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AURAL TRAINING WITHIN AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO MUSICIANSHP TRAINING

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Introduction

This chapter originated as a talk given at the symposium *Aural Skills Pedagogy: What is to be done?* held at the Royal Academy of Music, London, in April 2017. Speakers were chosen from a wide variety of backgrounds, some more academic than others. My own experience is that of a performing musician, composer, and arranger who has been involved in curriculum development and delivery at a UK music college (‘conservatoire’) over a long period of time. The experiences and views here expressed are my personal experiences and views, and I have not sought to reinforce them with academic citations. These could no doubt be found, along with citations supporting an opposing view, but my hope is that the experiences I have had will resonate with readers, both those who have undergone aural training in the past, those who are now involved in its delivery, and those interested in the way conservatoire-level musical education is developing, in my own institution at least.

A typical UK music college may take on between 100 and 150 new students each year with varying degrees of proficiency on their instruments, academically and in terms of general musicianship skills. These skills would include aural ability and knowledge and experience of theory and harmony. Our task as educators is twofold: first, to prepare our students for an ever-evolving musical workplace, and second, to develop their intellect, sense of curiosity, work ethic, and power of self-expression in a more general sense. Many factors have driven the evolution in the curriculum that music colleges provide. The increasing variety and unpredictability of the workplace has necessitated more flexibility and adaptability from our students, who now need a greater range of skills than ever before. Some formerly ‘academic’ skills such as harmony, arranging, and aural skills have taken on a more direct relevance as potential prerequisites for a portfolio musical career.

This chapter will argue that these skills are better taught in an integrated way. To separate aural from theory, for example, impoverishes both subjects, and leads to an insular attitude where these subjects become ends rather than means. I will argue that aural training, being in general the most demonstrably relevant aspect of conservatoire-level academic provision, is now increasingly in the vanguard of the new integrated approach that is evolving.

Part 1: How It Used to Be

Approaches to aural training at college/conservatoire level are changing. Three principles seem to be driving developments in what we provide for students. One is a recognition that the world of work
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is changing rapidly and constantly, and aural-skills teachers need to provide graduates with a range of practical skills to equip them for a professional life that will involve far more than playing standard repertoire on their instruments. The second principle is that the acquisition of these new skills involves forming connections between academic subjects that, in my own education, were taught in isolation. Finally, in my own institution at least, there is increasing pressure for academic courses to lead to practical outcomes — performable arrangements, recordable lecture-recitals, transcriptions, improvisations, and so on. This chapter will suggest some practical steps for achieving these triple goals of relevance, integration, and output. This section discusses some of the obstacles institutions will face in achieving these goals, viewed through and drawing on my experience with evolving and delivering a curriculum, at conservatoire level, which now incorporates aural training, improvisation, instrument- and paper-based harmony, composition, and arranging in an increasingly integrated way. Starting with an examination of my own experience of aural training, the section then discusses the musical goals of aural training before suggesting how it can be expanded to include, theoretically, any other academic subject you care to put in the mix. It is a (relatively) exciting time to be an aural teacher, since the relevance of what we do is becoming increasingly palpable.

At school and then at college, I was taught aural in the following way. At the beginning of the lesson, a dictation would be played, and we would attempt to write it down. After a couple of times through, the teacher would ask who had finished. A few people would put up their hands. The teacher would then play it a few more times, until either everyone had finished or nobody could hear any more. People who only required a couple of play-throughs were ‘good at aural’ and people who took longer were ‘weak.’ Everyone knew where they stood. The weaker ones were discouraged because they never improved relative to the better ones, who spent most of the lesson sitting around looking ostentatiously bored and a bit smug while they waited for the others to finish. My own perfect pitch was such an advantage that I’m not sure that my musical perception really benefited from this training beyond the mere exercising of a muscle. Sight singing and rhythm, the other two main components of standard aural training, were, similarly, continually tested rather than trained. The educational principle seemed to be that doing things over and over again made you better at them, which is, of course, true to an extent, though what I really missed in my own education was an examination of how I listened, and any strategy for improvement. While those of us who practiced regularly did better than those of us who didn’t, it was, in many ways, a frustrating subject to study, and, when I started my job, to teach.

Shortly before graduating, I was invited to be an aural teacher at my music college. I had happened to get high grades in my aural exams, and this was presumed to qualify me to explain to others how they could do the same. I got good grades primarily because of my perfect pitch, which when I started to teach seemed a disqualification to be an aural teacher, since it made it more difficult to get inside the mind-set of students who did not have this mixed blessing. The initial problem for me was that I had always found it easy, and never had to think about how I did it. When I started to consider how to teach rather than test, I needed to examine my own thought processes, which was a little like breaking down a movie into a succession of still shots. It was at this point that aural training became fascinating, as it gave me the opportunity to compare how I, myself, thought to how my students thought. The self-reflection was a vital precursor to formulating ways to explain the process to my students.

Aural was streamed and graded when I started to teach, and the attainment of a certain standard was a requirement for the award of a diploma. One or two students (generally singers) would come back to college for a chance to resit every summer for up to seven years before giving up. At that time there was something of a divide between instrumental teachers and academic staff. The instrumentalists, not all of whom had had uniformly positive experiences of training in aural, harmony, and essay-writing, were disheartened by the fact that students who in their view were excellent musicians were being denied degrees because of weaknesses in ‘academic’ subjects.
In subjects like history and, to a lesser extent, theory, this was somehow more acceptable than in aural. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requires a certain minimum standard of literacy, for example, to justify the award of a university-equivalent degree. Theory can be taught mechanically, with both species counterpoint and Bach Chorales being ‘solvable’ by following sets of rules and guidelines. They can be negotiated without requiring musical ability, demanding, rather, a certain level of organization and meticulousness. Although the exercises are musically sterile, they are ‘correct’ and the application of common sense and method can improve a student’s results very quickly. One can see the pragmatic purpose of objectifying music in this way (easy to teach, easy to mark, the mark unlikely to be affected by the personal taste of the marker), but since this objectification stifles creativity it is, by and large, demotivating to students, and the relevance to their future musical life is hard to prove.

Aural is different. You can’t be a good musician if you don’t have a good musical ear, and, surely, if you don’t have a good musical ear, you won’t do well on aural tests. Therefore, people who get low marks in aural tests can’t be ‘good musicians.’

The problem was that instrumental teachers brought me examples of students with excellent intonation, sensitivity to sound, and ensemble skills who had done badly in aural tests. The top marks always went to those with perfect pitch, which is by no means a prerequisite for a successful career in music.

We made various attempts to link aural training with the ‘musical ear’ – perceptions of intonation, instrumentation, performance nuance, and so on, but this didn’t prove a great success, being rather unchallenging and largely over-obvious. These tweaks to the curriculum didn’t address the core of the problem: the ‘musical ear’ doesn’t appear to equate with success in aural tests.

Part 2: What Is Trained in Aural Training?

Let us examine what aural actually does test. There are three principal components: structured listening, the development of short-term musical memory, and the ability to process the information that is taken in.

First, let’s look at the ability to plan and prioritize your listening. Let’s assume you have 20 minutes to complete an eight-bar dictation exercise that will be played 15 times. How do you plan your listening for maximum success? Work on organization and strategy produces the most dramatic and rapid improvement in aural grades. Two playthroughs, for example, to determine key and meter. Two more to sketch in the rhythm independently of the notes. Two more to mark every occurrence of the tonic. There are many strategies, which should be individually tailored to each student. The instinct of the untrained student is to concentrate on the first few notes of an exercise, and the student feels unable to proceed until these notes are correct; often, they have run out of time before getting beyond the first couple of bars. It is more effective to get the general picture and the musical highlights (eight bars, 3/4, C minor, triplet in bar five, diminished seventh in bar seven, and so on) before focusing on the detail. This is far closer to the way in which people normally listen to music: forming a general impression, noting interesting details, and discovering more on each subsequent hearing. So in training students to develop strategies for transcriptions (number of bars first, then time signature, then identify tonic and key-signature, then placing significant notes and rhythms in the relevant bars, getting the outline before the detail), we are also training them to listen to music more constructively and less haphazardly. In my college we now deliver the dictation test as a sound file that students listen to on their phones, tablets, or laptops. This means that the strategy is chosen by the student rather than imposed by the examiner, since the student can determine the length of extracts, the number of play-throughs, and the size of the gaps between them, as well as check the given first note as a reference pitch whenever they like. The development of technology (universal
access to Wi-Fi and the ubiquity of smartphones, tablets, and laptops) has made these new ways of doing assessments more practical, and the enormous wake-up call given by the 2020 pandemic has intensified the search for more effective means of technology-based learning and assessment.

The second ability that needs to be developed for success in aural exams is good short-term memory. The student needs to be able to retain a reference pitch for long enough to relate it to a series of other pitches in the course of the test. The student must be able to remember musical fragments for long enough to process them during the silences between play-throughs. The training of musical memory involves analytical listening. In the same way that we can remember a multi-digit number as a series of four-digit dates (much easier to remember if the dates are famous historical ones), we can look for patterns in groups of notes (e.g., a descending D major seventh chord, the first five notes of the Franck Sonata, four notes of an octatonic scale). We seek ways of forming larger units from individual notes, or of gradually increasing the level of detail from a general impression. These two techniques (micro to macro or vice versa) are fundamental to musical analysis, so this aspect of aural training develops an analytical way of thinking that will help musical memory and understanding.

The third ability is that of good theoretical knowledge, or musical processing ability. Clearly, you can’t recognize a descending D major seventh chord if you can’t name it or don’t know how it’s made. The greater this processing ability is, the less likely it is that short-term memory will have faded before the notes have been reproduced on the page. The processing of musical information (recognition of interval size, chord types, harmonic progression, rhythmic detail) needs secure foundations in theory, and training in theory is fundamental to understanding how and why music works.

So the training of aural encompasses theory, memory, and structured listening. All of these move into the territory of other areas of the curriculum. The necessity for an integrated approach becomes clearer.

Part 3: Toward Integration

The initial stage in an approach to integration would seem to indicate the necessity for some kind of liaison with the teachers of these relevant subjects (theory, in particular). Personal experience as ‘module coordinator’ for theory and musicianship shows that if aural and theory are taught separately, it is very difficult to coordinate the two subjects. Aural trainers demand of theory teachers continual reinforcement of material that theory teachers consider basic (chord types, progressions, inversions, intervals, even key signatures) that has generally been covered within the first couple of weeks of a theory course. As aural trainers, we find that many students have not truly absorbed this basic information long after their theory course has moved way beyond it. Program managers need these courses to move in parallel; this is impracticable, because in aural training this basic theory has to be completely understood and ‘felt’ – in theory lessons, you write your exercise and move on to the next thing. What could be understood theoretically is always far in advance of what can be applied practically. This is not to say that advanced theory shouldn’t be taught – the information and techniques are always potentially useful. There are many things I was taught as a child that I was able to apply practically only when I was an adult. For example, I was taught to resolve diminished sevenths in certain set ways without realizing their usefulness in (particularly improvised) modulations or their creative uses in nineteenth century music. In an ideal world, then, the theory needs to be taught simultaneously with the aural training, either by the same tutor or by two tutors in close liaison.

As an institution, we have expressed this as an aspiration for many years, but it has always come up against practical difficulties. Theory and aural teachers can appear to have different priorities – to summarize crudely and far from impartially, for theoreticians, practice comes out of theory (or will, eventually!); for teachers of aural, the theory will emerge from the practice (almost immediately!). Theory classes work more easily to a curriculum, since there is less necessity to wait for something
to be absorbed before passing on to the next topic. It would be extremely frustrating for a teacher to have to repeat the same piece of information until a student had fully absorbed it, but this absorption is a prerequisite for the development of aural skills.

Nevertheless, we have recently decided to grasp this nettle. The initial impetus for this was the relatively low level of engagement manifested in students in theory lessons in comparison with aural. In these days of satisfaction surveys where ratings can relate directly to funding, this has become much more important. Aural classes in our institution had already evolved into ‘Musicianship,’ having been combined with improvisation and instrument-based harmony (more detail in the next section), and were well received by students, who immediately saw the relevance to their own performing.

As an institution, we are also moving toward a position where assessments should result in a product – something that could potentially be disseminated – whether this is a presentation that could be recorded and posted onto a media-streaming channel, or, in the case of theory, an arrangement or piece that could be rehearsed, recorded, or performed. This result is easier to achieve in the postmodern era, in which the distinction between ‘harmony’ and ‘composition,’ a ‘piece’ and an ‘exercise,’ ‘original’ and ‘pastiche’ has become usefully blurred. As a good practical example, we had to think of a practical application of the Schenkerian ‘reduction’ that has been a staple of our theory syllabus for some years. We have decided that, for example, singers should take a song with a piano part they can’t play, and reduce/arrange it so that they can play it. The weaker the pianist they are, the more reducing they have to do. They then perform and record their arrangement, playing and singing simultaneously. The usefulness of this approach is obvious, particularly as we build up a repertoire of simplified accompaniments that could be shared between colleges and then used when students learn, then teach, a song. Second-study piano tutors (about which we will say more later) have also become involved in helping the singers with this project, and engagement has been very encouraging.

This engagement has led to a more ‘practical’ approach to teaching, and the marriage with our musicianship course has become much easier as a result. Student groups are now the same for both subjects, and the assessment mark is a composite (which means that a good musicianship mark can compensate for a weak theory mark, and vice versa). We therefore rely on a close liaison between musicianship and theory tutors. The difficulty has always been in finding the tutors with the skill set to encompass both subjects, but the more practical orientation of theory is making doing this more feasible.

Part 4: From Aural to Musicianship and Beyond

Although the skills taught by traditional aural training are manifestly useful, perhaps they don’t immediately engage with performance and composition in the way that they might. I would like to examine the ways in which the aural syllabus can expand to encompass more obviously musical elements. This expansion is the rationale behind the ‘Musicianship’ aspect of our provision.

We should begin by involving instruments in aural lessons. This creates the vital link between theory and practice. The link between the tactile sense of an interval and its sound is necessary for good performance. pianists have the advantage that the keyboard is a graphic representation of a chromatic scale, so the visual aspect is also helpful. Intervals have a ‘stretch,’ chords have a hand-shape. String players are the next most favored, since on a single string there is a clear relationship between stretch and interval size. Next come the woodwinds, with some association between finger- and sound, though this is more rational on some instruments than others. Brass players have even less help from their instrument, with subtle differences in embouchure/air pressure determining the pitch, and only three valves or a slide. The worst off are singers, whose voices are subject to external factors, might change from day to day, and have no reliable way of ‘feeling’ a pitch physically before singing. It is no accident, therefore, that in our streamed aural groups, keyboard players and string
players tend to be in the higher sets, woodwind players intermediate, then brass, and finally singers. As a result of this, many singers arrive at their first aural lesson with a rather low view of their own abilities. There are always exceptions, of course, but the correlation is strong enough to indicate a causal link between instrument choice and aural ability. One solution is to take secondary piano study seriously, as a means of generating a tactile feeling for intervals and, particularly, chords. It is no coincidence that the singers or brass players in the higher groups tend also to be competent pianists. The role of secondary piano study in music colleges is relevant here: students on these courses can often be regarded as poor pianists rather than good instrumentalists with specific reasons for studying the piano. Finding the best way to teach this subject is a real challenge; done properly, it is a real help to students of aural, giving a much more tactile sense of interval, chord, and tonality.

The introduction of instruments to aural lessons has been a very positive development, and as a result, the link between aural and performance can be developed. But what should students do with their instruments when they’ve brought them? The most natural extension of aural training into instrumental playing is in the area of improvisation. I have found that the best way to start to link aural, theory, and performance is by liberating the student’s attitude to scales and arpeggios. These are learned as patterns, to develop facility on the instrument, and because they form the building blocks of so much classical music – fingering patterns can be transferred directly from a scale to a Beethoven sonata. But scales and arpeggios are limited and ritualized: why should a scale always have to start on the tonic? Why should the descending scale always have to be the same as the ascending? (The artificial construct called Melodic Minor is the only scale that uses a different form on its descent, and Harmonic Minor is disfigured by the un-vocal augmented second to the extent that singers never use minors in warm-ups and are therefore less confident when sight singing in a minor key.) What better way to absorb the cycle of fifths, for example, than to play scales that add a sharp or flat on each change of direction? What better way to absorb the disposition of triads and seventh chords in scales than to practice them as broken chords on each degree? What better way to teach students the relationship between melody and harmony than to have them change the scale as the underlying harmony changes? It is a very important technique in so many ways, developing a sense of harmonic function, fluency, and flexibility in scales and arpeggios, as well as the foundation of some technical competence in improvisation. The inclusion within the aural syllabus of this way of working with the instrument leads naturally to improvisation as a skill to be taught in conjunction with aural. If there is an improvisation department within the institution, there should be links formed, joint classes with improvisation teachers, prior to the ideal situation when one tutor can cover both topics.

Given the vast advantages of linking aural training with instrumental playing, it would be of clear benefit to both teacher and student if the aural teacher could attend the instrumental lesson to see how the student’s musical ear manifested itself in playing. Similarly, the instrumental teacher would gain from observing how their students remembered and processed musical information – how quick and accurate their ear was.

But enough idealism. This hardly ever happens, for obvious reasons. Primarily, time and money. Teachers are either salaried, in which case these visits would be outside of contractual duties, or hourly paid, in which case the visits would either have to be voluntary or funded out of a departmental budget. They would tend to be one-off and token, although the pandemic-led upsurge in online meetings has created a technological basis upon which this is more achievable. As aural training/theory becomes ever more demonstrably relevant to performance, instrumental teachers (by far the most significant influence on the student’s musical life) are much more likely to want to become engaged. The academic-practical divide is clearly outmoded.

The range of skills needed in a modern musical career (how many of our graduates will be soloists? Full-time chamber musicians? Orchestral players?) is ever-expanding. Today’s musician needs to be versatile, flexible, organizational, entrepreneurial, motivational, inspirational, and imaginative. Many of the possible components of a ‘portfolio career’ call on skills and abilities way beyond those...
traditionally provided by the instrumental teacher. Many academic subjects are modernizing accordingly. Harmony becomes pastiche composition in a range of idioms, leading to commercial uses in film or gaming music. Exams give way to presentations, lecture-recitals, and projects in collaboration with external organizations. The theory agenda, which used to be set by church organists, is now set by composers and jazz musicians. Improvisation is being redefined as a core skill, the most direct means of communicating and ‘reaching out’ to new audiences, and the missing link between theory and practice.

**Part 5: The Role of Aural Training in Our Brave New World**

For me, aural training is *the* prerequisite for all these other skills, necessary if a musician is to be anything other than instinctive. It is the binding agent between theory, improvisation, and performance. Theory names what you hear, improvisation plays what you can name, performance is informed by all of these. Aural training analyzes how musicians think and trains them to use their musical ear and brain in the most efficient and productive way. It deals in the most direct way with the musicianship of the individual. It builds the foundations for musical rather than only intellectual understanding of the information given in theory classes, and as such, it is clearly less effectively taught as a discrete subject. We need to bring in theory to explain to students how to process what they hear. A meaningful theory syllabus should, I feel, derive from the aural syllabus, and informed performance should derive from this integrated academic syllabus as well as the technical and interpretative insights provided by the instrumental teacher.

The responsibility that goes with this is that we do not regard our subject as circumscribed and restricted. There is an unhelpful comfort zone in aural training in which the ability to transcribe dictation is regarded as an end rather than a means, and a belief that the method of achieving this ability is continual testing.

We may all be able to agree that the ideal situation is to find in a single teacher everything you need. A great practitioner/composer develops your playing, your musical ear and your musical understanding, your historical and contextual background by means of a kind of apprenticeship. In the real world this can’t happen – one-to-one teaching for several hours a day for about ten years would be a little expensive for most institutions! Our task as educators is to simulate this situation as closely as we can, but there are immediate problems. The structuring of colleges in departments, each with its own head, budget, and staff, with quasi-autonomy for both Instrumental and ‘academic’ tuition. It is common for the instrumental tutor to have no idea who teaches their student aural or theory, or how or what they are taught, or even why they are taught. The demands of staffing, curriculum, and assessment mean that a subject like music has been broken into components, which should, in an ideal world, be reintegrated.

Aural training can lead the way toward this reintegration. It will be a long journey, but with a clear view of the goals, and of their purpose, a true synthesis with other aspects of the curriculum is achievable.
This section begins with three chapters that take a close look at the process of dictation and why a well-formed curriculum teaches it. The first chapter, by Gary S. Karpinski, builds on his decades of work examining and writing about aural-skills curricula. This chapter expands on his description of the process of dictation that he described in his *Aural Skills Acquisition* (1990), defining each of the four steps (focused attention, melodic memory, understanding, and notation), describing how one can identify and potentially correct individual student deficits in each and then explaining how that skill transfers into the broader work that musicians of a variety of disciplines might do. Karpinski argues for the relevance of dictation as one of the few places in a traditional curriculum where students bring together and practice relevant and transferrable musical skills and proficiencies.

In the next chapter, Timothy Chenette takes a closer look at Karpinski’s ‘focused attention’ in dictation, examining and applying recent literature on the skill to come up with a more comprehensive understanding of it. He then suggests strategies for building a class environment and activities that promote the development of beneficial focusing skills.

Martin Scheuregger makes the case for teaching analysis as an aural skill and describes a learning module that he uses at his institution where he begins the process of analysis with listening assignments that intentionally do not involve using a score. (A different take on this topic can be found in Jorge Costa’s chapter, later in the book.) Jeffrey Lovell also tries to bridge a gap – this one between conceptual and applied music theory courses as they are commonly taught at the university level. He points out one of the most significant problems arising with integrated curricula – the amount of material that needs to be learned in a short amount of time in the aural-skills curriculum – and looks to research on language acquisition to point out a fundamental flaw with this approach. He advocates for a different type of integration, one that allows these two subjects to proceed at their own paces through integration within each track, rather than between the two.

Samantha Inman brings the piano into the discussion, advocating for the importance of integrated music making that is a necessity of the sing-and-play exercise. This chapter reviews the use of sing-and-play exercises in commonly used aural-skills textbooks and demonstrates how these exercises are used to address some of the significant deficiencies that aural-skills teachers say they need to have addressed (through a survey that she administered to these teachers). She then explains how she uses these exercises to teach specific concepts and skills in her aural-skills classes. The reader may also want to read the chapter by Justin Mariner and Peter Schubert (Chapter 9), who provide other ways in which to use the keyboard in aural-skills training.
Bridging the gap between discussions focused on dictation and those focused on performance skills and integrating the various themes found in this section, Chris Atkinson’s chapter makes the case that an underlying understanding of pitch function (understanding of a pitch’s scale degree within a key and location within a chord) improves the quality of a student’s sight singing and, through transference, overall musicianship. His observation is that many students lack this understanding, and that this condition is apparent to the attentive listener – whether that is the performing musician’s discerning ear or the untrained ear (even if he or she can’t put into words why one performance sounds ‘better’ than another). An attentive ear can differentiate when a student ‘gets it’ (i.e., understands the pitch function of the notes they perform) versus when they ‘don’t get it.’ Pitch function is, in his description, a stand-in for an awareness of a defined and integrated conception of the sound the student wants to make. This is separate from, but no less important than, the technical side of the sound concept. He then proposes an alternate notational method, focused on pitch function, that might be used in an aural-skills classroom to make students more aware of, and thus more attuned to, pitch function in their performance.

What binds these chapters together is not just that they consider the theory and curriculum but that they put an explicit and implicit emphasis upon integration. When we integrate we do not lose something within another, we find an enrichment of purpose by combining the theory with the practice or, if you will, the ear training with the musicianship. For Karpinski, integration comes in the form of recognizing the connection in his four-step model; for Chenette and for Scheuregger, respectively, it is the integration of the activity with the person; and for Lovell, Inman, and Atkinson, it is the respective understanding of integration with the other parts of the curriculum. This section is therefore a recognition of the benefit of ear training within a curriculum. This has been known for many years by those who lead aural training in their institutions, but it is hoped that this collection of chapters will help those often lone voices when they find themselves in challenging discussions on the competition for curricular space during curriculum design. To integrate is not to lose anything, or keep a learning skill in isolation; it is to strengthen the links of learning during the academic journey toward professional musicianship.