

Citation:

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Abstract

This teacher-conducted research observes the influence of music history and theory instruction upon motivation, engagement, and expressive performance of the author's high school string students. Two diverse teaching approaches were introduced sequentially as students learned two movements of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet (D810). The first movement was taught using performance-based instruction only, while the second movement was taught with a combination of performance-based instruction and music history and theory lessons. Student comments and teacher observations revealed that the incorporation of music history and theory lessons into performance instruction was (a) motivational to students, (b) a catalyst for expressive performance, and (c) an effective use of rehearsal time. Independent adjudicator scores were higher for the second movement than for the first, although several additional explanations are given that may also explain the variation in scores. Pedagogical recommendations are provided for incorporating music history/theory lessons into performance rehearsals.

For decades, many North American music education programs have placed a considerable emphasis on technical aspects of performance, often at the expense of other forms of music knowledge including historical, cultural, and structural (Austin, 1998; Depugh, 1988; Freeman, 1983; Grashel, 1993; Rothlisberger, 1995; Schmid, 2000; Strange, 1990). While strong performance traditions are a hallmark of music education in the United States, it has been asserted that “the accolades received from public performance” may in some cases take precedence over instructional investments in student knowledge and musicianship (Radocy, 2001, p. 123).

Some might argue, however, that performance-oriented approaches support and enhance student musical awareness, and without procedural knowledge that stems from active performance, other understandings of music would “remain moot in the most essential regard” (Elliott, 1995, p. 57). The present research offers one perspective for balancing technical performance instruction with other forms of musical knowledge by describing teacher-conducted research in which students were exposed to a variety of musical skills and concepts within an active performance setting. Student musical engagement and expressiveness were observed in order to determine an effective balance of various forms of instruction.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACHES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

The issue of offering a broader, more comprehensive range of experiences in developing students’ overall musical knowledge is not new. Comprehensive Musicianship programs of the past few decades, as well as more recent trends toward “performing with understanding” through the National Standards (Reimer, 2000) have

attempted to encourage music educators to foster a broader musical awareness in their students. Despite considerable discussion regarding the potential benefits of more comprehensive musical instruction, however, such approaches have “never garnered widespread acceptance” in comparison to more performance-oriented courses (Austin, 1998, p. 29).

Among many potential explanations for the lack of attention to non-technical issues in performance classrooms, one may involve the ways in which teachers prioritize limited rehearsal time. In prior research, for example, music educators expressed an appreciation for teaching the background of the music their students play, but did not perceive such instruction as critical to the musical performance product (Bell, 1987; Cargill, 1987). Performance pressure has been cited as a reason for neglecting the instruction of non-technical concepts, even among music educators who endorse a more comprehensive approach (Cargill, 1987).

Research does not concur with the notion that comprehensive instruction is a distraction from performance preparation. For example, some studies have reported significant differences in performance achievement in favor of students whose rehearsal time included an emphasis on understanding historical, social, and/or structural aspects of the works being performed (Garofalo & Whaley, 1979; Gebhardt, 1974; Linton, 1967; Sherburn, 1984), while others have shown more comprehensive instruction to have no effect upon performance achievement (Brown, 1997; Gleason, 1998; Parker, 1975; Swearingen, 1993; Whitener, 1983). Other research has suggested that even a small amount of instruction in music history and theory may increase student perceptivity to expressive elements of music (Marciniak, 1974).

Additional considerations regarding the relative importance of comprehensive instruction in performance classes might include perceptions of its influence upon student motivation, engagement, and attitude. Research on this topic is less clear. Some research has reported no significant differences in student attitudes or interest between groups learning comprehensively and those learning with performance-only approaches (Gebhardt, 1974; Parker, 1975; Sherburn, 1984), with other research suggesting that students, teachers, and parents provided generally positive responses to a more comprehensive learning style (Swearingen, 1993; Whitlock, 1982; see also Austin, 1998). On the other hand, Gleason (1998) found a significant difference ($p < .01$) in favor of a performance-only control group regarding self-esteem of musical ability, although the author reports insufficient evidence to relate this finding to instructional treatment. This same study found a significant difference ($p < .05$) in favor of the control group regarding retention, yet the author states that exit survey responses did not suggest a link between retention and instructional treatment.

A recent collective case study (Sindberg, 2007) demonstrated that students who learned performance through a comprehensive approach displayed a deep and broad understanding of the music they were performing, even if some students did not express a belief that such instruction was helpful to them. Mixed reports regarding student attitude are not surprising, considering the variety of approaches that music educators might use to present extra-technical instruction in their classrooms. The present research therefore observes student engagement and motivation in a performance classroom in which music history and theory are taught, in order to offer implications and strategies for effective and efficient presentation of such instruction.

PURPOSE

Stemming from my own reflective practice as a public school orchestra director (Elliott, 1995; Schön, 1983), this teacher research describes the process of inquiry and subsequent pedagogical recommendations through my own perspective, experience, and voice (see Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Conway, 2007; Robbins, Burbank, & Dunkle, 2007). As a high school music teacher facing constant performance pressures, I was aware that the education I provided my students was almost exclusively performance-based. Much like the teachers in the literature cited above, I recognized the merit of a more holistic teaching approach. However, I did not make the teaching of music history and theory a priority because I was not sure that I could afford the time it might take away from concert or contest preparation. I therefore implemented the present study in order to observe the learning experiences of my own students when I incorporated historical, sociological, and structural concepts into their performance instruction, in order to determine whether it might be worth the investment of rehearsal time.

The present research has three aims. First, it considers the influence of music history and theory instruction upon motivation and engagement (including expressive performance) of high school string students. Second, the research also discusses whether music history and theory instruction is worth the necessary investment of time it might require in a performance classroom, considering the various demands placed on western music educators to produce high-quality performances. Finally, this study offers implications for educators regarding the effective and efficient implementation of music history and theory lessons into a performance rehearsal.

METHOD

This study was an independent strand of a larger educational project undertaken in my own classroom. The project also included an extensive musicological analysis of Schubert's D Minor Quartet, D810, "Death and the Maiden," provided with performance/lecture demonstrations. Findings from the musicological research yielded death themes and motifs in the second movement of the "Death and the Maiden" Quartet. These include a dactylic "death rhythm" in various forms of diminution; a *passus duriusculus* figure (i.e., descending chromatic line representing grief or despair); and a historical reference to *todessehnsucht*, or a longing for death, that was prevalent in the society in which Schubert lived. As described below, these concepts were taught to the students as they learned the second movement of the quartet.

By sequentially teaching students in an advanced string quartet using two diverse pedagogical styles, I considered the influences of music history and theory instruction upon student learning, engagement, and performance expressiveness. Three questions guided the research:

1. How might the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal be motivational and engaging to students?
2. How might the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal help students play more expressively?
3. Is the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal worth the investment of time?

Additional observations were gleaned from teaching/learning experiences throughout the course of the research. These observations were shaped into pedagogical recommendations, and are presented at the end of this article.

Four string students consented to participate in weekly after-school coaching sessions, where they were taught the first two movements of Schubert's D Minor Quartet, D810, "Death and the Maiden." The students received a total of 24 coaching sessions, divided into two phases. In the first 12 coaching sessions, the students learned the first movement of the quartet, receiving performance-based comments only. The second 12 coaching sessions were spent learning the second movement through a combination of performance-based comments and music history and theory instruction. All coaching sessions were exactly 60 minutes in length. In both phases of the research, students also rehearsed together, without instruction, for approximately 60 minutes between each official coaching session.

After each weekly coaching session, the students spent an additional 10 minutes filling out questionnaires that allowed them to reflect on and describe each session.

Following are the items presented in each questionnaire:

1. List generally some of the activities that took place today in your coaching.
2. Which activities do you think helped you better comprehend the composer's intentions in "Death and the Maiden?"
3. Which activities do you think helped you play "Death and the Maiden" better technically (e.g., intonation, rhythm, shifting, bowing)?
4. Which activities do you think helped you play "Death and the Maiden" more expressively (e.g., dynamics, phrasing, musicality)?

At the conclusion of the 24 coaching sessions, students filled out a final questionnaire in which they were given an opportunity to share their overall impressions of the project. This survey contained questions including, “What was your favorite or most memorable learning experience during the coaching sessions?” and “What would you have changed about this experience?”

I served simultaneously as teacher and researcher for this project, providing chamber music instruction as well as music history and theory lessons based from my own musicological analysis of the “Death and the Maiden” Quartet. I also kept a pedagogical journal of my observations and impressions regarding student motivation and learning, and videotaped each coaching session for later analysis. Finally, I invited a cellist from a local professional string quartet to serve as an independent adjudicator for the project, rating performances of each movement immediately following their respective 12th coaching session. Documentation of the sessions and any extra-instructional discussions exists in the form of questionnaires, adjudicator ratings and comments, video and audio tapes, teacher journals, and written student comments from notes and e-mails.

RESULTS

Teacher observations and student and adjudicator comments are presented here in order to evaluate and contrast the teaching experience of the second movement (i.e., a combination of instruction in music history, theory, and performance) with that of the first (i.e., performance-based instruction only). The purpose of this evaluation is to determine the influence of music history and theory instruction upon student learning, engagement, and expressive performance. Data sources for the following discussion

include adjudicator comments and ratings, student comments, teacher journals, and observations of video tapes. Examples are organized to reflect each of the research questions outlined above.

1. How might the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal be motivational and engaging to students? Student excitement and interest was apparent after the students learned concepts relating to death in the second movement, such as the dactylic rhythm associated with funeral marches, the chromatic descending *passus duriusculus* in the cello line, and Schubert's historical interest in writing lieder dealing with the theme of *todessehnsucht* (longing for death). Two specific examples of student interest in music history and theory concepts are provided below.

After the first session of the second movement coaching, in which students had learned about death motifs embedded in the music, Emily (cellist) sent me an unsolicited e-mail describing a card game with her mother:

I yell[ed] out, "This is the game of death!" and then recalled our discussion last Monday about the rhythm of death so I started singing the theme to her while trying to play [...] as fast as I could. She got really annoyed that I was singing this "slow death durge [sic] while madly flipping cards." So then I started singing variation 5, the cello part, the triplet G's and she says that that was REALLY annoying. (It sounded like this: da de da de da de da de da de da de, I'll have to sing it to you so you can really get the idea, but I even accented the beats). She said that she thought it sounded like death, so I guess it worked, you know the whole sinister figure thingy. Needless to say I lost.

Emily's memory of the coaching session apparently impressed her to the point that, days later, she was rehearsing particular sections of the work in her mind in detail. Notably, this mental and vocal rehearsal came at the expense of her focus on a different recreational activity.

During the last coaching session of the second movement, the students brainstormed ideas for a movie screenplay based upon historical and theoretical principles they had learned during the previous 11 coaching sessions. Although I had planned for the students to create a story line together, I was nevertheless surprised by the excitement in the room as the students created a synthesis of what they had learned. An excerpt from my journal follows:

The students discussed, debated, laughed, and even shrieked as they dreamed up scenes for "Death and the Maiden: The Movie." Every student was involved in this conversation. In fact, the students would often speak out of turn, apologize, and then wait for their opportunity to share an idea.

It is possible that student interest was piqued by the combination of music history and theory instruction as well as the opportunity to invent a movie screenplay, regardless of topic. In any case, I observed a high level of energetic output, suggesting that the students were experiencing motivation and engagement as they participated in this activity.

2. How might the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal help students play more expressively? Out of 48 student questionnaires completed for the second movement, 25 contain music history or theory concepts as answers to the question, "Which activities do you think helped you play 'Death and the Maiden' more expressively?" In the final questionnaire, Taylor (violinist)

mentioned that the study of music history was her favorite or most memorable experience throughout the entire instructional process:

On a broad scale, I liked learning of Schubert's life and the things he went through. Specifically I liked reading the quotes by Schubert and learning about events in his life, such as, his mother dying and his accumulation of sifilus [sic]. I feel this was the most beneficial thing we did throughout the sessions. I felt that learning of Schubert and his death helped me to focus on conveying those feelings he had through his music, making it more expressive.

In her final questionnaire, Marianne (2nd violinist) expressed a similar sentiment: "It was kind of creepy to think about how much Schubert was into death [. . .] but I think it helped us play with more expression." In addition, Emily wrote in her final questionnaire:

During the 2nd movement coachings [the author] told us more about Schubert's life and musical things like passus duriusculus and dactylic rhythm. Those things helped me play it better expressively even though they kind of freaked me out a couple of times!!!

The expressive performance of the students was apparent to others outside the study as well. After the fifth coaching session, I recorded the following in my teaching journal:

The students' expressiveness in Variations I and II was unmistakably moving. As the students played Variation I, I glanced at Vickie, a student who was in the room listening to the quartet play. She looked back at me with eyes and mouth wide open, obviously feeling the same amount of expressiveness from the students that I was. She said to me privately after the session: "Whoa. That was

really scary, the way Jenny [1st violin] played that first variation. I couldn't breathe.”

Finally, independent adjudicator comments (see Table 1) suggest an improvement in expressiveness between the performances of the first and second movement. First movement scores of interpretation and musicianship received a 4/5, and a comment that such “emotional aspects are the work of a lifetime.” However, the musicianship of the second movement received a 5+, with the comment: “Wonderful!! You've captured the essence of each variation so well – excellent.” No other area of focus received a 5+ rating for either movement. Improvement from the first movement to the second was suggested by the scores in every area of focus except for intonation and balance, where the scores remained the same.

3. Is the incorporation of music history and theory into a string quartet rehearsal worth the investment of time? The students were asked directly on two occasions (i.e., after the eighth session and at the conclusion of the study, following their performance of the second movement) whether they thought that the discussions of historical background and structural and harmonic analysis were worth the time they took away from potential discussions of performance-based concepts. On both occasions, the students provided consistent answers: Marianne, Taylor, and Emily answered “yes” without hesitation, while Jenny agreed, provided that the instruction took place after a performance-based foundation had first been established. As described above, the scores

Table 1

Independent Adjudicator Ratings and Comments for Performances of Each Movement

Areas of Concern	1 st Movement		2 nd Movement	
	Rating (1-5)	Comments	Rating (1-5)	Comments
Tone Quality Consider: resonance, control, clarity, focus, consistency, warmth	3	Group sound is quite good but could be explored much more; the balance among members can help (balance to bottom & inner voices more).	4	Very nice color in theme. Nice <u>group</u> sound.
Intonation Consider: within ensemble, accuracy to printed pitches	3	Accuracy to printed pitches is good, but group intonation needs work, especially chordally; balancing to bottom voices can help.	3	Quite good overall. There is always work to do on intonation, keep it up consistently.
Rhythm Consider: accuracy of note and rest values, duration, pulse, steadiness, correctness of meters	4	Subdivision as a group can be stronger – it's not incorrect, but it could be more sturdy to highlight the character.	5	Tempos could stay a bit closer to each other, but generally excellent.
Balance, Blend Consider: likeness of qualities, awareness of ensemble, accompaniment	4	This is very good, but the inner voices need to come out more in general.	4	I lose the cello in her variation at the high dynamic range, but overall it's terrific!
Technique (facility/accuracy) Consider: artistry, attacks, releases, control of ranges, musical and/or mechanical skill	4	Excellent preparation in the parts; some articulations could match better through the group.	5	Terrific job! Especially your articulation matching
Interpretation, Musicianship Consider: style, phrasing, tempo, dynamics, emotional involvement	4	Excellent work on this; the emotional aspects are the work of a lifetime!	5+	Wonderful!! You've captured the essence of each variation so well – excellent.
Bowing	3	Articulations could match better in certain places.	5	Nice matching of strokes, especially in the theme, just be sure it stays through dynamic changes. Especially excellent inner voice matching.
Other Performance Factors Consider: choice of literature, appropriate appearance, poise, posture, general conduct, mannerisms, facial expression, memory	5	Very poised as a group and extremely responsive and attentive.	5	
Total Score	30		36+	

provided by the independent adjudicator also suggest that the introduction of music history and theory into the rehearsal did not interfere with performance-based instruction.

It is probable that the general improvement of scores also reflects other maturation issues that naturally occurred over the course of the study. These might include improved rehearsal skills, technical improvement over time from private lessons received throughout the school year, and an increase in the group's overall cohesiveness due to their working together over a period of 12 coaching sessions. Also of note is that the second movement was considered by the students to be less challenging than the first for every part but the first violin, thus creating a condition conducive to increased expressiveness without loss of technical performance. However, considering that no area of focus received a lesser adjudication score in the performance of the second movement, it appears that the time taken for music history and theory instruction was not detrimental to student performance.

PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This research revealed the importance of balancing time spent on music history and theory as compared to technical performance instruction, both in each rehearsal and throughout the learning process, to inculcate in students a sense of accomplishment in a variety of aspects of musicianship at each stage of their learning. This issue warrants exploration by other teachers within their own pedagogical contexts; however, I present particular illustrations from the research in order to provide recommendations that may be helpful to music educators.

Perhaps the most major error in the experiment was the introduction of various music history and theory elements too early in the coaching sequence of the second

movement. The intended lesson plans followed a “spiral curriculum” (Bruner, 1977) format in order to gradually introduce deeper layers of music history and theory content as students became increasingly familiar with its technical content. However, the excitement of students and teacher alike led to an unexpectedly large output of history and theory material during the first few coaching sessions. For example, I taught the students about dactylic rhythm, *passus duriusculus*, and *todessehnsucht* in the first three sessions, although all of these concepts were intended for discussions in later sessions. Notably, student responses to the question, “Which activities do you think helped you play ‘Death and the Maiden’ better technically?” were sparse at the conclusion of the third session.

While it may not be generally problematic for certain sessions to include more focus on one form of instruction over another, it is worth noting that the students did not express a sense of technical improvement when they received considerably more music history and theory instruction than performance-based instruction in any one session. This issue suggests the importance of pacing in coaching session activities. If balance is maintained between technical and expressive aspects within each session, and from one session to the next, students might better sense continual improvement in a variety of musical domains.

When asked in the final questionnaire what she might have changed about the project, Jenny expressed: “Maybe rearranging it a little so the first, maybe 7-8 coachings were [dedicated to] notes and the last few were [dedicated to] background/shaping. Make the cake before you put on frosting.” When asked how they perceived Jenny’s suggestion, the other three students expressed an understanding of her point. However, Marianne suggested that the other parts were not as technically challenging and they were

perhaps ready to discuss music history and theory before Jenny was. Individual learning pace aside, teaching these concepts later in the sequence of coaching sessions might have introduced new expressive ideas to the students' practice and performance at a time when the students were primed for a new cognitive and expressive challenge.

In order to facilitate balance between music history and theory versus performance-based instruction, I recommend the following instructional techniques:

1. Spend more time playing than talking or listening. Although this commonsense rehearsal technique had not been formally addressed in my lesson plan preparation, I observed a need to attend to nonverbal student cues (e.g., fidgeting, distracted attention) in order to determine when it was time for the students to pick up their instruments and play the music they have been discussing. Such impromptu changes in rehearsal pacing facilitated student interest and engagement.

2. Take advantage of opportunities outside of class to teach some historical and theoretical aspects of the work, including giving small homework assignments. On a few occasions during coaching sessions of the second movement, the students received small homework assignments in order to prime them for music history and theory lessons in the following session. These assignments, which took less than 15 minutes each to complete, allowed the students time to reflect in advance on the material that would be presented. It also allowed time for more performance-based instruction to take place during the coaching sessions. The students never complained to me about having to do the assignments; in fact, Taylor expressed appreciation for them in several of her questionnaire responses. Jenny also recommended such assignments in her final questionnaire:

I feel like practice sessions are more efficient if we work on actual playing and [are] given a sheet of his history [to] read on [our] own time. [...] It was interesting to get a broader scope on what people think, but again, I like it when it's on a sheet of paper and you can read it whenever you have some time.

Although Jenny articulated interest in the activities, she also expressed a desire to learn them on her own time so that she could receive more performance-based instruction during the coaching sessions. Notably, this comment came from the first violinist in the group, whose part was by far the most technically challenging in the second movement. Therefore, when teaching parts that are not equal in difficulty (an inevitable experience when teaching classic literature), educators might consider providing students with a variety of learning activities that will keep all individuals interested and challenged.

3. Introduce music history and theory according to student readiness. As stated previously, Jenny expressed in her final questionnaire that she would have preferred to wait until later in the instructional sequence to learn about the historical and theoretical background of the “Death and the Maiden” Quartet. On the other hand, Emily and Taylor expressed delight from the very beginning of the second movement coaching experience as they learned more about Schubert, German death poetry, and death motifs. They did not appear to feel that this instruction was introduced before they were ready to receive it.

Because Marianne’s opinion on this topic was not explicit from questionnaire or verbal comments, I interviewed her again the day after the final coaching session in order to obtain further clarification. After I explained Jenny’s point of view to Marianne, I asked her if she agreed with Jenny, or if she appreciated learning about “music history”

from the very beginning. She stated that she liked learning the history at the beginning, but thought that it was good to “learn the notes” first. As described above, Marianne stated at this point that Jenny’s part was perhaps the hardest of the four, and this might be reason that Jenny wanted to wait longer than the others to learn background information about the piece.

Each of the students in this research learned at an individual and unique pace. It would therefore have been challenging (if not impossible) to introduce music history and theory instruction at a time that was optimal for every student. However, by implementing a “spiral curriculum” format (such as the one originally intended for use in this project), or by introducing music history and theory discussion ever more gradually into the instructional process as performance-based accomplishments were made by the group as a whole, the problem of addressing varying student needs might have been somewhat alleviated. Future research is needed to recommend a more exact sequence for such instruction.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research study represents the experience of one group of students, with the researcher also serving as teacher. Therefore, the intent of this study is not to generalize findings as much as it is to share the experience of one individual case (see Stake, 1995). In this article I have observed the influences of music history and theory instruction upon one small sample of students, and have provided recommendations that are relevant to that particular group of students. It is left to the readers to consider the applicability of these implications for their own individual pedagogical and research purposes.

Student comments and teacher observations revealed a rise in student motivation

and musical engagement when students received instruction that incorporated music history and theory lessons. Although several issues should be considered to explain the increased adjudication scores between the performances of the first and second movements, it is apparent that the music history and theory lessons were at the least not detrimental, and at best helpful, to student musicianship and performance level. These findings concur with the body of research literature cited at the beginning of this article. Furthermore, three out of four students expressed without hesitation that the music history and theory instruction they received was worth the time it took from performance-based instruction. The fourth student expressed appreciation for the instruction, but suggested that it could be presented more efficiently. Additional study data were utilized in order to provide pedagogical recommendations addressing this particular issue.

I chose a qualitative methodology for this study in order to obtain an in-depth description of teacher reflection and student comments. However, a quantitative study could conceivably be designed to determine the effectiveness of music history and theory instruction upon student expressiveness, for the purposes of triangulation or complementarity with the present research (see Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). A string instrument adaptation of the EPAM measure of expressive performance (Broomhead, 2001) might be an appropriate measure for such a study. Future research might also include observations of student-run rehearsals, in order to consider changes in student practice techniques as music history and theory lessons are introduced.

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