

A dear child has many names: an investigation of 'aural training' as a subject in specialist higher music education

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Introduction

Aural training has been one of the fundamental subjects in specialist higher music education for classical musicians since the establishment of the Paris conservatoire in 1795 (Jørgensen, 2009; Ilomäki, 2011). The subject is known by various names (see Ilomäki, 2011), but 'aural training' is most common in English-speaking countries, as well as in Norway, where it is usually translated to 'gehørtrening'. Central to the inclusion of aural training in performance education is the idea that the study of one's principal instrument alone does not make a 'complete' musician. Hence, aural training is often considered as one of the many subjects contributing to performance students' wider understanding of music as a practice as well as a phenomenon.

Aural training arose because of the need for learning notated music in a fast and reliable way (Blix & Bergby, 2007: 7). Because students needed to train their musical ears, sometime during the seventeenth century conservatoires started to divide music tuition into different subjects, and one of these changes involved separating the aural training subject from musical practice (Blix & Bergby, 2007: 10). In Norway, the aural training subject was formalized as part of a curriculum when the Organist school in Christiania, established in 1883, developed into the first music conservatory in Norway. One of the first Norwegian aural training textbooks was called 'Hitting the notes and music dictation' (Lindeman, 1961). This title may indicate a view of the aural training subject as disconnected from musical practice. Yet, Lindeman's intention was to support musical practice:

Some may ask why a musician needs skills in hitting the right notes or in music dictation. A singer obviously has to know how to hit the note, but

which need does a string player have for sight singing? Indeed, it's necessary for a string player to be able *to hear the melody for his inner ear before playing* (Lindeman, 1961, my translation).

In Europe, the aural training subject has continued to be taught separately since its early roots in the eighteenth century, but it is intended to have a complementary relationship to musical practice. The subject often has an explicit two-fold mandate:

Aural-skills education is expected to develop the students' aural awareness of music and their music literacy: their ability to learn and perceive music in increasingly refined ways and to communicate using music notation and other symbols. [A]ural-skills education should also support the students' growth into future musicianship, which is likely to involve unpredictable demands and challenges (Ilomäki, 2011: 1).

The first aim – to develop students' aural awareness – represents the separate function aural training may hold, while the second stated aim of developing musicianship represents the complementary and supportive function of aural training; the subject is described here as something that is meaningful *beyond* itself. However, various research studies over the past 25–30 years have shown that this aim is not always achieved. For example, Pratt and Henson (1987) investigated music students' attitudes to aural training and the content of aural training courses in England in the 1980s:

The first survey showed that the students were largely dissatisfied with their aural training, seeing much of it as irrelevant to their musical needs. (Pratt & Henson, 1987: 115).

The students in this survey reported finding their aural training 'irrelevant', which implies that the separateness of the subject from practice can have a negative result if the relationship between the two is not maintained. In a much more recent study, Feichas (2010) found that, among several subjects studied, aural training 'tended to be structured and compartmentalised regardless of students' experiences, and consequently [was] disconnected from daily life' (p. 53). In this study, an aural training course in Brazil is claimed to be very separate indeed from the musical practice and the students, and the complementary function of aural training seems to be lacking. My view is that a reduced complementary function can also result if one works specifically on the link *between* aural training and music performance.

In fact, working too much on the link may challenge aural training as a separate subject – that is if the characteristics of aural training disappear in what seems like an ideal amalgamation with performing subjects.

Discussing a dichotomy between intrinsic and utility value

In this article, I argue that there may be a dichotomy between the conception of a ‘separate aural training subject’ and the conception of a ‘complementary aural training subject’ in classical specialist higher music education. By ‘separate aural training subject’ I mean an independent – and perhaps isolated – educational subject, specifically addressing the development of aural skills and aural awareness. By ‘complementary aural training subject’ I mean an independent – but perhaps integrated – educational subject supporting musicianship. In such an understanding, the separate subject is meaningful *in* itself, and the complementary subject is meaningful *beyond* itself. This distinction may be understood as a dichotomy between ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘utility value’, and this dichotomy may be present within the same aural training subject.

The subject area of aural training is affected by different agents. Insiders contribute by undertaking research studies and developing curricula that emphasize certain understandings of aural training. Higher music institutions may affect the subject by making certain political moves. Students themselves can contribute by talking about a subject in certain ways. For example, Cargill and Pratt (1991) found that students could feel ‘that everyone is better at aural than you are’ (p. 22), which displays the aural training subject as an object – something you either master or do not master. Finally, other faculty, or outsiders, may contribute to a debate simply by talking about aural training.

From my insider perspective as an aural training teacher and researcher, I suggest that, at least in some institutions, the aural training subject now stands at a vitally important crossroads. I further argue that understanding the debates about the aural training subject as a possible power struggle between intrinsic and utility value can reveal some deep-rooted assumptions at work. This article therefore seeks to investigate *some* possible values of aural training as a subject in classical specialist higher music education, taking as a point of departure that there is some-

thing to learn from taking a distance from one's own understanding of the suggested dichotomy.

Of use in exploring how the terms 'intrinsic' and 'utility' value may inform our understandings of the aural training subject are the Aristotelian concepts of *praxis* and *poiesis* (Aristotle, 2000). Aristotle's *praxis* may be understood as 'action' (Bartlett & Collins, 2011). In our context, this means that the 'actions' of teaching and learning aural training can be meaningful in themselves, without reference to any usefulness to musical practice, and that the content of the subject may have intrinsic value. *Poiesis* can be understood as 'production' (Bartlett & Collins, 2011) and describes actions that are suitable in order to gain something else. Thus teaching and learning in aural training can be meaningful – 'productive' – for musical practice. The value lies outside the activity (see also Øverenget, 2012 and Varkøy, 2012).

Another pair of terms to be interrogated in this article is *basic subject* and *school subject* (Nielsen, 1998; Nielsen 2007). In Nielsen's (1998) terminology a school subject collects its content from one or several basic subjects, which could be science, a form of art or a handcraft tradition. According to Nielsen (2007) the school subject of music is extending its contents and structures "from an ars to a scientia dimension (music as art, craft and science)" (p. 268). The scope of the present article does not allow an extensive discussion of which basic subjects form the make-up of aural training, but it is often said to draw from a variety of disciplines, including music theory, musicology, and musical practice.

About the study

This article reports on a small-scale theoretical investigation, taking partly a historical and partly a contemporary look at the subject of aural training. The data comes from 'document studies' on curricula as well as research studies. Atkinson and Coffey (2004) argue that documents should be seen as "social facts," in that they are produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways' (p. 58). This way of thinking about text and statements is very much in alignment with the list of possible dichotomy contributors mentioned above.

My specific examples are selected from two countries, Great Britain and Norway. I chose these two countries because I experience their subject areas of aural training

to be progressive, in the sense that the mentioned dichotomy is actually present, which means there is a debate with possible power struggle. The two institutions chosen are The Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) and The Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH). Again, the selection is based on what I perceive to be progressive thinking within these institutions.

Although I will view the different kinds of documents as ‘social facts’, it is not possible to understand all underlying cultural issues just by reading. In one sense, I inevitably have the best understanding of the Norwegian documents, but on the other hand, these present the biggest challenge to my professional distance, given my cultural preconceptions.

Intrinsic value within the aural training subject

There is evidence in curricula that the aural training subject has intrinsic value at both the RNCM and the NMH. The curriculum for the BMus (Hons) at the RNCM, states:

Years 1 & 2: You will attend lectures and seminars each week to develop **core skills** in music theory, music history, culture and performance, aural and improvisation training. (RNCM, 2017, my emphasis).

The curriculum for Bachelor of Music Performance, first year, at NMH states:

By working with the subject, the student shall acquire **core skills** within melody, rhythm and harmony (NMH, 2017, my emphasis, my translation).

The references in these excerpts to ‘core skills’ reveals the presence of a *praxis* perspective. Structuring these quoted ‘school subjects’ of aural training around core skills is in line with the subject’s history: the content that was originally separated was the training of abilities to read music. Hence, the emphasis on core skills is perhaps the most obvious proof that the authors of the curricula – the faculty – have a strong connection to the subject’s tradition. They (we) try to maintain some of the features of the aural training subject, by saying that some knowledge is ‘best’ acquired within the framework of a separate subject.

Utility value within the aural training subject

There is also evidence in curricula that the aural training subject has utility value at both the RNCM and the NMH. In the curriculum for the Bachelor of Music Performance, first year, at NMH, this sentence follows immediately after the sentence quoted above about core skills:

The development of methodical insight and the **ability to use** this in **performance practice** is emphasized in the course (NMH, 2017, my emphasis, my translation).

And the curriculum for the BMus (Hons) at the RNCM says:

The aims of the BMus (Hons) programme are to: **Enable** students **to relate** skills and knowledge developed in studies of music theory, aural training, and cultural context to **performance practice** (RNCM, 2017, my emphasis).

Here I have emphasized 'performance practice', as well as the verbs that go with it: 'ability to use' and 'enable to relate'. The two examples reveal a *poiesis* perspective within the aural training subject at both institutions. It is clearly stated that the subject shall have meaning *beyond itself*, the meaning does not lie solely within the aural training course, but has a greater purpose of improving musicianship. Hence, the examples show that the *poiesis* perspective is also being kept alive by aural training faculty. They (we) are trying to fulfil the twofold aim of aural training being a complementary subject.

A question remains, of course, whether the utility value wished for actually happens in practice. An example of a research study looking at the utility value of aural skills in relation to musical practice is McNeil (2000). McNeil's aim is to establish 'whether aural skills [...] actively influence, inform and enhance performance skills'. She interviewed students and teachers and found that:

[...] teachers and pupils are frequently unaware of any relationships between aural skills [...] and performance ability. [...] It also became apparent that they could not divorce aural skills, as defined in examinations, from aural skills needed to produce a 'good' performance (McNeil, 2000).

Earlier, we also saw that both Pratt & Henson (1987) and Feichas (2010) found a lack of coherence between aural training courses and musical practice.

Conclusion

My title, 'A dear child has many names', is more than an allusion to the various names under which aural training is known. It has been my aim to shed light on the two ways of *describing* the aural training subject in specialist higher music education, and to show that the subject can be understood as both separate and complementary. Or put in another way, there is a possible dichotomy between an intrinsic value and utility value in the subject area. In the introduction, we saw that aural training became a separate subject *in order to* better prepare students for their performance practice. In the quoted curricula, we learnt that subject descriptions of aural training may include both *praxis* and *poiesis* perspectives. The meaning of aural training seems to be found inside as well as outside the subject.

Yet there is a paradox, here, which challenges the dichotomy. The two-fold aim of seeking both intrinsic value and utility value is actually *inherent* within the aural training subject itself – at least the way it is presented in the curricula referred to in this article – and in my experience this is a more common analysis than the examples can represent. As we have seen, however, research shows that the complementary aim is not fully achieved. Somehow, students do not experience the connection between their aural training and musical performance. The paradox is that the aural training subject seems to have been isolated – by being separated as a subject – despite of the fact that its content and aims seem to maintain the original idea of supporting the development of musicianship.

Maybe, as Gustavsson (2012) argues, the dichotomy between education¹ and utility value is unnecessary. Perhaps we need not deal with the antagonism of education and utility, but can instead see the different perspectives as fruitful in relation to each other. Then, if there is a point in keeping a separate subject alive, because the faculty believe there are important core skills to be learnt, and there is also the wish for increasing the utility value, we should look at ways of dealing with the synergies. Some effort has been made, because the RNCM has a Theory and Musicianship course

1 Gustavsson's original term here is 'bildning', which is the equivalent of the German 'Bildung'.

in which aural training is an important part, and at the NMH aural training is a crucial part of the curriculum of both the elective chamber music course and the elective contemporary music course. I believe that this blending of different subjects is a good way to keep the best of both viewpoints.

Finally, I would argue that musical performance is actually the *practice* of aural training. Hence, students need to develop some core aural skills, but they also need to use these skills in real-life music. Many curricula encourage this two-fold aim. The challenge is to make it happen within the education.

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