variously for new repertoires, gender, sexual considerations, societal forces, and economic tiers. These rotating places, shared, place into the discourse arguments on the statements of race and cultures in our listening. They cannot readily be partitioned, and they possess fluid boundaries. However, such multiplicity does not dismay our students and the audiences we address variously, and it need not dismay us. At times we might well invite the concerti of the Afro-Frenchman Joseph Boulogne, Le Chevalier de St. Georges when Haydn has previously dominated the conversation at table. Boulogne can as effectively teach concertante as an apparent but not direct successor to uses of the Concerto grosso and incipient Sonata form as can the young Haydn. Our iPod-shuffling postmodern students do not care who or what “masterpiece” presents such essential cultural signals in art music. One may revel in passing over Haydn’s accomplishment while centering on, and likewise reveling in Boulogne. We teachers thus can raise compelling questions of the Enlightenment and its rational meanings seen in Sonata form, of race, and heretofore of music peripheralized. Noam Chomsky rebukes the attitude that, “you just march the students through a canon of “great thoughts” that are

¹ http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/classical_music_sales_decline_is_classical_on_death_s_door.html.

picked out for everybody ... the effect of that is that students will end up knowing and understanding virtually nothing”.² I would argue that we project musical knowledge by encouraging ownership when such a rotation of places occurs at the table.

The table joining these places can and must be the historical imagination, recalling Leo Treitler,³ but that does not necessarily call for the music history survey standard to undergraduate teaching or even a strict chronology. To cite two compelling thinkers on transmitting musical knowledge, Caroline Bithell⁴ and Susan Cook⁵ call on Western music history to underpin today’s ways of knowing, at least in the West, but they insist on active reformulating our ways and means of transmission. A lock-step chronology needs not be exclusive when strategies of teaching by historically-oriented topics addressed for reaching out and relating to history, or of teaching the evolving genre can interact with and bolster the historical imagination. How, you may ask, can a teacher – shorthand for anyone seeking to transmit knowledge – how can a teacher count on a historical imagination for an underpinning when it has not been ingrained in the student beforehand? I am convinced that a good teacher can and must envelope the capacities of historical thinking as she addresses any music. The iPod’s generation are astounding in the kaleidoscope of perspectives and information streams that they coordinate. All the while, we ought to be judicious in the choices we present, continuously showing historic relationships always, the lines of genre, and reason and articulate why we rotate places to the head of the table.

Choices for those looking into the kaleidoscope are numerous but manageable. One begins to manage by selecting a fundamental text to read or series thereof that engages the student. Such readings are brought to fullest life by stimulating music references from a thoughtful diversity, establishing a pride of place for wide repertoires, psychologies, and the corroborating arts. In class, this is time-consuming and it places aside warhorses, but the “sacrifice” is far more than worth it. As one way of proceeding, the teacher can offer a

² N. CHOMSKY, *Understanding Power*, ed. by P. R. Mitchell and J. Schoeffel, New York, The New Press, 2002, p. 173. Chomsky’s criticism seems to derive from his view that education ought to train students to learn how to think for themselves, as opposed to learning what to read – a view which he attributes to Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

³ L. TREITLER, *Music and the Historical Imagination*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁴ C. BITHELL, “Praisesong to the Ancestors and the Post-New Nuclear Family”, in *The New (Ethno)musicologies*, ed. by H. Stobart, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 2008, pp. 76-82.

⁵ S. C. COOK, “Teaching Others, Others Teaching, or Music History Like It Mattered”, in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. by J. R. Briscoe, Missoula, MT, College Music Society, 2000, pp. 125-138.

touchstone composition representing key music historical principles, such as Ellen Zwilich's post-modernist First Symphony, and the teacher can compare the Zwilich to orchestral genres such as Adams's orchestral essay "Short Ride in a Fast Machine," proving performing excellence by viewing Marin Alsop's performance on YouTube with the BBC Symphony with half its basses and its powerful timpanist women.⁶ Quickly turn to Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic performing the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven, never heard in class. Ask for reactions. Recall the psychology of Beethoven, first studied in hearing his Third Symphony, and ask whether such "sleep chasings", to borrow Walt Whitman, seem to propel the contemporary symphony. One thus bridges tradition, genre, gender and performance, the development of tonality, the rhythmic and timbral impetus, and compositional ways of proceeding.

Caroline Bithell offered a "Praisesong to the Ancestors and the Post-New Nuclear Family".⁷ She is "happy ... to have shaken off the prejudices and complexes of certain of our more scholarly ancestors" and she shuns decades of musicology that scorned "bourgeois" and "cooked" commercial music. And yet, she warns of a radical proliferation of alteraties run amuck: "We're in danger of overcompensating ... of disappearing beneath a sea of discourse".⁸ Touchstone teaching, as I suggested, is one strategy, emphasizing a few guiding masterpieces that in turn can link a widened music and cultural neighborhood and can allow many places at the table without "alteraties run amuck".

Susan Cook writes: "History matters precisely because we can learn how we came to where we are".⁹ Thus, the table of musical places we set can respond to the narrative we carefully conceive for any condition at hand, for the student or scholar or layperson we address, for an intentional kaleidoscope of presentations. Such an attitude might let the other 98% discover art and historic music and see their lives mirrored and bettered.

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⁶ Herbert von Karajan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV6Lp7cnX7s>; Marin Alsop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCo6qcJaWiv>.

⁷ BITHELL, "Praisesong to the Ancestors and the Post-New Nuclear Family" cit.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 76 and 78 f.

⁹ COOK, "Teaching Others, Others Teaching" cit.