

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

**PROFESSOR DYLAN J. SCHNEIDER**

**VISITING PROFESSOR, AMHERST COLLEGE (2017-18)**

**MUSIC COMPOSITION & THEORY**

Have you a moment? Let's step inside Room 215 of the Music Building, an upbeat before noon.

The cacophony we actually hear are messenger bags launched onto the floor and unzipped for service, plus fingers delicately tapping on phones with last goodbyes to friends “who are always there for me” or to questionable lovers, plus the air conditioning fan playing a *Prelude to Noise Pollution*. The cacophony we don't hear—ah, this is better, the prehistoric animal thoughts of music-loving homo sapiens, chasing dreams of fame and other potential harmonies, afraid to play the wrong note when class begins, maybe a comment that brings a chill of scorn from the all-knowing instructor with his secure, calm smile and his Ph.D. safely tucked away in his Italian leather valise.

As class starts, however, so begins my work to alleviate students' primordial fear of judgment and equip them with the skills to emerge as independent, self-reliant thinkers—who dare to question the status quo and aspire to make the world into a more just and enlightened place. Ultimately, I want my classroom to function as a laboratory, where students feel safe to test out their latest measures of music or their suggestions to improve the canonical rules of counterpoint. To achieve this, I offer a carefully measured mix of encouragement, approachability, rigor, and humor to guide students through a process of technical and cultural discovery.

Teaching music is not only an activity that I take seriously, but something that I relish, that deeply enriches me. I challenge my students to become critical thinkers by learning to organize their thoughts around the abstract and ephemeral aspects of music. In studying music, one learns a discipline that teaches analytical prowess, logical deduction, communication, creativity, and self-expression while heightening an awareness of our collective intellectual roots—ultimately touching upon what it means to be human.

Over the past decade, I have developed an expertise in tonal harmony, voice leading, counterpoint, set theory, and improvisation, as well as Schenkerian analysis and other approaches to tonal and post-tonal repertoires. In the music theory classroom, I have found that by engaging students in the performance of theoretical principles germane to the lesson (through singing an interval, performing a familiar piece, or occasionally even including their own instruments in the lesson), learners begin to internalize the logic of music in a way that often surpasses the need for rote memorization of abstract rules.

In my current experience teaching music composition at Smith College, I have found that students have fresh, compelling, and original musical instincts all of the time. My job, then, is to serve as a guide through the process of “spinning out” a young composer's idea into a satisfying and vivid composition, one that exudes both a sense of variety and wholeness.

To do this, I have developed a series of exercises (my own *Course in Composition*) to arm students with a toolkit that can accommodate a variety of musical styles. The repertoire for the course draws from musical traditions from across the globe. I believe it is critical to expose aspiring young composers to music they would not encounter in their ordinary routines. For example, one assignment earlier this semester, entitled “Creating Music Over a Drone,” emerged from our exploration of Carnatic music. In this assignment, students embellished a scale of their choosing (within certain guidelines), listening carefully to the intervals

their notes created with respect to the drone. Each student's piece was performed in class, by their peers, guest faculty, and myself.

I strive to help students imagine how their music will sound on various instruments, keeping in mind matters of playability, orchestral effect, and sonic character. In particular, I pay special attention to the quality of a student's notation, helping the young composer develop the skills and awareness to communicate one's musical intentions in clear, robust, and striking detail: the blueprint for a satisfying collaboration with performers. Perhaps above all, however, my most pressing responsibility is to help students procure the performance of their works. There is no greater educational resource for a composer than hearing one's music played—and, ideally, to have a quality recording.

A composition instructor must also decide how and when to incorporate the astounding array of music technology available today into the teaching process. Being a composer, I am deeply familiar with the music notation software on the market—both its advantages and pitfalls. Modern notation programs allow a student to “playback” music through MIDI audio. Unfortunately, this feature is not always an advantage for a beginning composer: it can give the false impression that a passage is playable on a given instrument when in fact it may be technically impractical, or even impossible. Having spent most of my life developing an intimate working knowledge of instruments, from the oboe d'amore to the electric bass, I can guide young composers beyond this pitfall and onto writing music that is idiomatic, fresh, and alluring.

Today, tools with which to create music are more readily available than ever before, for anyone with an Internet connection has access to powerful digital audio software. Nevertheless, in the absence of musical literacy, these programs can lead to results that are less than satisfying. Thus, when teaching computer music, I place as much emphasis on helping students consider fundamental musical questions—form, texture, harmonic and rhythmic interest, etc.—as on the technical aspects of programs and hardware. This approach helps students envision a dramatic structure for their work, using this ubiquitous technology in the creation of original and truly satisfying expression.

Furthermore, I strive to find ways for students to include elements of “live” performance in their computer work. For example, a student might use a MIDI device to control certain parameters of the composition in performance. I find that an element of improvisation not only contributes to a more engaging presentation but increases a student's overall involvement and satisfaction in the music making process.

Ultimately, as a teacher I am committed to opening up my academic and creative experiences—in music, literature, and more to students—while encouraging the development of their own intellectual and artistic identities. There is nothing like the buzzing of the spirit that creative expression can set off, and I find the process of connecting students with their own voice and inner passions my richest reward.

## **STATEMENT ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Western music owes its very existence to the robust (although sometimes sporadic) support of the church during the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation. Religion holds an essential place in the study of not only Western music but just about every musical tradition around the globe. I enjoy finding opportunities to explore the connection between a society's cultural and religious practices and its music. This may range from exploring with students the life of the medieval monk (who arises at 3 a.m. to sing plainchant) to the profoundly modern embracement of Christianity by the twentieth-century composer Olivier Messiaen, exemplified perhaps most poignantly in his opera *Saint Francis of Assis*. In my course *Music & Religion*, we explore these very subjects in depth.

In learning about our own religion and the religion of others through our study of music, we enrich our experience global citizens, coming to terms with how the belief of human beings defines their art.