

Music history as a polyphony

A heuristic study of learning and teaching music history

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ABSTRACT

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This article is based on my dissertation (Unkari-Virtanen 2009) wherein I related music history teaching and learning in Finland to the field of music education. The objective of my dissertation was to examine music history from a pedagogical perspective, and to discuss the meaning of music history studies for today's Higher Music Education students. The basis for the case study was one-year music history course at Stadia Helsinki Polytechnic in 2003–2004.

The methodology was based on heuristic research, ethogeny and participatory action research. The core of the data consisted of the students' anticipatory and contemporaneous accounts, transcribed negotiations, and the students' essays and exercises. I utilized Rom Harré's theory of identity in my interpretation of the learning process. Auli Toom's description of tacit knowledge provided a theoretical basis for the classification of the students' narratives, which made it possible to create connections with the different phases of Harré's identity process.

As a fundamental part of my study, I also reflected on the role of the teacher in regards to meaningful learning. The role of the teacher can be seen as both an upholder and a developer of tradition.

My primary conclusion was that music history, as the active memorizing of an open and democratic musical heritage, can help students to recognize themselves as participants and actors in a living musical tradition. However, shared reflection and collaborative development of both praxis and theoría are needed for music history teaching to be able to renew itself.

Keywords: music history pedagogy, practitioner research, music history teaching, music education

The past of music – praxis or theoria?

In Higher Music Education, the past of music is present in two distinct practices. The practical aspect (in Greek *praxis*) of the past is present in the instrumental lessons, in the art of playing. Since the Enlightenment, the theoretical aspect (in Greek *theoria*) of the past has been separated from the sensuous *praxis* (see Varto 2011:25). Music history as a modern academic discipline originated in the 18th century, and over the last two hundred years the history of music has been similar to the focus of numerous studies and writings, which outlined the past from many different perspectives, such as musicology or cultural research.

This article examines music history as an educational subject in Finland. Since the end of the 19th century, the history of western music has been studied as a part of the education undertaken by Finnish musicians. The pedagogical goal of music history teaching has long been focused as distribution of knowledge. Today, however, a vast variety of information and knowledge is easily accessible through the internet, and as a result the form and the essence of music history teaching and learning is being rethought. Many didactic researchers in general history now view their pedagogical goal as the cultivation of the students' "historical consciousness" rather than enforcing the students' knowledge of historical "facts" (see also Ammert 2010, Unkari-Virtanen 2011):

"In line with the liberation of the past from the constraints of academic history, historical consciousness no longer needs to be as focused on the interpretations and knowledge provided by the institution of history but can increasingly be determined by popular understandings and the needs of the consumers." (Pihlainen 2011)

Viewing "historical consciousness" as an educational goal means that history itself is seen more as a discipline of *praxis* than has previously been the case. Until the 21st century, critical examinations of music history from any educational perspective had been few and far between. Currently, however, the teaching and learning of music history is undergoing a pedagogical re-evaluation (see e.g. Briscoe 2010, Natvig 2002, Unkari-Virtanen 2009, 2011, JMHP 2011). New perspectives emphasize music history as an educational subject that can contribute to a student's musicianship by enhancing his or her understanding about music as social and cultural construction, and in Higher Music Education, also as a subject that can also promote the construction of the music student's professional identity. Music history – understood as the active memorizing of an open musical heritage – can thus help students to recognize themselves as participants and actors in a living and changing musical tradition.

Research Questions

The basis for the case study was a one-year course of Western music history (5 ECTS) at Stadia Helsinki Polytechnics (nowadays the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences) in the year 2003–2004. The participants, 34 students aged 18–24, were first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor's degree program in classical music. The course included three one-week lecture periods (3 hours per day) and between the periods listening, group working and e-learning. The curriculum emphasized the students ability to recognize musical styles as defined for example in Grout's *History of Western music* (Grout 1960).

The objective of my study was to examine music history teaching and learning in context of this course and from pedagogical point of view. I was interested of students' experiences of their music history studies, everyday routines concerning e-learning, and of their comprehension of music history knowledge, especially tacit knowledge. In my study, the research questions were:

1. What events were described by each student in his/her accounts of his/her music history course, and
2. How the student's tacit knowledge was comprehended in the individual student's descriptions of his/her learning process, and what can be said about the development of a classical musician's professional identity. Furthermore, based upon the previous questions, I examined
3. How the teaching and learning of music history could be improved upon in the light of the student's experiences and the tradition of the subject.

Methodology

The methodology was based on heuristic research (Moustakas 1990), ethogeny (Harré & Secord 1972) and participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000: 576–605). Figure 1 illustrates the methodological context of my research.

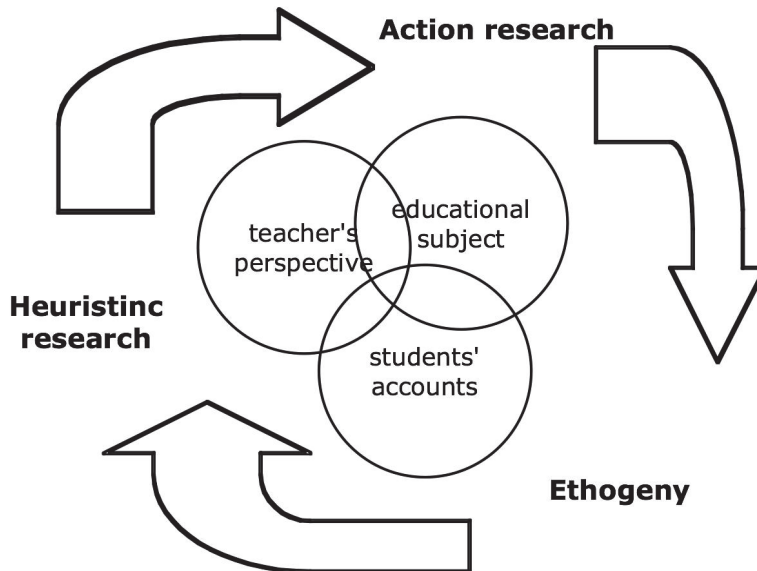


Fig. 1: Methodological context

Heuristic research, as defined by Moustakas (1990: 38–39), examines the underlying meanings of lived experiences and illuminates them from direct first-person accounts. Moustakas (1990: 38–39) outlines the characteristics of heuristic research as follows.

Heuristic research:

- Emphasizes connectedness and relationship between researcher and participants, in my study between me as a teacher-researcher and my students.
- Leads to depictions of essential meanings and portrayals of the intrigue and personal significance that imbue the search to know.
- May involve the reintegration of derived knowledge that itself is an act of creative discovery, a synthesis that includes intuition and tacit knowledge.
- Participants remain visible and continue to be portrayed as whole persons.

The heuristic element of the inquiry allowed me to pursue research questions that were deeply connected to my own identity and professional activities as a lecturer of music history. In my research, the heuristic approach manifests itself in the teacher’s perspective on the music history course, in the description of my personal goals for my own teaching, and also in my observations on the student’s accounts. In the

research report, I reflected on my own attitudes and assumptions with regards to my students' narratives, reflections and negotiations (Unkari-Virtanen 2009: 54–59).

The model employed for data collection of the research followed Harré & Secorde's methodology, based on the question "Why not ask them?" - which arose from the narrative turn in sociological methodology during the 1970's (Harré & Secorde 1972: 101). Harré and Secorde developed the conception of a human being as a rule-following agent. Ethogeny, as Harré and Secorde (1972) called their methodology, highlighted the participants' "voluntary" accounts of their own lives, and emphasized the researcher's negotiations with the participants when considering interpretations of the multi-layered structure of a research episode. An episode was defined as "any natural division of social life" (ibid.: 147), and an episode as a research entity comprehends not only overt behavior, but also the thoughts, feelings, intentions and plans etc. of the participants (Harré & Secord 1972:147). An episode has a formal structure - which in my research was defined by the curriculum and assessment practices of the music history course - as well as an enigmatic, unknown structure, which is not explicit (ibid.: 171–180). In my research the enigmatic element was represented by the rules, plans, conventions, and other practices, which students used to guide their behavior. I was the lecturer for the course, and I also examined the course as a researcher. I was searching for a teacher's understanding of the students' role, stemming from the collection and analysis of their accounts and my own negotiations with them. I collected the data - consisting of the students' accounts and assignments - during the course. The accounts were anticipatory (in the form of a kind of active role-playing, see Eskola & Suoranta 1998: 110–117) and contemporaneous, written during the course. Another important part of the data set were the recorded and transcribed negotiations with my students.

Participatory action research considers an action as a continuum of planning, action, evaluation, and reflecting; and its aim is to improve that action. As a self-study research of my own practice, the aim of my research was to improve my own teaching and learning of music history, including e-learning. The research process involved the development of music history teaching, and understanding the need for change in music history pedagogical practices, as well as the relatively high level of reflexivity in my own role. My research did not involve several action cycles, but the interpretation of the accounts was conducted in a collaborative partnership with my students (see Somekh's methodological principles for the action research process in Cain 2008: 248).

The data and the process of analysis

As a part of my research, the students who participated in the music history course at Stadia wrote descriptions of their learning experiences, or first-person accounts (see eq. Harré & Secord 1972: 167). The core of the data was composed of the students' anticipatory and contemporaneous accounts, transcribed negotiations between myself and the students, and the students' essays and exercises.

The anticipatory accounts (76 short stories, each of them written at the beginning of a lecture) mapped cultural stereotypes - the students' expectations of music history studies - as a kind of active role-playing (see Eskola & Suoranta 1998: 110–111). The anticipatory accounts were written in three variations on a simple narrative frame, where it was imagined that "Suzie Student" – an imaginary participant – was attending a very successful music history course. The students were asked to write a short description of what happened during this hypothetically successful course. In the first exercise the narrative frame focused on collaborative learning, in the second on lectures and assignments, and in the third did not include any mention at all of the teaching methods.

The music history course included three one-week lecture periods and e-learning continuing between the periods. The students' contemporaneous accounts were written at the beginning of the second and in the third lecture period. The first accounts (by 30 students participating to the lecture that week) turned out to be short descriptions of practical affairs, such as searching for recordings, writing their exams, and working with computers or in the physical environment of the lectures. My interest as a teacher-researcher was more oriented to a critical approach of the subject matter than to these practice-oriented accounts. In the second account (written by 27 students participating to the lecture that week) I asked the students to reflect on their learning and their collaborative activities. Thus, the process of data collection had already highlighted one difference between the teacher's and students' areas of interest: whereas my emphasis as a teacher was on a critical approach to the subject matter, the students were interested in the practical aspects of their performance and assignments.

The first and second accounts were followed by recorded and transcribed negotiations with each of the students, each lasting about 15–20 minutes. The research projects were thus also an empowering project; during the negotiations the students were asked to reflect upon their experiences

My dual role as a lecturer and a researcher naturally influenced the students' accounts, as well as their reflections as expressed in the negotiations. The situation was similar to any lecturer's relationship with his or her students: the students are always

looking for a good way to present themselves as respectable and skilled members of their learning community, and as promising professional musicians. As described later, in my theoretic framework I defined this theme as the “moral order” (see Harré 1983), and this conscious adoption of student roles was one theme in my analysis.

The process of analysis was abductive, combining the data, the theoretical concepts, and my own interpretation of the genealogy of music history as an educational subject. All of the negotiations with the students were transcribed and then thematized. The themes of the analysis, other than the “moral order” mentioned above, were:

- Music history learning as an everyday routine - a theme highlighted in the student accounts,
- The students’ performances and assignments during the course - also emphasized in the student accounts and negotiations,
- A critical outlook on the subject matter - my primary interest as a “critical” teacher, including a kind of genealogy of music history as an educational subject in Finland,
- Tacit knowledge, concepts, and narrative knowledge - my original inspiration for this research was the fact that in Higher Music Education classical music students gain a great deal of experience with playing classical music, but often cannot integrate these aspects of learning and playing their instruments with the knowledge and understanding gained from studying music history. How could the musicians’ tacit knowledge be interwoven with other ways of knowing?

Theoretical framework

I applied Rom Harré’s theory of identity (Harré 1983, Ylijoki 1998) to my interpretation of the learning process. Auli Toom’s (a Finnish researcher of compulsory school-teachers’ tacit pedagogical knowledge) description of tacit knowledge (Toom 2008: 54, see also Rolf 1995) provided a theoretical basis for the classification of the student narratives, which in turn made it possible to forge links to the different phases of Harré’s identity process.

The knowledge of music history gained through instrumental practice is by nature experimental and tacit, and different from the verbal or literary knowledge represented by music history textbooks. According to Toom, tacit knowledge is based on implicit concepts and theories, but also on situational anticipation grounded in a tradition (Toom 2008: 51). A tacit dimension of teaching rests on conventions and

repetition, and is by definition not only opposed to verbalizing and literacy, but also to rapid changes and to innovations (see Polanyi 1966; Toom 2008). Furthermore, tacit knowledge is not reflective in its essence. Rather, it can be defined as a contextual ability to act appropriately in various professional situations. The owner of tacit knowledge can be a person as well as a collective, and it can be examined as a process or through its product (Toom 2008: 53–54).

The concept of tacit knowledge, as described above, was compared to Rom Harré’s concept of an identity project (Harré 1983). Harré describes the different phases of what he calls “the psychological space” of an identity process (Harré 1983:258), while Toom specifies the different dimensions of tacit knowledge (Toom 2008: 54) as described in the middle of Figure 2. Both Harré and Toom define their four fields on the same axes, which are social and public–private, and process–product. Figure 2 illustrates the combination of Toom’s dimensions of tacit knowledge and Harré’s phases of the social construction of an identity (Unkari-Virtanen 2009: 141).

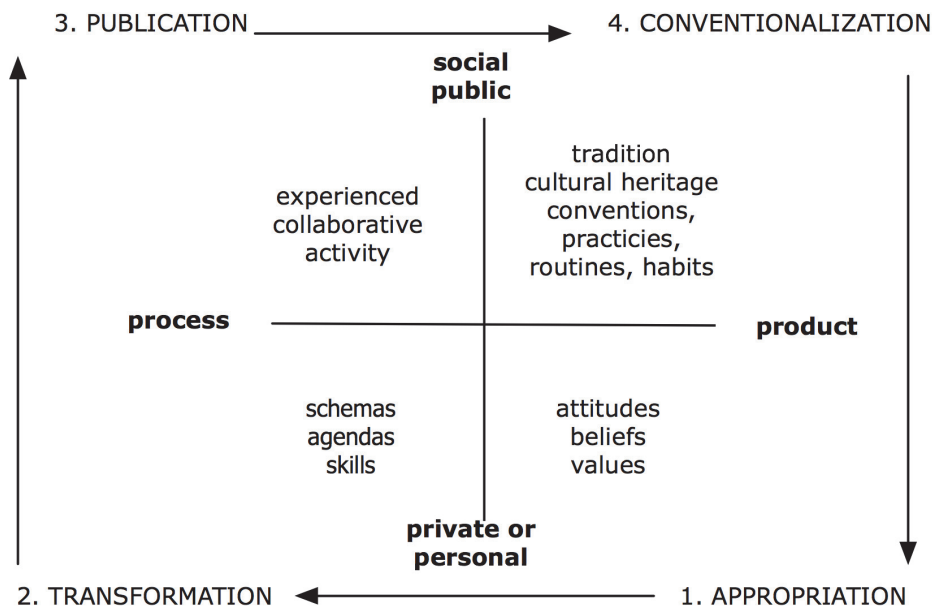


Figure 2: Dimensions of tacit knowledge and the phases of the social construction of a professional identity.

According to Harré, the psychological space of an identity process creates a continuum of four transitions. This process of transition is long-term, and is spread out over a period of several years. The transitions originate from a socially inherited

tradition, leading to an individual appropriation of the tradition and, in turn, through personal transformation of the tradition to the manifestation of a personal identity. By transforming his or her social appropriation to a personal interpretation, the student creates his distinctive personal being as a musician, to “take over his own development” (Harré 1983: 256–257).

Personal transformations can be brought out into a public arena, where the student stands “on a threshold of radical recategorization, since, depending on the reaction of that public, his personal innovations may earn him assessment running anywhere between ‘madman’ and ‘genius.’” (Harré 1983: 257.) Within the identity process, Harré, and a further developer of Harré’s theory Oili-Helena Ylijoki, both highlight the importance of the “publication” phase (Harré 1983: 259; Ylijoki 1998: 141–142). Ylijoki characterizes the publication phase as a kind of a trial for the “novice,” who may also fail and thus lose the opportunity to gain a position as a full member of a professional “tribune” (Ylijoki 1998: 136).

Harré’s last phase (see Fig. 2), conventionalization, illustrates the potential for the transformation of a tradition. By manifesting his personal transformation of the tradition, the student can also establish new interpretations of the tradition. If these new interpretations are accepted, this phase of publication leads in turn to a slow revision of the tradition (Harré 1983: 258).

Results

The analysis presented here was described as a process of reflection, incorporating a large data set based on citations from student accounts and transcribed negotiations. This data was first thematized, as described above. As an every day routine the students appreciated easy-access assignments with a minimum use of time for anything other than listening to music. The assignment which received the most negative feedback was one in which they had to travel to different music libraries in Helsinki. The management of time in the e-learning periods was also a problem for many of the students. These problems with time management eventually resulted in the students slightly criticizing me for not defining and recording them all the musical examples they should listen to.

The use of a computer for learning was mainly a problem for those students who did not own a computer. The public computer classrooms were seen as sometimes too noisy or too crowded, and sometimes the student did not have the time to learn to use the new web-based learning applications. When encountering these problems

during the e-learning period, some of the students gave up their assignments without contacting me, their teacher, to find a solution to their practical problems.

During the negotiations, the collaborative learning which took place in the course was mostly described as a positive element, however sometimes the students had problems finding the time to do the assignments together. Interestingly, in their anticipatory accounts the other students were described only as noisemakers during the lectures. My conclusion was that collaborative methods were not included in their cultural stereotypes of the learning methods used in music history; however, collaborative learning did eventually become a positive experience.

The students favored both reading and listening to or participating in lectures as learning activities, but listening to music was the most popular learning method. An analytical listening assignment was considered inspiring, but the students regretted that they did not have enough time to pursue it more fully. As a teacher, I expected to hear some reflections on the students' listening habits, but this was obviously not the students' primary concern. Some of the students articulated their uncertainty when they had to describe pieces of music that they had just listened to. They were looking for a model of the "right" answer, even if I, as the teacher, had pointed out the importance of describing their own experiences and perceptions. Other writing assignments, such as writing a booklet for an invented CD-collection of music, resulted in copy-and-paste writings; the students imitated or even copied the narrative style and stereotypical, canonized content known from their textbooks. In their peer assessments, as well as in the negotiations, the students characterized these writings made by other students as uninteresting.

The exploration of the hidden rules of the course, or the role defined by the course's enigmatic code (see above), was one of the main themes of the analysis. The primary shared practice for all the students was their attempt to hide their ignorance and uncertainty – a result that is itself worthy of further exploration. All the students tried to present themselves as competent and skilled future musicians, but the attributes of that status were variable. Sometimes music history studies were rejected due to a professed belief in the ideal that formal studies are repressive of artistic freedom; a few of the students told me that their ideal practice was their own informal exploration of music and composers, their historical context, and music life of the past. Some students told me that the assignments were too easy for them; meanwhile, the others told me that they had devoted a very large amount of time to their music history studies. During the negotiations, some of the students even wanted to instruct me in what they considered to be normative and acceptable assignments, exercises, and subject matter, and in contrast what material was not suitable for a proper music history course.

Conclusions: transforming music history pedagogy

The appropriation of both an increased musical repertory and the content of the music history textbooks were clearly the students' main goals in their music history studies. According to the data, the students believed the core of music history as a subject was comprised of musical works and information on composers. The students thought that the lecturer should introduce the subject matter, the important themes of interest, and all musical examples during the lectures, even if working in small groups was a generally liked way of learning. The students' critical attitude was focused on the forms of studying, and especially on the assignments, which they thought to be either "acceptable" or "wrong".

The phase of appropriation (see Fig. 2), and the student's expressions of their attitudes and values towards their music history studies, was seen clearly in the data set. In contrast, expressions of the phase of transformation were few or far between. E-learning and ICT had the potential to promote the phase of publication, however when the phase of transformation was lacking in the learning process the student's publications manifested as copy-and-paste works of little interest even for their student peers.

The minor role that historical thinking played in the data can be understood as a consequence of music history's own written tradition, but it can also be ascribed to my activities as a teacher. The students' own tacit knowledge of classical music was not appreciated as proper source of knowledge by themselves, even in the listening assessment, where the students were asked to describe their own perceptions. The students knew that the conventions of music performances varied over time, but they did not consider that all concepts and themes in music history texts are historically constructed. For the students, historical consciousness was a part of *praxis*, but not a part of literary history.

As a fundamental part of my study, I also reflected on the role of the teacher in the process of meaningful learning. One of my conclusions was that the teacher could, when recognizing the phases of the students' identity formation (Fig. 2), help students to pass through the passive phase of appropriation and move on to an active and experimental transformation of the tradition. The role of the teacher can be seen as both an upholder and a developer of tradition. I introduced a way to transform the teacher's role from that of a passive purveyor of information gained from textbooks to an active producer of knowledge, by approaching music history teaching through the metaphors "Cultural heritage", "Voice leading" or "Cultural memory".

Further applications

I would like to conclude by briefly discussing two further applications of my dissertation. Firstly, since the Fall of 2011 a group of Finnish music history teachers and students have been exploring new pedagogical approaches to transform music history into an inspiring musical heritage, and discussing the possibilities that new perspectives, such as historical consciousness, can provide to music history teaching and learning. The group is writing new material for music history teaching, and outlining guidelines for a renewed national curriculum of music history for Finnish music schools and conservatoires.

Another application of my work lies in a theoretical outlook on the transformative processes and collaborative learning of music history in Higher Music Education. Harrés phases of identity process can also be utilized to discuss curriculum development, the development of the publication phase, and “public arenas” in Higher Music Education institutes. Recitals and examinations are public arenas for performance skills, and in some Higher Music Education institutes a student’s final thesis can also be a public display of the student’s professional being. My argument is that, in order to encourage further positive change, shared reflection and the collaborative development of both *praxis* and *theoria* are needed to renew and reinvigorate the field of music history. Music history studies could and should contribute to the construction of students’ professional identities, and help students meet the increasing pace of change in the discipline; and we should thus encourage and support the transformation of curricula to respond to the new demands placed on both classical musicians and music teachers alike.

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