

Teaching Music to the Non-Major: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Students pursuing college degrees in fields other than music must often take a music or arts course. Teaching these non-majors has been a traditional responsibility of college and university music departments. While experts agree that a single, widely accepted approach to teaching the non-major is unavailable, many experts concur that developing perceptive listening skills is a primary goal. Furthermore, they also agree that the study of music for the non-major is important for reasons of personal development, for societal development, and for the preservation of music. These experts take different approaches to the content and methodology for instruction and offer differing recommendations for improving the education of non-majors. This article will review literature regarding the methodology and curriculum for teaching music to college students pursuing degrees other than music and provide recommendations for areas of future research.

Keywords

college, curriculum, general student, higher education, liberal arts, methodology, music appreciation, music in general studies, nonmajor

Coursework in the fine arts is a cornerstone of general education requirements at institutions of higher education. University curriculum designers, faculty, administrators, accrediting agencies, and the general public recognize the arts as an essential component of a liberal education. The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), the accrediting association for music in higher education, recommends that institutions “provide non-major students with opportunities to develop awareness and understanding of music as an integral part of the liberal education and the human experience” and that music faculty and administrators be actively involved in the education of the general university student (NASM, 2009/2010, p. 74).

Educating the student pursuing a degree other than music (hereafter referred to as the non-major) has been a traditional responsibility of college and university music departments. According to the NASM, this responsibility unfortunately often becomes a secondary concern as the education of the music major takes precedence (Maris, 2006). “As a result, the cultural involvement of the public is not sufficient to take full advantage of the high level and quality of artistic activity available” (NASM, 2009/2010, p. 172). Moreover, many scholars believe that the college student not pursuing a degree in music is perhaps the most valuable asset music has both in terms of advocacy and economy. This student will become a

patron of music and may perhaps serve as a board member of an arts organization or even become a school principal or provost of a university and be required to make decisions that affect arts education (College Music Society [CMS], 1981a).

Educating the non-major is a topic of particular importance at specialized institutions that offer no degree programs in music or offer only liberal arts music degrees (e.g., Purdue University, Michigan Technological University, and other engineering and technological institutions). These schools have special responsibilities to provide liberal arts music courses for the general university student, as well as elective experiences in applied music. Students generally take at least one music or arts course before they graduate—whether be it in theory, appreciation, history, or a performance ensemble. Music faculty at these institutions have special responsibilities and a unique mission requiring special instructional methods and curricular approaches. Such programs can be thought of being devoted entirely to educating the

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non-major. Personally, the pursuit of improving the profession's efficacy is the primary motivation for my research.

This article will examine the literature in areas of music in general studies methodology and curriculum and attempt to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: Why is studying music at the college level important for non-music majors?

Research Question 2: What are the appropriate goals for college-level music study for non-majors?

Research Question 3: What methodologies and curricula are recommended for teaching the non-major and how might they be improved?

The search of the literature for this review was delimited using the *Music Index Online*, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*, *ERIC*, and the online archives of the *College Music Society Symposium, Reports*, and *Newsletters*.

Background

In 1981, the CMS held the Wingspread Conference in which 36 college teachers of music met to “face the challenge of developing a new emphasis on music in general studies” (CMS, 1981b, para. 1). This conference was a pivotal moment as it put into motion a series of summer institutes and workshops throughout the 1980s addressing topics related to music in general studies. Furthermore, issues relating to music in general studies became a regular feature of CMS regional and national meetings. In 1983, the Dearborn Conference on Music in General Studies brought together NASM administrators of music programs in higher education and CMS teachers to discuss issues related to teaching the non-major (Maris, 2006). Many of the presentations covered topics related to staffing concerns (e.g., tenure and promotion issues, incentives, and appropriate training). While no formal recommendations were given at this conference, the papers presented were published in hopes of furthering discourse related to music in general studies (CMS, 1983).

In 1990, music scholars, composers, and performers gathered once again at the Eastman Colloquium to “share their observations and insights on teaching music to non-majors and to raise topics worthy of further research and discussion” (Freeman & Mahoney, 1990, para. 1). As before, no formal recommendations came from this meeting; however, in his welcoming remarks, Robert Freeman (1990) acknowledged that scholarship on this subject is still in its infancy. Following these welcoming remarks, Truman C. Bullard (1990) noted in his presentation that “new ways can be found, and must be found, to bring the extraordinary capacities of the human learning mind and

emotions to the infinite riches of musical expression” (para. 22). These words at the Eastman Colloquium in 1990 establish a starting point for this literature review.

The Importance of Studying Music

One primary reason for studying music is that music provides an opportunity for aesthetic education. Bennett Reimer advocates for aesthetic education because “creating art and experiencing art educate feeling” (1989, p. 37). Similarly, in its Summary Statement, the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations (CNAEA) states,

The arts have served to connect our imaginations with the deepest questions of human existence: Who am I? What must I do? Where am I going? Studying responses to those questions through time and across cultures—as well as acquiring the tools and knowledge to create one's own responses—is essential not only to understanding life but to living it fully. (CNAEA, 1994, para. 7)

The study of music develops the individual in many facets of life. The NASM believes that there are many values both intrinsic and instrumental to music, such as the ability to perceive in the aesthetic realm, emotional engagement, intuitive and nonlinear thought, making value judgments, self-discipline, mind/body coordination, verbal and nonverbal communication, community building, and knowledge and understanding of culture (NASM, 1999, pp. 35–39).

Studying music also has a direct impact on the future of music and the arts. Gerard Aloisio (2006) stresses the importance of music classes for the general university student, reiterating that this course may be the last music class they will take. Michael L. Masterson agrees that instructors need to give students “something focused on finding meaning in music of many kinds, because that's what they will encounter in the next six decades of their lives” (Mazullo, Rauche, Hanawalt, & Masterson, 2000, para. 3). A study by Gordon C. Bobbett, Nan C. Bobbett, and Wayne Dorothy (1995) suggests that non-majors' “musical philosophy is an accurate reflection of what is communicated to them by their private teachers, band directors, or other music educators” (p. 16). Finally, a study by Mark C. Ellis (2002) of college students who had taken a music appreciation course suggests that these courses are effective. He found that 9 out of 10 respondents credited the course for expanding their range of listening, and many of these students reported the purchase of recorded music, at least partly as a result of the course. In the same study, Ellis found that “85% of respondents recalled attempting to influence the musical awareness of another individual, at least in part, because of the course” (p. 80). Ellis's introductory study used a small sample size, and a larger scale study may be worthy of exploration.

The importance of studying music must be kept in mind during discussion of coursework for the non-major. This importance guides both the goals and objectives set for students and the delivery of content. Before exploring the content and methodology, it is important to discuss the differences in needs between majors and non-majors.

Differences Between Majors and Non-Majors

Recognizing the differences between majors and non-majors is an important aspect of teaching and should guide decisions about course content and methodology. Susanna Guthmann (2004) states that a primary challenge of teaching the non-major is the variety of backgrounds they have had with music. Paula Conlon (2006) writes that it is a great challenge to teach people about music of any culture without a “working knowledge of Western music theory to use as a starting point” (para. 2). Moreover, a different set of listening skills should also be taught. Barbara Bowker (2006) cautions that when teaching listening skills to the non-major, teachers should not pursue what she calls “a glorified transcription machine” (“Let us examine deeply,” para. 1) approach and instead should focus on the “experience of listening” (Part of heading “Let us examine deeply”).

The topic of staffing was discussed at the Dearborn Conference in 1983; however, very little has been published on the topic since. Some scholars believe that there may be a problem with the academic system itself. At the conference, Robert Werner (1984) stated that too often general music courses were assigned to “junior members of the faculty who had to ‘pay their dues’ before they could move on” (para. 4), which creates a negative reputation for this teaching post. M. Suzanne Roy (1983) and John R. Stegall (1983), both speakers at the Dearborn Conference, suggest that there need to be incentives (release time, credit toward tenure/promotion, etc.) to encourage quality teaching. Aloisio (2006) advocates that “the time has come for [general music] specialists” (this is the title of his paper). He questions why “a faculty member who teaches a studio of 20 is required to hold a terminal degree and be a trained specialist, yet general music teachers of 20, 200, or 2000 do not have the same requisite preparation and training” (“The Answer: The General Music Specialist,” para. 1).

Skills and Knowledge

The music community seems to be in agreement that the development of perceptive listening skills is a primary concern in college music courses for non-majors. Aaron Copland (1939/2009), in his book *What to Listen for in Music*, emphasized listening above other skills, “If you want to understand music better, you can do nothing

more important than listen to it” (p. 3). Likewise, Martha Snead Holloway (2004) and Thomas J. Gibbs (2005) both stress the importance of teaching students how to attentively listen to music.

Expressing one’s musical understanding and preferences is another primary goal for non-majors. Both Masterson (Masterson, Hanawalt, & Rauche, 2000) and Mazullo (Mazullo et al., 2000) believe students should be able to articulate meanings and descriptions of music. Masterson believes that too often responses to questions of “Why do you like this [artist]?” result in vague answers similar to “Because she rocks!” (para. 10). What is more, Bowker (2006) takes an interdisciplinary stance and suggests that the articulation of the musical experience need not be limited to verbal communication, and students should be allowed to use other modes of expression like video, dance, drawing, or even their own musical composition (“Let us examine deeply,” para. 3).

Being able to relate music to other aspects of human culture is another primary goal for non-majors. Donna L. Buel and Samuel C. Welch (2000) agree that perceptive listening and communication skills are important but also believe that students should be able to relate concepts to other aspects of humanity. Using a similar viewpoint, Margaret E. Lucia (2006) has her students interview different generational groups about the music they liked at different stages in their life. Stephanie Berg Oram (2007) has her students find the “[interconnections] of music with their own disciplines” (para. 1). Fred Wickstrom (2003) also seeks to encourage diversity but does so by connecting students to the cultures that immediately surround them at the University of Miami. His course focuses specifically on the music from cultures in that region of Florida.

Curriculum Models, Methodologies, and Materials

While perceptive listening, the articulation of understanding, and the ability to relate music to other aspects of human culture are primary goals of educating the non-major, teaching methodologies and curricula differ in how effectively they advance these goals. Lewis Gordon (1996) categorizes three approaches to music appreciation methodology: (a) “The Historical Approach” (para. 10), (b) “The Analytical Approach” (para. 10), and (c) “The Contextual Approach” (para. 8) in which history is taught concurrently with analysis. His preliminary study found that students taking a course with a contextual approach showed significantly more improvement on a musical perception test than students taking courses with a historical or analytical approach. It might be worthy to note that those students taking a course delivered by the historical approach actually tended to score lower on the posttest. Masterson agrees with the contextual approach

and focuses on the study of “music’s aesthetic sound patterns, expressive metaphors, and cultural connections” (Masterson et al., 2000, para. 4).

Many instructors are dissatisfied with available textbooks and often require supplemental readings or compile their own materials for courses. Anita Hanawalt believes that the problem with course content is that “culturally diverse curricula tend to exclude women, and more gender inclusive curricula tend to exclude culturally pluralistic musics” (Mazullo et al., 2000, para. 4). Susan Wharton Conkling (2003) also expresses concern that “particular student groups feel excluded from music study because of curricular content?” (“Envisioning Scholarship,” para. 6). Mazullo agrees. He believes that most of the “available textbooks tend to subordinate other musical traditions to the Western art music canon” (Mazullo et al., 2000, para. 3).

Common general classroom techniques like cooperative learning are frequently used in music appreciation courses. In a 2004 study, Martha Sneed Holloway found that “the scores for increasing listening skills using cooperative action learning were significantly higher than scores using the lecture method” (para. 5). Furthermore, she found that the group composition activities she created became something students enjoyed, and “it was easier for them to hear those elements in the compositions of the master composers” (Holloway, 2004, Discussion section, para. 2). Buel and Welch (2000) expressed similar success in courses that used group work to study specific time periods in depth and then share their findings with the class.

Because non-majors have different musical backgrounds and typically take only one fine arts course, the instructor must take student engagement issues and time limitations in account when developing a curriculum. The following sections discuss both of these items.

Restrictions of Time

Mazullo believes that trying to cover all topics of music in a semester is ineffective and suggests that it is more productive to teach only a few facets of music but cover them in greater detail because it fosters critical thinking skills that may be used beyond the course itself (Mazullo et al., 2000). Buel and Welch (2000) use a similar approach and focus on generational cohorts (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation X). In addition to music, students study the “societal values and factors (including politics, economics, literature, visual arts . . . that collectively continue to influence the behavior of that generational cohort” (p. 15) and then present their findings to the class. Both Mazullo et al. (2000) and Buel and Welch (2000) believe that students will be able to generalize this detailed knowledge and apply it later.

Generating and Maintaining Student Engagement

In addition to developing an effective curriculum and methodology, instructors must also address issues of student engagement in courses for the non-major. Masterson writes,

If students discover that sometime in an Introduction to Music class their music will be listened to or discussed, then we have a student less likely to dismiss the class as unimportant or irrelevant . . . and more likely to give other, less familiar music a chance. (Mazullo et al., 2000, para. 2)

Hidemi Matsushita (2007) and David Bruenger (2005) agree and believe that an instructor should use familiar music to draw in seemingly disinterested students. Martin Kutnowski (2005) takes this one step further and suggests analyzing popular culture entities like the TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* as a “bridge” to musical understanding (para. 1). For example, the students might explore the qualities of the music in the show that create tension.

Often instructors design courses with a specific theme to attract students and maintain interest. Anne Dhu McLucas (2003) offers courses that focus on a film that has music as a core element (e.g., *Amadeus*, *O Brother Where Art Thou?*). She uses the film as a springboard for discussions on cultural and historical nuances, styles, form, and connections to other arts. Elizabeth Sellers (2004) also uses film to teach the fundamentals of music by examining how the music “shapes the form of film” (Section II. Article A. Item 2). Other examples include Glenn Gass (2004), who teaches a “Music of the Beatles” course, and Eugene Montague (2003), who teaches a course titled “Punk in the History and Practice of Rock Music.”

Stephanie Berg Oram (2007), like Buel and Welch (2000) and Wickstrom (2003), emphasizes connections of music to culture. Oram (2007) has her students “investigate any tangent” (para. 3) from the piece being studied as a way to “encourage diversity and inter-diversity” (para. 3). For example, after studying Bizet’s *Carmen* an economics student may choose to “look into Sevilla’s tobacco factory, with its connection to the New World” (para. 2).

Interestingly, these approaches focus on Western music—an approach that is often criticized by others in the field (see “Curriculum Models, Methodologies, and Materials”). While using music that students enjoy may be an effective way of addressing issues of engagement, instructors may be limiting the perspective and understanding a student may gain. Perhaps, more scholarly work needs to be conducted on how to best bridge music

from popular culture to music from a variety of historical periods and cultures.

While many instructors take a historical approach that centers on a single genre or historical period(s) for content, two other common methodologies that are used may be categorized as Emotional Experience-Centered and Performance and Theory/Composition-Centered, which are discussed below.

Emotional Experience-Centered Methodology

Some instructors believe the focus of the course should be on the experience itself as a teaching tool. Phil Ford (1996) advocates that music appreciation should be an “appreciation of presence” (Third section, para. 4) and argues that “it is not the things themselves, but the experience of them in their full richness, quiet, and still and unmoved by the tidal pull of prior interpretation, that is the goal here” (Third section, para. 6). Likewise, Robert H. Woody and Kimberly Burns (2001) conducted a study that found “young adults who have had past emotional experiences with classical music are more responsive to the expressive qualities of classical music and are more willing to listen to this style of music on their own time” (p. 67). Woody and Burns suggest that instructors should seek to create opportunities for students to “experience first-time emotional responses to classical music” (p. 67). While the focus of the study was classical music, one could generalize this to mean all types of music.

Some instructors create this experience through live music as they emphasize the interaction that takes place between the listener and the performer. Some schools offer a course for non-majors that features live performers each class meeting (Glen, 2007). Melin and Stockton’s (2001) course, “The New York Jazz Experience: A Model for Experience,” is a 3-week course in which students visit famous jazz clubs like in New York and are given the opportunity to discuss musical elements with the jazz artists.

Performance and Theory/Composition-Centered Methodology

Some faculty make the students learn to perform on instruments. There is little research examining the efficacy of performance-based music appreciation. What does exist is anecdotal in nature. Nancy Bolick Kudlawiec (2000) acknowledges this fact in her dissertation titled “The Effect of Active Music on Achievement and Attitude on College Music Appreciation Students.” Although introductory, Kudlawiec’s findings suggest that using such an approach is as effective as a lecture/listening-based approach. Fred Wickstrom’s (2003)

course, titled “Miami’s Multicultural Musical Heritage,” teaches students about the musical styles and cultures of Miami in the setting of a beginning percussion performance class. At the end of the course, students are able to demonstrate and communicate basic ideas in the music found in Miami.

Some schools address the lack of music notation skills in students through instruction of basic theory and composition. Susanna Guthmann (2004) and Stacey Davis (2007) take this approach in their courses. Davis (2007) sees activities related to music theory and composition as an opportunity learn musical concepts in a “creative way, thereby helping them discover how these concepts can be relevant to their future listening or performing experiences” (para. 2).

Many non-majors continue to perform throughout college even though they are not pursuing a degree in music. However, very little research exists that examines the effectiveness of this performance-based approach in advancing the goals of music appreciation. An introductory study in 1995 by Gordon C. Bobbett, Nan C. Bobbett, and Wayne Dorothy produced results that contradict traditional thought. In the study, Bobbett et al. find that emphasizing “band music and sight reading during individual practice or during private lessons has a destructive impact” (p. 16) on the non-major’s musical growth as measured by the Instrumental College Survey-2 and Colwell’s Music Achievement Test 3 and 4. Curiously, no similar studies seem to have followed this one, nor has the study been cited in subsequent research. Nevertheless, this may be an area that deserves more attention.

Technology

Interestingly, publications on the topic of technology in music appreciation and music in general studies become less prevalent in the early 2000s. Besides a few journal articles and dissertations, little has been published. This finding was also acknowledged by Amalie Walker Hinson (2004) in her dissertation titled “The Effects of Web-Based Music Appreciation Instruction on Students’ Attitude Toward Western Art Music.” Perhaps this illustrates Peter Gouzouasis’s (2006) critique that “experienced teachers in the [arts] system lack the foundation for teaching an integrated arts and technology curriculum” (p. 7).

It seems that the only publications addressing the use of technology in music appreciation classes since 2000 focus on the use of web-based or web-assisted instruction. John Murphy (2000) advocates that many aspects of teaching can be moved to the web (e.g., quizzes, listening to selected pieces before class with an interactive guide), which allows more class time for in-class listening and discussions. Using web-based technologies,

Andrew R. Levin, Roy P. Pargas, and Joshua Austin (2005) agree and emphasize that “repeated listening is essential to greater understanding of music” (p. 28).

Although many of the publications regarding technology before the year 2000 addressed technologies that are obsolete (e.g., Woodruff & Heeler, 1990, 1993), these studies do suggest that interactive technology can supplement in-class instruction, allowing for more breadth and depth in the curriculum.

Summary

All of the authors seem to agree on three primary items with regard to the music education of non-majors:

- Developing perceptive listening skills is a primary goal.
- The study of music for the non-major is important for reasons of personal development, societal development, and for the preservation of music.
- A single, widely accepted approach to teaching the non-major is unavailable.

However, the authors disagree on three primary issues:

- The appropriate content for the course
- The methodology for delivering instruction
- The best way to improve the education of non-majors

Recommendations for content and methodology vary drastically. Judging from the number of varied approaches, it is clear that the professional community is still in the early stages of pedagogical exploration. Many authors take a survey approach—whether it is a study of jazz, rock, punk, Western music, or non-Western music—as they believe it is important that students receive an overview of the prominent concepts that are characteristic of that genre. Others believe that this approach is futile and prefer to teach fewer facets of music in greater detail. Within each of these different viewpoints, some authors prefer to emphasize historical and cultural context, whereas others emphasize analysis and theory. Furthermore, some authors believe that true understanding occurs only through performance or composition.

While it is widely accepted that approaches to teaching the non-major have room for improvement, there are different perspectives on how this can be done. Many believe improvements can be made by rethinking content or methodology, yet others believe the problem is that college instructors receive little or no training in educating the non-major. Furthermore, some experts believe that college music departments need specialists that have special expertise in teaching the non-major.

Most of the literature addresses the education of non-music majors through music appreciation courses, yet there is a large population of college students that continue to perform through college but do not wish to pursue music as a career. Very little research has been done into the effectiveness of performance-related courses and music appreciation. Are the campus bands, orchestras, choirs, and private lessons designed for the non-majors meeting their needs?

Another area that needs more recognition is the use of technology to teach non-majors. The scholarship seems to have come to a fairly abrupt halt in the last 10 years with regard to technology. While much was written about videodiscs and HyperCard in the 1990s, very few studies examine current technologies, especially the effectiveness of the CDs/DVDs and interactive guides that accompany many major textbooks.

Perhaps a larger issue is that the topic of teaching the non-major has been of secondary concern for so long that even scholarship on the topic has been limited. In Mark Mazullo’s (2006) final report to the College Music Society as Board Member for Music in General Studies, he expresses concern that the dearth of scholarship regarding the general university student will continue “unless there is a significant push from the top down” (para. 4). While the College Music Society is a leader in producing scholarship on teaching the non-music major, very few articles on this topic are published in other journals. Perhaps there is a lack of awareness on the topic and publications in other journals would raise awareness to this topic.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

When appropriately taught, reflective, technical, and interdisciplinary studies in the arts can promote and enhance the aesthetic appreciation and discrimination of students who, in turn, become audiences and provide leadership in the continuing and various processes of artistic creation, presentation, and education. (NASM, 2009/2010, p. 172)

It is my hope that this article will serve as a catalyst for future discourse and study. In-service instructors should think critically about their personal approaches to teaching non-majors. New ideas for content or methodology should be developed and disseminated. These ideas are the foundation for improving the inner and outer lives of not only the non-major but also the art form of music itself.

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