

Experimenting with the Canon: New Approaches to the Music History Survey

Chair: Mark Clague, University of Michigan

Panelists:

Vilde Aaslid, University of Rhode Island

Ryan Bañagale, Colorado College

Gwynne Kuhner Brown, University of Puget Sound

John Spilker, Nebraska Wesleyan University

Instructional innovation results from curricular review and campus-wide mandates, but it can also appear in a single classroom, where individual instructors routinely reshape content, assessment, activity, and purpose. For this panel, four music history instructors from contrasting educational environments will spark conversation by offering comments rooted in concrete pedagogical examples that use the music historical survey in novel ways. The goal of this session is to explore possibilities, share ideas, and inspire innovation within the traditional structure of the music history survey.

To emphasize audience participation, we begin with a discussion to catalog both limitations and strengths of the traditional survey. Panelists will describe their approaches, leveraging as well as challenging the survey model in ways that have renewed their own teaching and learning environments, while meeting goals to explore diversity, curricular integration, and creativity in the classroom. In between two pairs of position papers, the audience will discuss a second topic—possibilities and mechanisms for change. Summary small group conversation and an open forum bring the session to a close, exploring the future of music history course design. By alternating discussion with presentation formats, we hope to keep the session interactive and to encourage attendees to participate actively in the proceedings and thereby to broaden the impact of this session across a variety of schools and curricular environments.

Our four panelists and their case studies are summarized as follows:

The required music history course for Brooklyn College's core curriculum aims to teach students of all majors about a wide range of music: the Western European repertory, popular music, and music from at least two non-Western areas. The broadening of this traditionally Western-canon-based class requires the instructor to approach the course's structure carefully to avoid tokenism and othering discourses. Rather than a chronological approach, Vilde Aaslid (now at University of Rhode Island) organized her content thematically, with units on music and dance, music and spectacle, music and word, and instrumental music. Thematic units featured one main example from each of three categories: Western European art music, U. S. popular music, and traditional music from outside the United States. Readings introduced students to theoretical approaches for each theme, which were then explored in application through a musical "focus piece." Without the frame of chronology, structuring a meaningful progression of ideas for students meant rethinking in-class group work, small writing assignments, and larger class projects.

Colorado College's recently revised music curriculum reflects a trend among liberal arts music departments towards greater flexibility and customization. Six required units of the new curriculum introduce broad approaches undertaken in various fields of musical inquiry, including history and theory, cultural studies, creativity, and performance. Six elective units allow students

to pursue an individualized path that aligns with personal musical aspirations and goals. Designed in part by Ryan Bañagale, the new music major curriculum deemphasizes the canon, requiring only a single course in Western Music History chosen from a range of options. Significant challenges lie in not only what to include/exclude from core history offerings, but also how to distribute fundamental music-historical issues and methodologies among courses in popular music, ethnomusicology, technology, and creativity—all the while striking a balance between serving music majors and meeting campus-wide pedagogical requirements.

In 2007 the University of Puget Sound expanded its two-course music history survey of the Western classical canon to a third semester, described in the school's catalog as "a survey of music history of the classical and popular traditions from World War I to the present and an introduction to world music." While this new course ensures that all music majors are exposed to jazz and non-Western music, it requires the instructor to cover enormous terrain, particularly given the necessity of surveying the music of "the world" in roughly five weeks. To avoid tokenism and to alert students to the constructed nature of historical narrative, the focus of this third course shifts away from canonic repertoire and style, towards a critical exploration of methodology, articulated by the work of scholars in jazz, popular music, art music, and ethnomusicology. Teaching this way has inspired Gwynne Kuhner Brown to adopt a more transparent, methodology-driven pedagogy in not only this course, but in other music history courses as well.

For the required music history core at Nebraska Wesleyan University, undergraduate music majors take two non-traditional topics-based courses taught by John Spilker. Designed to meet NASM guidelines, "Music History: Gender & Sexuality" and "Music History: The Environment" likewise fulfill campus-wide requirements for writing instruction and "thread cohorts," each of which organizes multiple disciplines around a common topic. These music survey courses feature case studies focusing on a work drawn from popular, blues, hip-hop, Broadway, art, and film music repertoires. Informed by student-centered inquiry and project-based learning strategies, each case study engages students in developing three research skills: 1) contextualization in time, place, and genre; 2) stylistic analysis; and 3) examination, understanding, and critique of a scholarly article related to the genre or culture. As a capstone, students apply these skills to a semester-long paper. A concurrent music history journal assignment requires students to locate and summarize information from key genres across the six historical periods.