

Reflective Conservatoire Conference 2015

Short paper for discussion

From music student to professional musician The relationship between the aural skills discipline and the musical ear in professional performance practice

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"To educate your ear is of supreme importance."

Robert Schumann

Background

In an academy of music aural skills training is a natural part of the curriculum. The aim is to develop the students' musical ears to facilitate the reading and understanding of music. This presentation is based upon a study of professional orchestral musicians.

What is the experience of the aural skills discipline when musicians have left the academy and practice as professionals? This involves both their attitudes to the subject and the practical role of the subject in the musical profession. My interest as an aural skills teacher is to learn how a part of a study program function in the "real life" of performing musicians, and the possible implications such knowledge might have on the actual study programs. How are the skills learned in the aural discipline related to performance practice?

My research questions are:

- How is the aural skills discipline based on professional musicians' experiences?
- What is the relationship between the aural skills discipline in the education program and the musical ear in practice?

I will discuss these questions related to my findings. May be this conference paper might evoke a debate concerning these questions, which should be important for educators at music academies.

Former research

The aural skills discipline has been discussed and criticized, including its relevance to performance. Pratt (1990) and McNeill (2000) both studied the British aural skills discipline. Pratt launched a new kind of listening subject more relevant for musicians than the traditional pitch-and duration-focus. McNeill's concern was the assessment-system testing other kinds of skills than she meant was relevant in connection with performance. At the Norwegian Academy of Music (NAM) a research team of aural skills teachers has engaged in this connection, resulting in an anthology: Reitan et.al. (2013) titled *Aural Perspectives on Musical Learning and Practice in Higher Music Education*. Several articles here are concerned with the link to performance (Bergby, Reitan, Øye).

Method

In my study I did qualitative interviews of professional orchestral musicians. In the interview, I focused on their experiences and opinions about aural training in their education and the link to their professional orchestral practice. The musicians were seven performing instrumentalist

representing the following instruments: viola, cello, obo, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, tuba, in addition to one conductor. They represented various ages, educational background and years of orchestral practice. As they all received their academic aural skill training in the years 1970 – 1996, we might assume that their experiences are different than today's educational practice, or not?

Findings

The presentation of the findings will follow the two research questions.

1. The aural skills discipline in the education:

This is a retrospective part where the informants look back at their experienced aural skills discipline. The findings will be organised into the following categories:

- Content and activities
- Personal motivation
- Role of the instrument teacher

As to the *content and activities*, the informants reported that the discipline was mainly concerned with melody, rhythm and to a smaller degree with harmony. There was use of textbooks in melody and rhythm. 50 % of the informants mentioned especially the textbook in atonal melodies *Modus Novus* (Edlund 1963). The main instrument used in the classroom was piano and there was rarely any use of “real music”, either as working material or as a source for listening.

The *personal motivation* varied from low to high. The low motivation was explained by either lack of relevance to music or to the instrument, the feeling of not being talented or the time-consuming factor as they felt that the aural skills discipline was taking time from the main instrument activities. The high motivation was explained by a general positive attitude towards the complementary subjects in the study program: aural, music history etc.

The *instrument teacher's role* or interest in the aural skills discipline was described as being either indifferent, only interested in a general good musical ear or in having a superior attitude towards the “theory professors”. One quotation from an informant was directed towards the instrument teachers: “The instrument teachers should be challenged to see the importance of aural skills in relation to future jobs”.

Reflection: the aural skills discipline seemed to be limited to few elements and the motivation of the musicians in their education was relatively low, with no help from the instrument teacher. The connection to real music or to the instrument seemed to be almost absent, which also could explain the low motivation.

2. The musical ear in professional practice

The second research question was connected to the relationship between the aural skills discipline and the musical ear in practice. Tendencies from this part of the study will be treated in the following categories:

- Relevance and application
- Learning in practice

As to *relevance and application*, there were both negative and positive attitudes. Some of the negative responses were explained in general terms, stating that the aural skills learnt in the academy had not become a useful tool. Other explanations were the lack of contact to the instrument and to the absence of learning about important skills, like intonation.

However, the positive attitudes were dominating. In spite of no or very limited links to the instrument in the discipline, the informants explained the relevance in a variety of ways. There were general statements that the aural skills discipline is a fundamental discipline affecting many different fields. It lead to musical understanding and perspective. They learnt how to study new repertoire. They learnt the importance of singing the music before playing, it was useful in chord playing, for balance and intonation, for musical memory and for playing 12-tone music. One musician said: “even if it was not important for the orchestral job, it was important for the musical profession”. The answers seem to be a documentation of a wide concept of skills, including technical skills (e.g. sight singing and reading, musical memory), as well as abstract and attitudinal skills (e.g. understanding and perspective).

Things that they did not learn in the study program, they *learnt in practice*. This was especially connected to intonation. In the academy, they said that they learnt nothing about this issue, neither in theory nor in practice. Therefore, they learnt from and with their colleagues, by trying and failing. As one said:

I practice Bach chorales regularly with colleagues, some times 2 hours a day: scales, nature harmonics, triads, building and building until it becomes intuitive.

Reflection: the traditional aural skills from the education had obviously relevance for the informants in their profession as musicians. Thus it confirms the quotation from Nielsen (1998:320) that “the aural training discipline becomes an integrated part of the musical craftsmanship”¹ (Nielsen 1998:320). Intonation, a very crucial skill, was very often mentioned as an important aural skill in the orchestral profession. There was an obvious lack in the academic training, so they had to learn this skill outside the academy. The question is who has the responsibility to teach and train this skill, the aural skills teacher or the instrument teacher?

Discussion

Looking at curricula on the home pages from four academies in the Nordic countries, there are great differences in the way the aural skills discipline appears: in the descriptions of aims, content and of its visibility (hidden among music theory disciplines or as an own subject). The NAM-plan is the only plan that also relates to performance and to instrument practice.

Are the findings in this study relevant for today’s aural training teaching? There is an interesting paradox in the fact that a majority of the orchestral musicians had low motivation for the discipline as students, and still saw the relevance and the possibility for application in their profession. This tells us that there is a potential for improvement to make the discipline more relevant in the study program and to motivate the students to see the relevance.

I will present two models of aural skills discipline: *the box* or *the bridge*.

In my opinion the box model represents an old traditional aural skills discipline characterized by being a closed system, a cultivation of the discipline per se. This means that the training and skills are relevant in itself, such as dictations, sight-reading, rhythm reading and tapping, harmonic dictation or identification etc. It often consist of especially composed learning material and exercises. In the end of the course, there is a test or an examination, oral and/or written. It might seem that the main purpose of aural skill is to pass exams to get the certificate from the academy. Is this model still existing today?

¹ My translation

The bridge model aims at linking the aural skills training towards musical repertoire, to the musical and instrumental practice, and to other disciplines in the study program. This does not mean avoidance of the training of “traditional” aural skills, like sight singing, dictation, chord analysis, rhythm, development of the inner hearing etc. Maybe this model will be a more motivating model, also during the academic years.

At the Norwegian Academy of Music, we have tried to practice the bridge model for many years, (even if we do use the bridge concept). It affects the way we organize the classes, the curriculum and the form and content of the examinations. Some examples to illustrate this praxis are:

- the first year aims at giving a common platform in skills and knowledge
- in the second year of study the students bring their instruments in the classroom and focus on relevant repertoire
- the examination involves the use of instruments
- aural skills is also integrated in some chamber music groups (Slette 2014)
- aural skills teachers are collaborating, sharing ideas and experiences, doing research and development
- aural skills teachers and instrument teachers collaborate and communicate
- in addition to the complementary courses in aural skills there are elective courses in intonation, rhythm, aural skills teaching etc.

New ideas and models also take place at the Sibelius Academy. There has been an interesting aural skills project in involving the students in a peer-learning project, integrating instruments and repertoire (Ilomäki 2013), to link aural skills to performing practice.

The box or the bridge? The search for the *ideal* model is not my objective. Most important is the willingness to ask questions about the pedagogical practice to prevent stagnation.

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