

## Listening to History

# A phenomenon-based approach to teaching music-history

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**ABSTRACT.** Teaching history of music requires the teacher to mediate between musical experience and historical knowledge. In this paper, I present some ideas about how to work with this relation via the idea of human consciousness as developing through history. By taking Steiner's view of the third and its function in tonal harmony as an example of a change in mentality, I present some examples of how to work with the immediate experience of music as a way to experience history as something still alive within the students. In this way, the attempt is made to make knowledge of history more alive and based on experience.

*Keywords:* History of music, Steiner, listening.

### Introduction

In this paper, I present an approach to music history as an example of how it can be practiced according to Waldorf-education. I first present some background to the Waldorf school pedagogy. I then reflect on the relation between music and history in teaching history of music, and sketch a phenomenon-based approach with the ideal of creating a living relationship to history. This is followed by a brief discussion of the approach to history inherent to the Waldorf pedagogical philosophy. I then present an example of how I teach music history according to this approach, using the example of how the musical interval of the third was introduced into renaissance music, and how we attempt to work with this in the classroom. The last section discusses the kind of listening which is used in this methodology, and suggesting that it can be seen as a creative form of aesthetic listening.

### The Waldorf-school movement

The Waldorf-school movement originated in Germany in 1919 and began as a school for children of workers at the Waldorf-Astoria factory. The director of the factory Emil Molt asked Rudolf Steiner to be the pedagogical consultant of the school, a request which came after Molt and the factory-workers had attended a lecture by Steiner in which he spoke about the need for a more comprehensive and holistic education. (Uhrmacher, 1995, p. 383).

The pedagogical thinking is based on ideas originally given by Rudolf Steiner, and focuses on the idea that teaching needs to relate to the individual genius of each human being, and that the transmission of knowledge always should have such a perspective in mind (Leber, 1985). The schools were from the beginning coeducational, open to everyone independent of religion or gender and with the explicit aim of letting the teachers have the pedagogical decisions, with minimum interference from state or economic interests.

The developmental-psychological perspective which underlies the ideas for curriculum is based on Steiner's theory of knowledge and ideas from his Anthroposophy, and focuses on the pupil as a spiritual individual in becoming, where the formation of the body is seen as an important prerequisite for healthy learning and development (Schieren, 2012). Because of the epistemological fundament, which regards learning as an active process taking place in the relation between the faculty of thinking and perception, teaching is not primarily about accumulation of representations but seeks to stimulate the creative will-element inherent in the construction of knowledge (Schieren, 2012). It therefore seeks to take experience as the point of departure. This is also why the aesthetic subjects such as music, painting etc., as well as handicrafts, always had an important place within Waldorf curriculum (Leber, 1985, p. 25). Insofar as learning is seen as something which grows out of an *experiential* relationship to the material, a general approach to teaching within the Waldorf pedagogy can be termed phenomenon-based approach.<sup>1</sup>

In the following I want to present one such phenomenon-based approach to teaching music history to students at high-school, as it has developed out of my practice of teaching music-history at a Waldorf high-school.

## An experiential approach to music-history

Before we look into the question of methodology and ways of doing this, we have to discuss the condition of possibility for establishing an immanent relationship between musical experience and history. How is history accessible through experience of works from earlier epochs, and how can this tell us something about ourselves today?

The central idea which animates a pedagogical approach to history inspired by Rudolf Steiner lies on regarding history as the formation of the human self. According to Christoph Lindenberg, teaching history in the Waldorf schools has as an aim to give an understanding both of the present time, as well as the historical process which has brought us to this present (Lindenberg, 1985, p. 214). History is here seen as the biography of humanity, where spiritual expressions such as music are symptoms of an evolving and changing self-expressive consciousness. This view, which is strongly expressed in Rudolf Steiner's writings, is of course not an uncommon one. To regard history as a self-organizing self-expressing process, is something which we find in many thinkers and historians, like Hegel or Ernst Cassirer, Jean Gebser or William Irwin Thompson, with or without a metaphysical and supra-historical perspective attached to it.<sup>2</sup>

To look at history as the image of an evolving and changing consciousness opens the door to explore significant events in history as events we can revisit, looking for underlying impulses determining a change in consciousness. In an approach to history where cultural artifacts express an evolving consciousness the possibility for a deepening experience of the qualities of these expressions as direct symptoms of this evolution is in principle possible. Just like the child, the teenager and the adult all still live within the old person, the different stages in the formation of the human self all live as many layers of a still active and living

1. See (Dahlin, Hugo & Østergaard, 2008) for a discussion of phenomenon-based approach to teaching in Waldorf schools.

2. The view on history as the evolution of the spirit is of course the central idea in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In Rudolf Steiner's writings and lectures there is an elaborate metaphysical horizon to this idea of an evolution of consciousness. What is essential for the pedagogical point of view is the idea that a creative reciprocal relationship between human and world is determining of the different forms the subject-object dualism takes. Generally speaking, it is this configuration which changes during the ages and gives rise to the different modes of consciousness. The human biography, from the infant's consciousness totally immersed in its surroundings, via a gradual individualization to a potential mature re-integration, is often used as an image of the becoming of humanity as a whole.

past in the contemporary human being.<sup>3</sup> Changes in the experience of the self and the world have given rise to the varying ideas and cultural expressions through the ages, and when one revisits these expressions today, one can work towards re-actualizing them in such a way that one become conscious of what they have contributed to in the formation of human consciousness. To acquire such an expansion the aesthetic dimension of teaching is arguably an important element. Through aesthetic experience the students are engaged both emotionally and intellectually and become capable of connecting themselves with ideas and works of art that bring them in touch with the historical development. Through the aesthetic experience, they are experiencing footprints of history, and therefore the connection between the personal present and a cultural past can be established.

How would such an approach look like in music history? Insofar as music history naturally comprises both music and history, a natural question which emerges in relation to this approach is if it is possible not only to listen to music, and then reflect about history, but to let history show itself in and through the musical experience? This concerns the important question of how to work with the relation between music and history. The relation and reciprocal influence between of music and ideas and events in general culture is obviously a very interesting and important part of teaching the subject, and it can be done from various perspectives (sociological, technological, economic, to name a few), but what and how can we learn about music's role in history specifically through *listening*? It is possible through listening to come into contact with the form of consciousness which lies behind and is expressed within the music, and by deepening the experience of the musical elements enter deeper into those changes in mentality and consciousness which music history express?

A critical question which this approach needs to have in consciousness, is whether such an approach simply projects a modern form of experience back into the past. As the criticism of the so called authentic performance practice has objected, one cannot know how music sounded to people of different cultures and ages.<sup>4</sup> To this criticism can be said that even if there obviously is a difference between a renaissance person hearing renaissance music and a contemporary person hearing it, this does not necessarily compromise the idea of hearing a change in the music. We are not looking for the absolute identity between a past, say of 1500, and its contemporary repetition in the classroom, but the repetition of a *difference*. Even if this introduction of a new element in music will be experienced differently at the time of its emergence from today, one can still listen to this change in musical language.

Further, we can say that such a relativism of the identity of an aesthetic quality can only hold to a certain extent. There is what we could call a weak essentialism inherent in the approach I present here in that the quality of musical elements, for example a certain interval, is taken as relatively constant in terms of their experiential quality within a relatively large timeframe. This must not be misrepresented as a naïve belief in static qualities. It is by a focused concentration and deepening of a quality together with an informed approach to history that we become able to unearth some of its sense. It can also be claimed that only by holding such a weak essentialism is it possible to uphold a creative relationship to history which can claim to constitute knowledge, and not only be a construction dependent on the present.

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3. This is based on a completely different view on time from our everyday common sense attitude where the present is real and the past resides only in human imagination or as materially preserved arrangements. Expressed in philosophical terms we could compare it to Henri Bergson's idea of time. For Bergson all past exists in itself, i.e. not as materially preserved memory, but as the being of time, and the present is the tip of this cone of time. The experience of the present is the most concentrated state of the past; the present is pushed or grows out of the being of the past. To this picture belongs the idea that memory is fundamentally ontological, and not only individual and psychological – although the actualization of memory belongs to the psychological domain, the past resides in itself, independent of its actualization in the present. This is Bergson's theory of being as duration, where matter and perception belongs to a present which is constituted by a pure past, and not the other way around as we usually tend to think. Matter is the extensive expression of an intensive durational being. This idea, which has been renewed by Gilles Deleuze in his differential philosophy, can help us ground the ideas presented here also in philosophical work done independent of Steiner's anthroposophy. See Bergson, 2004; Deleuze, 1994. A comparison between Steiner's philosophical transformation of thinking into a higher consciousness and Deleuze's transcendental empiricism is done in Eftestøl, 2011.

4. A criticism of the idea of creating a historically authentic performance practice was raised among others by Richard Taruskin in his essay "The Modern Sound of Early Music" (Taruskin, 1995, p. 164)

With this approach to history one can take experience as point of departure. When we deepen the experience of a piece of music, we do so with the aim of deepening both our self-experience and our historical consciousness. We listen to music and focus on novelties such as new harmonic language, new uses of meter and rhythm, new types of form etc., and deepen the experience of this element. To this we ask questions such as; what does this musical element do with us and our experience, and how can this teach us something about history as a history of different mentalities and transformations of consciousness? The *ideal* in this kind of work, we could say, is that history becomes alive within the students, instead of music being a personal experience which they then relate to abstract knowledge about historical changes. In this way, we connect with history through aesthetic *experience*; it is on the basis of an experience that we try to develop a historical consciousness.

However, to do this a methodology is needed since there easily opens up a discontinuity between experience and reflective content. Listening to music is first and foremost an *actual* experience; it brings something alive in the listener, much more than it is a relationship to something as past, even if what listened to was written five hundred years ago. This participative dimension in the musical experience is also due to the nature of listening as sense-perception. In listening to music, one is not perceiving something out there - listening is not a kind of perception which represents and objectifies - but one participate in something which comes alive within. Therefore, one can say that in listening to music from the past, one listens to history at work as part of oneself, but naturally tend to forget this. Listening activates a living relationship to the past *as* present. Therefore, if this is to become a forceful way of entering into the historical forms of consciousness and actualize these here and now, the teacher needs to find ways of connecting the immediacy of the musical experience and the historical consciousness that one aims to develop out of it. How can one work with the personal experience in such a way that the ideas are experienced *immanent* in and through the musical experience? If one takes a piece of music as the point of departure for delving into history, the task of the teacher will be how to transform the naïve and immediate experience of music that the students have into a consciousness of how this musical experience can teach him or her something about the past.

### **A peak into the class-room: Listening to history**

I will now present an example of how I attempt to do this in my teaching of music history, and how a methodological approach can be developed. It is taken from lessons in which I attempt to give the students an experience of the transition from the middle-ages to the renaissance.

The aim is to let the students experience and get involved in some of the musical, aesthetic and cultural changes at the time of the renaissance. According to Steiner, a new level of self-consciousness began to develop in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and he sees this reflected in cultural and societal changes, such as humanism, experimentally and experientially based science and a concern for the earthly in art and philosophy. For many students, some of this is known, and they can expand a little on it when asked to do so.

In music history one is used to learn that the opera had its birth during this period, that instrumental music began to be composed to a greater extent than before, and that music began to express the content of texts expressive of human emotions. All these things are important, and we need to explore them in various ways in music history. However, perhaps more significant and telling than any of these things is that in the musical language at the time, the interval called the third is starting to be used as a harmonic interval (Goodall, 2013, pp. 34-41). The experience of the third becomes from now on the central element of music, and it is the introduction of this interval which opens and begins the development of harmony as we know it from European classical music. It is the third which makes possible the development of tonality, the musical language which dominated all of music from 1600 until 1900 in Europe. Just like the painters began to construct naturalistic landscapes with geometrically based perspective, musicians began to construct music based on the third; they began to stack thirds on top of each other to create what eventually became tonal harmony.

This change in musical language was brought in relation to a gradual transformation of the sense of self or inwardness of which it corresponds to by Rudolf Steiner in his lectures on music (Steiner, 1989, p. 125). Thus, if one can get a feeling for the change in musical language which occurs when the third is introduced, and deepen this feeling by listening to the quality of the intervals, then it should be possible to use this experience as the basis for thematizing the idea of music as an expression of different forms of consciousness belonging to different cultural and historical epochs.

Thus, a musical quality occurs in a new constellation - the third as the basis for a new harmonic language - which can be taken as representative of the renaissance. This change represents something radically new in music, and one can therefore take it as a symptom for a greater transformation in history. If the renaissance was the beginning of a new consciousness then it can be argued that within music the new harmony based on the third expresses a new sentiment which corresponds to this change in consciousness.

Of course, the third, and tonal harmony based on it, is the bread and butter of contemporary musical experience – modern western listeners are so used to it that they don't hear it any more so to speak. Therefore, it is necessary to get a distance to the immediate experience in order to hear it anew. To do this in my teaching we listen to the quality of the third and compare it to the sentiment inherent in the consonant intervals of mediaeval music, i.e. the fourth, the fifth and the octave. In this way, I try to make the different feeling qualities of the different intervals more conscious. This process of becoming more conscious is something which is developed gradually. In the classroom, we often begin by listening to examples corresponding to medieval and renaissance music. I then ask the students to reflect on their own experience: What are the general impressions, how do they experience the different kinds of music? We go on to examine the architecture of the music in some detail, asking what the characteristics of the music are, what elements are prevalent, and what is missing compared to that which they are used to hear. In this process, we listen and compare the use of metre, instruments, texture and harmony. When we come to the harmonic language we begin by noticing the general impression and try to characterize them. When we dwell in this and attempt to hear the difference between the music of the Middle Ages and the renaissance, the difference which the third makes is by most students clearly recognized. After this difference is brought into focus, I make clear that it is a general trait which distinguishes mediaeval from renaissance music. Having spotted this phenomenon, the next step is to disregard the other elements of the music and examine our experience of the intervals themselves.

To do this I isolate the intervals, and compare the feeling experience of the fourth and fifth with that of the third. I play the intervals on a piano and ask the students to characterize their feeling experience of the quality of these intervals. In asking about the qualities in the way that I propose here, I stress that there are no right or wrong answers, only different verbalizations of a quality which we try to approach. This means that the words, although very important tools in the process, are only there to point to a feeling experience which we want to bring to consciousness and strengthen. The question here is not if the students are able to recognize the intervals as third or fifth, since what we listen for is the particular quality of sentiment which they express. It is the feelings that they produce in each pupil that I am interested in. This process can of course be done in many ways. I have done it in front of the class as a whole, but one can imagine this to be individual reflections written down, or group-work where the students exchange their own feelings with each other.

After having presented this in a number of classes my impression is that the students agree to descriptions of the third as being more inward, warmer, feeling, closer to oneself and, if related to the body, to a greater degree connected to the heart and torso than that of the fourth and fifth. The fourth and fifth, which are the intervals used in mediaeval music, are described as more open, cooler, and are bodily felt to be more expanding and going beyond one's own limits. These characteristics of a feeling quality are obviously not done in order to pin down the meaning of the intervals, as if they mean something external to themselves, but in order to enhance the feeling inherent to the intervals by focusing and concentrating on them.

When we have deepened our experience of this musical element we then go back to the music and listen to how the middle-ages sounded and what revolution took place in the human sentiment when the third

became part of its musical consciousness. Among the examples that I have used for showing some of the first occurrences of the third is the *Quam pulchra es* by John Dunstable (1390-1453) and the *Incarnatus est* movement from *Pange lingua* by Josquin Desprez (1450-1521). In this last piece, an indication for the idea that I have tried to establish above can be found in the relation between the music and text itself. The third is here introduced as part of a harmonic vertical texture at the same time as the text (written by Thomas Aquinas) speaks about the incarnation of Christ on earth through virgin Mary. Before and after this part the texture is dominated by a more polyphonic style in the medieval idiom, and the text here speaks of the spirit and the resurrection. This suggests that Desprez deliberately has used the third as expressive of a more earthly and human sentiment, as opposed to the more complex polyphonic writing of the medieval idiom. A homophonic writing based on the triad follows the text in expressing the becoming human of God through Mary giving birth to Jesus.

After having gone through such a process where we have deepened our experience of the music we can use this as background for further discussions on the relation between music and history. At this point I also introduce the idea of looking at the human self as a process of formation in and through history, and the musical changes as symptoms of this process. In class discussion, we can use the experience of the difference between mediaeval and renaissance music as background for the discussion of what it means to develop a self-consciousness and how music both affects us in creating our identity, as well as how it reflects that mode of consciousness which we live within. For the students, this is a topic which might help them bring history and historical transformations more into their consciousness, and which help them relate music which might be unfamiliar to what they are used to listen to.

The example which I have presented here could have been added with many others which also can be seen as reflecting a changing consciousness through the ages. In passing could be mentioned the sonata-form as a reflection of the consciousness of development and self-determination through conflict, as it occurs within the time of the enlightenment with its idea of individual rights and self-determination. A significant intensification of the consciousness of development and evolution can be seen as expressed in the romantic excessive harmony, for example in Wagner, related also to themes such as homelessness and longing.<sup>5</sup> The atonal modern and contemporary music after Schönberg, which searches for a deeper relationship to sound itself, can be interpreted as expressive of a consciousness which is drawn beyond the individualized human self into cosmic supra- and sub-human forces.<sup>6</sup>

## The kind of listening we attempt to use in this approach

This is an approach to teaching music-history which takes its point of departure from experience and tries to get a feeling for a change in consciousness which belongs to the music from the different ages. Instead of beginning with the past understood as representations of what happened, we begin with musical experiences in the present, and go through a deepening of this experience, trying to use this experience as basis for thinking about history. In this approach, we don't focus on the question of which interval it is, or those associations which music makes, but try to make conscious the feeling quality and sentiment which lives in the intervals and in the corresponding music. In this kind of listening I ask the students to suspend their own associations and ideas about what they hear and try to have a pure listening. I stress that we are not listening in order to recognize theoretical structures, to identify the intervals, chord progression etc. Now we are not concerned to find a *right* answer. In the kind of listening we use in the example above it is not so important if the pupil can recognize the interval as a third, but if he or she can characterize a feeling qualities of the interval listened to. In the end, it is of course essential which interval it is, but the important thing for the

5. In "Darwin and Wagner: Evolution and Aesthetic Appreciation" Edvin Østergaard explores the relationship between Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and a new world-view which emerges at the time, expressed also by Darwin in his theory of evolution, and argues that "both *Origin* and *Tristan* articulate the shift from one world-view to another: from change as a circular repetitive movement to development as a cyclic-like process". (Østergaard, 2011, 97)

6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest such a view on modern and contemporary music: "If there is a modern age, it is, of course, the age of the cosmic. ... Music molecularizes sound matter and in so doing becomes capable of harnessing nonsonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 342f.)

student in the process is not if he or she can recognize this, but that a distinct feeling quality can be perceived which distinguishes one interval from another, and one kind of music from another. It is therefore an approach which begins with the feeling response to the sound. However, this feeling should be distinguished from merely subjective reactions. The feeling qualities that we try to discover are implicitly assumed to correspond to the different musical qualities and here we help each other to bring this to consciousness. When we acquire a clarity towards our own feeling response to what we hear, the experience of the quality of an interval is that interval; it is both the object experienced, and the experiencing subject, or consciousness.

This point in the phenomenon-based approach can be related to *aesthetic listening*, in the sense promoted by Charles D. Morrison in „Music Listening as Music Making“ (Morrison, 2009). In aesthetic listening one investigates the aesthetic qualities as a kind of higher-order thinking, where these qualities are neither purely objectively given, nor purely subjective reaction; „aesthetic properties are a matter of the relationship between the subject and the object; it is the subject – the listener in the case of music – who teases out the aesthetic properties from the objective base properties“ (Morrison, 2009, p. 85). This view of aesthetic listening, where the aesthetic experience is understood as a kind of higher-order thinking which happens in dialogue with the music, can help understand how we can approach music from different epochs as actualizations of different forms of consciousness: By involving oneself and teasing out the aesthetic qualities one *becomes* what one creates on the basis of a given musical work. Listening is here not purely receptive and passive, but a creative activity. When we then reflect on the qualities of this experience and take them as symptoms of a changing consciousness we can use this to help us relate to the past in a different more intimate and experiential way.

## Music history as listening to history from within

Music history, in the sense I have presented it here, can be regarded as a subject where we - ideally speaking - listen to the changes of history from within. We try not only to gain knowledge of what happened and what music was created at the time, but to listen for a deeper relationship between the music and its time. Somewhat overstated we can say that music history in this way can be a time-travel in which we seek to reactivate and enter into different modes of consciousness and experience that belong to different cultures and times. To listen to history in this way requires some amount of creative courage from the teacher, insofar as these correspondences must be created together with the students. It is obvious that for most classes there are time constraints which makes it difficult to delve into this method in more than a few examples. However, in my experience such a creative relationship to history enhances the interest of the pupils and sparks their involvement in the subject.

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