

Dr. James Ogburn: Teaching Philosophy

In the music theory classroom, I feel extremely grateful for the wealth of knowledge and inquiry accrued over centuries. Within today's milieu, I apply: 1) flexibility of viewpoints and approaches in recognition of the needs of a diverse group of students; 2) historical development of ideas as a tool for engagement; 3) generalized functional relationships (in Common Practice harmony), as opposed to rigid adherence to singular interpretations; 4) emphasis upon cultural relativism in an increasingly smaller world comprised of complementary musical traditions; 5) engagement with the Common Practice idiom as a means of "hearing closely," regardless of the focus or background of the individual student; and 6) music as a living art form, with the art music and theoretical methodology of the present and recent past complementing, not opposing, a rich musical legacy.

In serving different students' needs, I present as many viewpoints as possible. For instance, when teaching students to analyze and account for Secondary (or Applied) Dominants, I address the concept in three ways. First, I present the concept as a kind of "mini-modulation," placing emphasis upon the "borrowed function" of chromatically altered chords. Next, I focus upon the non-diatonic voice leading aspect, emphasizing the function of altered notes – i.e. raised notes are "temporary leading tones" in all but one case, lowered notes are "temporary fourth scale degrees." Finally, I re-contextualize Secondary Dominants as chromatically altered diatonic chords within the sequential progression. By presenting topics such as this from different angles, I reach a wide array of students. In addition, these multiple views reinforce several previously encountered materials: the defining functional relationship of dominant & tonic, the essential voice-leading principle of semitone resolutions within diatonic scales, essential harmonic progression based upon chord roots sequentially related by the perfect fifth, etc.

I believe it is also important to enhance concepts by referring to the historical narrative as much as possible, in order for the student to internalize principles. Without this context the material often reduces to meaningless data. For example, I find it excruciating that many textbooks require students to memorize the "Phrygian Half Cadence," without explaining its significance or convention. In my classes, I reserve discussion of this cadence for the third semester as related to "Augmented Sixth Chords." I proffer the following narrative: 1) in Renaissance polyphony, the cadence became normative in the Phrygian mode; 2) during the Baroque period, following Rameau and the new understanding of functional/ harmonic relationships, the norm was re-contextualized as a type of half cadence; 3) soon after this, composers added an intervening chromatic passing tone (#4) to "spice up" the trope; 4) later generations dropped the chord root for the subdominant altogether, elaborating upon the standard convention and, in so doing creating the $It+6$; and 5) composers continued to enrich the customary usage by adding other diatonic pitches to create the $Ger+6$ and $Fr+6$ chords. This story complements the mechanics of the concept through dramatization (for lack of a better word) of an otherwise sterile idea, providing reinforcement for its essential voice-leading structure.

Further, I contend that general principles serve the students better than rigid interpretations. For example in the distinction between the supertonic and subdominant chords, I do not feel compelled to impose my own view of the "correct" answer, as long as my students are consistent in their labeling – i.e. where scale degrees 2, 4, 6, are 8 are present within a single harmony preceding the dominant, the student must correctly identify a non-chord tone (or auxiliary) to account for the additional pitch (scale degree 2) if analyzed as IV. I believe firmly that function is primary and chord labels are derivative and, in this example both analyses identify the pre-dominant function. Therefore, I assess student work according to *identification of function*, where ambiguity or flexibility exists in Roman numeral ascription.

In addition, although music is archetypal in that all cultures in the world exhibit some form of music, the intricacies of each local system are individualized. These disparate traditions serve to complement each other and are in fact connected through one fundamental definition of music: artificially controlled sound. In Thailand, I have applied my (albeit novice) knowledge of Thai traditional music as corollary to Western music, whenever possible. Similarly, when teaching in the U.S., I have often related examples from popular and folk music to the Common Practice idiom.

Despite the need for inclusion of other traditions, I assert that Western music of the Common Practice remains the most highly articulated and thoroughly self-conscious musical tradition in human history.

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The basis for pedagogy in Western music spans more than two millennia and, as such, the breadth and depth of the material provides an outstanding source for development of musical acumen. It offers an excellent medium for “hearing closely.” In order to supply tomorrow’s musicians with the means to succeed in a highly competitive musical environment, I believe strongly that this tradition must remain at the heart of musical study regardless of the individual student’s focus.

Contemporary music is not opposed to this tradition. I believe the conditions of the past century have invigorated the ongoing development of a beautiful human activity and greatly enriched the palate for inquisitive composers and performers. For this reason, exposing students to the pluralistic trends of the past century is an essential component of their education. Countless novel approaches were conducted and, in my opinion these were not always thoroughly vetted. Composers today can explore the life work of the most radical and innovative creators of the recent past, synthesize these approaches with each other and with other traditions, and engage with their audiences using these tools. As long as the composer remains honest and has something meaningful and relevant to convey, the intelligent application of these developments is almost certain to inspire and delight. For performers, educators, and historians an understanding and appreciation for this epoch enriches and broadens their musical perspectives, helping to forge a new generation of outstanding musicians.

Today’s musician should also incorporate contemporary methods of analysis, in order to better understand Common Practice music and music of the past century. I emphasize rhythmic analysis, voice-leading (Schenkerian-derived) analysis, paradigmatic analysis, and set theory to unpack Western music from the Baroque to the present. I focus on these tools because they all translate to greater musicality for performers and composers. From the outset, in harmony and aural skills courses, I structure discussion around large-scale linear connections (i.e. voice-leading analysis), proximity, metric structure, and tonal tension as articulating phrasing (rhythmic analysis), syntactical relationships (paradigmatic analysis), and combinations of semitones/ complementary intervallic relationships (set theory). By applying these tools from the earliest stages, the student obtains ready accessibility in later discussions involving contemporary music.

As a final observation on theory pedagogy, I emphasize the rigorous application of representative examples from the canon as an aural and tactile experience. For this reason, I employ the piano during every lecture. If theoretical principles are left on paper, without reinforcement as an auditory experience, then I do not believe it is possible for students to internalize these principles. Although I believe this point is self-evident, I have not always observed a concerted effort to engage in this in the classroom. Still further, I believe it is necessary for the student to apply tactile learning skills to this end. For this, my students are required to sing, perform on their instruments, and internalize these concepts at the piano. By synthesizing these “learning styles” and applying the approaches mentioned above, it is my hope to provide students with skills they will retain and apply throughout their careers.

In teaching composition for a decade, I have often found students’ inflexibility concerning “voice” and “style” vexing. However, I believe it possible to influence their musical personalities according to three basic principles: 1) Musicality; 2) Notation technique; and 3) Historical precedent. By musicality, I mean to address that young composers often become fascinated with the appearance of a score, forgetting that music is an art of time and sound. They must learn to “breathe with” the performer and audience. Secondly, notation is crucial to clear communication with performers. Today’s composer must provide the correct balance of detailed attention and simple expression for his/ her musical ideas (i.e. simplest note-spelling, clear and logical coordination of articulation and phrasing, etc.). Finally, the precedent repertoire offers many perspectives for formal and structural possibilities, as well as demonstrative of notation. For this reason, my students are required to study scores and listen. In lessons, I ask students to reproduce the act of performing by singing, playing at the piano, or (for example) mimicking the act of drawing a bow. I ask them to breathe the phrases, in order to feel what they have written. I focus on the notation, based upon my experiences in collaboration with performers. I refer often to the canon.