Teaching Music History Today: Making Tangible Connections to Here and Now

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Abstract

There are two daunting challenges in teaching undergraduate music history today: 1) to be thorough and comprehensive, and 2) to make music history tangibly relevant in the lives of students. Only by abandoning the unrealistic goal of "covering it all" can instructors gain the time required to put the "old stories" of European music history in direct dialogue with the contemporary experiences of everyday student lives in America. Three multi-class activities on eighteenth-century music offer examples of how such contact between "then" and "now" can be accomplished. The first addresses notions of popular versus high art in order to demonstrate the pitfalls of anachronistic thinking when studying the music and the career of Joseph Haydn. The second uses a 24-hour listening journal to introduce topical analysis. The third is a seemingly straightforward production proposal for Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* that leads unexpectedly to discussion of such philosophical issues as the integrity of an artwork, the knowable versus unknowable intentions of a composer, and the production and location of musical meaning. Ultimately, to be able to think intelligently, meaningfully, and humanely about music, undergraduate students need fewer facts at their fingertips than instructors traditionally deliver.

Author Biography

Melanie Lowe is Associate Professor of Musicology and Chair of the Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music. She is the recipient of many teaching awards, among them the Reverend James Lawson Lectureship (Vanderbilt University, 2008), the Madison Sarratt Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (Vanderbilt University, 2001), and the Princeton Graduate Alumni Excellence in Teaching Award (Princeton University, 1993). She is also the author of *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony* (Indiana University Press, 2007) as well as articles on other 18th-century topics, music in American media, classical recording, and teen pop culture.
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Teaching Music History Today: Making Tangible Connections to Here and Now MELANIE LOWE T here are two daunting challenges in teaching undergraduate music history courses in the contemporary higher educational environment. First, despite the differences in our professional backgrounds, the wide variation in the level and musical experiences of our students, and the abundance of course formats and subjects, music history instructors often feel an imperative to be thorough and comprehensive, especially in survey courses. External pressures certainly play a role here, from the expectations of depa