

Teaching by Example

Experiential Dimensions of the Theory Classroom

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§ “In the second bar a fermata, then the idea repeated a tone lower, then another fermata.” In his seminal review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, E. T. A. Hoffman, in Ian Bent’s view, “narrates the listener’s perceptual experience . . . [withholding] verbs so as to convey a sense of breathless disorientation.”¹ The disorientation stems from the opening being less a stable theme than a catalyst for forward motion (a typical heroic-style trait). Hoffman’s text does not primarily *denote* the instability, as it would have had it said, for example, “A restless idea is no sooner stated than abruptly sequenced a step lower.” Rather, his text in some sense embodies or *exemplifies* the instability,² paralleling the reader’s experience of it.³

(1) Hoffman 1994 [1810].

(2) Nelson Goodman offers an elaborate and complicated formulation of denotation and exemplification in Goodman 1976, 45–80. For my present purposes, it suffices to say that to denote something is to point to it, whether by linguistic or pictorial representation; to exemplify something is to embody it, to serve as a material example of it. A painting of green grass denotes the grass but denotes *as well as* exemplifies greenness, since the latter is a material property of the painting itself.

(3) Chua 1999, chap. 22, offers a rich reading of Hoffman’s textual embodiment, exhorting us to “step into the imagery of Hoffman’s language to enter [the] magical realm” (180) of the absolute music Hoffman describes. Chua concludes that Hoffman’s essay is “itself a representation of the sublime” (182) of which Beethoven’s Fifth is, by Hoffman’s lights, musically paradigmatic.

§ Steven Rings undertakes a close structural and hermeneutic reading of Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* (Rings 2008). His reading centers on a duality between the repetitiveness of the ostinato motive and the flow of the melody; the ostinato itself embodies this duality in suggesting physical exertion that does not propel the protagonist forward—he seems to be walking in place. “Kinetic action thus shades into frozen temporality, physical impulse into stasis” (189). This “temporal polyphony” between frozenness and flow comes to a head in the phrase beginning in measure 20, where, two bars in, the ostinato ceases to alternate between two dyads and gets stuck on one—E/F, which it repeats seven times. Yet, over this broken-record figure, a melody unfolds continuously. Hence, this moment vividly projects two disparate temporalities simultaneously. (These also derive from the barren no-flat collection colliding with the much fuller and more fertile six-flat collection.) At this juncture in the article, Rings temporarily steps out of his chronological narrative—he momentarily suspends his bar-by-bar exegesis—in order to offer a “temporal excursus,” in which he surveys six different modes of temporal interpretation, drawing from literary theory. In so doing, Rings (intentionally or not) exemplifies the very temporal polyphony he had been at pains to explain. At precisely the moment within his exegetical narrative where temporal polyphony comes to a head, Rings sharply juxtaposes the onward flow of that narrative with an out-of-time theoretical meditation. Afterward, he resumes his narrative and completes it.

§ Such exemplification, of course, is not limited to written essays—it can be an effective tool of oral rhetoric as well.⁴ In her 2014 keynote address to the Society for Music Theory, “Does It Matter Where We Begin?,”⁵ Lydia Goehr meditated on the nature of musical beginnings, essentially posing this question: at what point, both historically and conceptually, does a prelude cease to prepare the work to which it is an ostensible introduction? When does it become an integral part of that work, or even a work in its own right? In short, how do we know when we have begun in earnest? Goehr, in turn, deftly problematized the beginningness of her own oration, elaborately precluding the main thrust of her argument, making her audience wonder if that thrust was already underway. Several minutes in, she called conscious attention to her rhetorical tack: “With my own preparatory preambing now well on its way. . . .”

(4) And of literature. In Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, for instance, Mignon's song, “Kennst du das Land,” depicts a paradisaical scene in the first stanza that is disrupted by the subsequent stanzas' depictions of suffering, anxiety, and dread. Lawrence Kramer remarks that these “stanzaic doublings are so haunting to Wilhelm that he is compelled to repeat them at the level of narrative. . . . He proceeds to write down the text . . . only to find that his actions imitate those of the text itself. Like the paradise of the first stanza, the pleasure of Wilhelm's first hearing is progressively disrupted with each act of doubling” (Kramer 1990, 25). Goethe thus displays in fictional writing what the previous writers I cited display in academic writing: harmonious accord between narration (diegesis) and content (mimesis).

(5) Goehr 2014. The lecture has since found its way into written form in *Music Theory Online* 21/3 (2015).



Hoffman, Rings, and Goehr all embody or exemplify various temporal dynamics or modes to which they refer in the very way they write about them. In so doing, they afford the reader or listener a visceral experience, not just intellectual grasp, of those dynamics. All three thus evince not just a cerebral disposition but an artistic one as well; they are clearly concerned to dispense their respective arguments with poetic élan, as regards syntax and structure.

How might the theory teacher do for her students what these artist-scholars do for their readers and listeners? That is, how might she exemplify rather than merely refer to structural processes or music-theoretic ideas,⁶ thus affording her students a concrete experience of them? More precisely, how might she foster situations whereby the students *themselves* exemplify the concepts under consideration, experiencing them with immediacy, with a minimum of conceptual interference? I offer three pedagogical scenarios, which loosely recount portions of classes I have recently taught.

Scenario 1: I merely point to an exemplification that I believe has already transpired. It is Monday morning with weary second-semester freshmen; we are reviewing parallel periods, a form I had introduced the previous Friday. I ask students to rehearse the concept. Trevor says, “A period has two adjacent phrases that sound the same or similar.” I respond, “Okay, good start.” Kristin chimes in: “The similarity comes from the second, consequent phrase melodically retracing the first, antecedent phrase, perhaps with some embellishment; but the two phrases differ in their tonal goals—they have two different kinds of cadence, one stronger, the other weaker.” I comment:

Trevor and Kristin, together you provided a satisfying definition of a period. Notice, what Trevor said, Kristin restated with “embellishment”—she elaborated on the “similarity” on which Trevor initially remarked. In addition, she provided the crucial piece of information missing from Trevor’s description—that the phrases’ cadences are different. In other words, Kristin was the consequent to Trevor’s antecedent! [Some students chuckle.] I don’t use that metaphor lightly, for I believe the antecedent/consequent relationship is at root, like so much else in music, a model of human behavior and interaction. Trevor and Kristin unknowingly modeled, in fact, a *good* relationship, in which

(6) There is obviously a crucial ontological distinction between “structural processes” and “music-theoretic ideas” about such processes. Is interruption, for instance, an intrinsic musical behavior that Schenker simply recognized, hypostatized, and coined a term for (*Unterbrechung*), or is it an outright construct whose connection to inherent musical properties is rather contingent? This is a sticky issue I can’t properly engage here, but I do in my *Performative Analysis: Reimagining Music Theory for Performance* (Swinkin 2016). There I elaborate on an idea proposed by Nicholas Cook, among others, that Schenkerian and other theoretical phenomena are not immanent in musical works but apply to them in metaphorical fashion. Suffice to say, when I refer to a musical behavior in this essay, it should be understood that such a behavior arises from a music-notational fact as viewed through a metaphoric music-theoretic lens.

two people have much in common but also differ in a way that allows them to complement each other. [A few students look confused.] Think of it this way: two consecutive similar phrases that have the same cadential goal won't form a period—they will merely amount to a single phrase that is repeated. Just so, two people who mirror each other too closely, who lack some complementary difference, probably won't "interlock" as a couple.

In this scenario, I point up the way in which the two students, in their interaction, exemplified the very concept under discussion. I do so fueled by the conviction that musical behaviors are analogous to human ones and that students, in the process of learning concepts, inevitably exhibit some of those very behaviors to which musical ones are analogous. Notice, I do not savor this exemplification tacitly but call it to my students' attention in order, I hope, to make the idea of a period more tangible, relatable, and memorable.

Scenario 2: I see in how the class is unfolding the potential for exemplification and I help bring it to fruition. It is Tuesday morning with sophomores. The Thursday prior I had explained to them, in somewhat simplified terms, the Schenkerian notion of interruption: basically, a phrase or section departing from a $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{3}$ supported by I aims to reach the goal of $\hat{1}/I$ but is impeded by $\hat{2}/V$. In order to find its way around this obstacle ("divider"), the phrase must start again and eventually do something different (melodically and harmonically). The class seemed to grasp this concept when I introduced it, but now they are hard-pressed to articulate it. Certain students explain it only partially, then hit various stumbling blocks. I say, "Okay, take a beat, mull it over with a classmate, and then in a moment we'll reconvene." For, I find that when a class as a whole is stuck (or at least reticent), allowing a few moments for discussion in small groups can alleviate the blockage, can help thoughts to flow more freely. Sure enough, when we regroup, the class manages to reconstruct a more complete definition.

I then call the students' attention to how the experience we just shared mirrored, in a sense, the very musical process we were trying to grasp. That is, we were trying to reach a goal (to understand and verbalize the notion of interruption); we were, for whatever reason, impeded in reaching that goal; we paused in order to alleviate the blockage, to find a different way forward; finally, after restarting our class discussion, we were able to reach our goal. In drawing this parallel, I make clear that interruption is not some esoteric idea unique to music

or music theory but is rather a common human experience, a schema: striving toward a goal, almost but not fully reaching it, trying again, and finally, finding a way to completion. Such is how we often move through physical space and, metaphorically, through the path of our lives.⁷ Drawing this parallel and pointing out to the students that they just *enacted* that parallel, will, I hope, make it easier for them to grasp and recall the concept—more so than if we had only discussed it in abstract terms.

Scenario 3: In contrast to the preceding scenarios in which exemplification arose more or less by happenstance, here I virtually ensure it by building it into a class design. It is Wednesday afternoon, and I am preparing Thursday's Forms and Analysis, a class for juniors and seniors. My plan is to cover the dialectical kind of ternary form favored by nineteenth-century composers in which the A_2 section synthesizes elements of A_1 and B—usually the theme of A_1 and rhythmic, textural, or registral features of B.⁸ Our main example will be Brahms's Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10, No. 1. In addition to discussing the synthesis as indicated in Example 22.1, I would like us, in the very structure of our session, to enact or embody synthesis, so that the students experience it on a non-conceptual level. I thus devise the following tripartite lesson plan:

- “ A_1 ”: discuss the dialectical aspects of Brahms's form;
- “B”: discuss the poetic impetus behind the musical genre of ballade, touch on Chopin's precedent,⁹ and then specifically address Herder's ballad “Edward,” on which the piece is based (Brahms's epigraph reads “Nach der schottischen Ballade: ‘Edward’ in Herders ‘Stimmen der Völker’”);
- “ A_2 ”: discuss how Brahms's dialectical structure on some level depicts or reflects Herder's story.

(7) Of Mark Johnson's various schemata (Johnson 1987), **BLOCKAGE** is probably most applicable here. As Janna K. Saslaw defines it, “Blockage entails the prevention of a force's continuation in a particular direction by an obstacle of some kind” (Saslaw 1997–98, 21). Although Saslaw does not relate this schema to interruption per se, she does see the schema as pervading Schenker's theory generally. For a fairly recent exposition of image schemata, one that seeks to refine and lend empirical support to Johnson's categories, see Mandler and Cánovas 2014, 510–32.

(8) Such synthesis between highly contrasting themes and sections is not limited to ternary form; it also commonly occurs in alternating variation form. See, for example, Kevin Korsyn's analysis of Beethoven's *Heiliger Dankgesang* movement from Op. 132 in Korsyn 1993.

(9) See Samson 1992, esp. chap. 4.

Example 22.1: Overview of Brahms, *Ballade in D Minor, Op. 10, No. 1*

A₁: Opening, theme 1 (mother's theme)
 Mother: "Why does your sword so drip with blood?"

Theme 2 (Edward's theme)
 Edward (lying): "I have killed my hawk."

Poco più mosso.

B: first few bars (interior theme, based on theme 2 [which, in turn, closely resembles theme 1, especially in terms of rhythm])

A₂: first few bars (sans pickup), amalgamates theme 1 of A₁ and triplets of B

To prepare, I consult Charise Hastings's excellent essay (Hastings 2008). Very briefly, she observes that the poem pivots on three crucial events: (1) Edward's mother counsels him to kill his father; (2) Edward does so; (3) Edward and his mother converse about it. However, the poem recounts these events in reverse chronological order. Invoking the diegetic/mimetic distinction, Hastings posits that the chronological sequence belongs to the "story" (mimesis), the reverse narration to the "discourse" (diegesis), and maintains that it is the latter that informs Brahms's structure: A_1 , with its alternation of two themes, intimates the conversation between mother and son; B, with its focus on and violent buildup of the second, "Edward" theme, intimates the murder (or recounts it); and A_2 , with its devotion to the first theme, intimates the initial counsel, and the triplets perforated by rests connote the murderous deed yet to be actualized. Hence, the musical synthesis within A_2 serves to set the stage: the mother's theme together with the enervated triplets forebode a deed that, in the time of the story, has yet to happen.

My class plan folds the discussion of Brahms's dialectical form into a broader class structure that is itself dialectical: in the piece, A_2 incorporates elements of A_1 and B (Ex. 22.1); likewise, in the class, we initially (" A_1 ") discuss Brahms's ternary piece in purely musical terms; then (" B ") we explore literary models for the musical ballade as a genre, the literary model for Brahms's ballade in particular; finally (" A_2 "), we relate the formal process to the literary model, understanding how Brahms's musical synthesis is narratively motivated. My pedagogical " A_2 " thus synthesizes the musical and the literary just as Brahms's A_2 synthesizes the first theme of A_1 and the triplets of B. Hence, in this session—if all goes to plan—we will not merely talk about Brahms's dialectical dynamic abstractly and conceptually but act it out, experiencing it on a subtextual level, through the very process by which we work on the piece.



The theory classroom, then, can be a venue not merely in which to refer to aesthetic processes as something happening "out there," in the music, but in which to play them out "right here," in the very act of studying the music. The teacher can observe such exemplification taking place naturally and point out when it does (as in the first scenario above), can facilitate it extemporaneously (second scenario), or can build it into the class structure (third scenario). Again, all three scenarios rest on the contention that musical behaviors (as viewed through some music-theoretic lens) are analogous to or resonate with common human experiences: interpersonal dynamics (recall the antecedent-consequent scenario), schematic physical engagements (the interruption scenario), and synthesis of diverse elements (the dialectical ternary scenario).

Why would the theory teacher want to promote exemplification of music-theoretic concepts anyhow? Why, that is, would he want students to act out, or to notice when they are already acting out, such notions (or, more precisely, the common experiences or schemata underlying such notions)? I would posit two interrelated reasons, the first qualitative, the second quantitative. First, the non-denotative dimension of instruction I have been describing arguably instills a deeper sort of learning, entrenching ideas and dispositions in students' minds more firmly and intuitively than rational discourse by itself could. Second, and simply put, two levels of learning are better than one. In my approach, music-theoretic concepts are not only discussed rationally and consciously but also experienced, such that the concepts openly discussed receive a second, non-propositional level of reinforcement. It stands to reason that the more levels on which and the more numerous ways in which a skill or concept is addressed, the more readily and thoroughly the student will learn it.¹⁰

Beyond its efficacy in instilling any one particular concept, this approach is valuable in mirroring an essential property of music more generally—its tendency to exemplify rather than denote emotions and other states.¹¹ To elaborate, music and language have traditionally been viewed as opposing types of signifiers. Linguistic signifiers, at least in a Saussurian model, have an arbitrary relation to what they signify—the word “dog” refers to a dog (actual or ideational) merely as a matter of convention. Musical signifiers, by contrast, generally have a more necessary relation to their signifieds. Music does not refer to something external to itself, as language usually does, but in some sense embodies the quality or emotion it signifies. The qualities or emotive states to which a piece refers are palpable and perceptible in the piece itself. To believe otherwise, Leo Treitler cautions, is to deem music's most central, tonal and rhythmic features incidental or subordinate to what they signify.¹²

To take a simple example, a sad piece, Peter Kivy observes, will normally exhibit physical characteristics analogous to those exhibited by a sad person: a slow gait (that is, a slow tempo), a drooping façade (for example, a descending bass), and mournful vocalizations (for example, sigh figures). Other features, such as pungent dissonances, express not so much the physical and vocal manifestations of sadness as the affective quality of sadness itself.¹³ Consequently,

(10) In this respect, my method seeks to bridge a chasm John Dewey detected in twentieth-century American educational practices, one separating rational and increasingly specialized learning and more intuitive learning. Education, Dewey admonishes, must “avoid a split between what men consciously know because they are aware of having learned it by a specific job of learning, and what they unconsciously know because they have absorbed it in the formation of their characters by intercourse with others” (1916, 9).

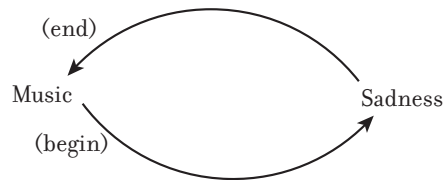
(11) This paragraph and the next are adapted from my *Teaching Performance: A Philosophy of Piano Pedagogy* (Swinkin 2015, 5). An extended discussion of exemplification in the context of applied-music teaching is found in chap. 7.

(12) Treitler 1997.

(13) Kivy 1989, 12–26, *passim*. Similar views are held by Davies (1994) and Michael Spitzer, who states, “the referential quality inheres . . . in the very quality of the musical material” (Spitzer 2004, 105). Spitzer adds that the ostensible act of referring to something external paradoxically shines an even brighter spotlight on the musical matter, its corporeal substance.

while the phrase “sad person” refers to or denotes the person over there who is crying, a sad piece is itself a tangible example of sadness. In listening to the sad piece, we are not led away from it (as with “sad person”); rather, our attention is tightly tethered to each musical detail exuding that quality. As Treitler aptly summarizes (in referring to a passage from Berg’s *Lulu*, which he invokes to convey this general point), “The music signifies, unquestionably, but it is not absorbed in signifying. Reference flows from this complex signified back to the music, which, rather than vanishing once it has done its job of signifying, is richer as a result of the reference from the signified to it.”¹⁴ Example 22.2 diagrams this path of reference.

Example 22.2



This semiotic behavior holds not just for emotive features but for structural ones as well. For example, a piece marked by interruption (at whatever structural level) does not refer to the idea of interruption as something outside of itself but materially embodies the schematic experience (striving toward a goal, being blocked, starting again, reaching the goal) of which that theoretic notion is a token. The same arguably holds for aspects of formal design or for form-functional entities, at least in some music. In the music of Mahler and Berg, according to Adorno, a module doesn’t so much refer to its formal function as wears it on its sleeve. “In Berg’s mature works ultimately every phrase or partial entity not only divulges with complete clarity to cognitive understanding its formal function, but also makes that formal function so emphatic a part of the directly perceived phenomenon that a concluding phrase declares: I am a concluding phrase; and a continuation, I am a continuation.”¹⁵ Absent the top-down, architectonic structure of the Classical style, such music must build form from the bottom up; the formal function of a module arises from its internal constitution—from its intrinsic thematic and harmonic content—rather than from its relation to other modules. Each module thus conveys its function with palpable immediacy.

To the extent, then, that exemplification is more typical of music than of (nonartistic) language, it behooves the theory teacher to find opportunities within the language-based medium of pedagogy to exemplify concepts—which is to say, *to teach music in a musical way*. Teaching in this manner serves not only

(14) Treitler 1997, 35.

(15) Adorno 1991 [1968], 373. For a robust discussion of this idea, see Vande Moortele 1995, 421–23.

to instill particular concepts in an experiential way but, much more consequentially, to convey, if subliminally, a deep-seated sense of how musical signification works generally.



One last scenario . . . because teaching, as we all know, extends beyond classroom instruction into the realm of mentorship and emotional support. It is Friday, the end of a long week, and Mark, a master's student in music theory, shows up to an office hour ostensibly to review a Schenkerian graph of Bach's Sarabande from the Cello Suite No. 4 in E \flat Major that we had recently generated in seminar. But no sooner does he arrive than he starts expressing academic angst—in particular, regrets about the somewhat circuitous path he had taken to this point. He recounts how, during his senior year of college, he had developed a taste for music theory and considered pursuing graduate work in it. However, he was deterred by uncertainties: he was unsure how to fashion an academic niche from his current *mélange* of intellectual interests and was also (understandably) apprehensive about entering a notoriously competitive profession. Thus, after graduation, rather than attending graduate school, he chose to work as a freelance musician—teaching lessons and performing—and as an independent scholar. Through the latter activity, he eventually developed enough of a scholarly identity as to feel secure entering academia. So, he matriculated at a master's program, which gave him an even greater sense of direction. Now he is deeply fulfilled by the work—it is part of who he is—even if, on occasion, some doubts remain (as evident in our meeting today). Even those lingering doubts, I counsel, are an integral part of the process; occasionally questioning one's career choices and/or intellectual allegiances can help one ultimately to understand them more deeply and embrace them more fully.

After a contemplative pause, we turn to the graph, as shown in Example 22.3. We remark in particular on the C neighbor that is a veritable motive in this dance: it first appears in incomplete form in m. 2; its thread is then picked up in m. 7, whereupon it resolves to the inner-voice B \flat in measure 9. C then steps outside of the picture momentarily while the dominant *Stufe* is solidified by a fifth-progression, which closes the section. C then returns, decamping to the bass voice, where it partakes of an enlarged neighbor motive, which renders that C more deeply ensconced in the voice-leading fabric and more integral to the tonal structure (C serves as the local tonic of the relative minor). C's connection to the B \flat tonic, initially tenuous in measures 1–9, is now solidified; there is no longer any question of the neighbor having either no resolving tone (as in mm. 1–2) or only a meager inner-voice one (as in mm. 7–9). During the rhyming-cadential section starting in measure 25, the neighbor traces a path similar to the one it took in the opening bars, but now it momentarily crops up in the bass by way of a deceptive (or evaded) cadence in measure 28. Thereafter, it dutifully returns to its upper-voice milieu and the *Kopftön* in advance of the final, structural descent.

Example 22.3: Middleground graph of Bach, Sarabande, from Cello Suite No. 4 in E_b Major

meas. 1 7 9 15 22 25 28 31

(3-prg.) (IN) (coup.) (nb.) (nb.) (5-prg.) (div.) (IN)

I IV V I (= V) I IV V=I (=i=ii Vi) I V I ii V vi I I

During another contemplative pause, Mark and I jointly experience an epiphany. What a fitting musical metaphor is this graph for Mark's own academic trajectory! Reading the plight of the C in hermeneutic terms, we arrive at the following analogy. The protagonist initially has but a faint sense of, and a tenuous commitment to, his academic inclinations (the incomplete neighbor). Then he finds a tentative niche (the C resolving to B \flat , mm. 7–9). Then, upon entering graduate school, his work defines him more *deeply* and he is more hopeful about where it will take him (the C–B \flat motive is enlarged in the *bass*, mm. 13–22). Before, however, reaching the goal of that journey—which, for Mark, will be to finish his master's degree and go on to earn a PhD (here signified by the neighbor adjoining the final melodic descent)—a doubt resurfaces (the incomplete neighbor in m. 28). Even that, as I had remarked to him, is *deep* (in the *bass*), integral to the process, insofar as we are partially defined by, and our creative work is influenced by, our personal and intellectual trials and tribulations.

In the three earlier scenarios, I solidified students' comprehension of music-theoretic concepts by relating the latter to human experiences, by pointing out that, in fact, the students were *having* those experiences in the very process of trying to learn those concepts. In this last scenario, by contrast, the student was initially and primarily concerned with a human experience, which we then crystallized by recourse to a musical, Schenkerian narrative. The primary objective in the first three scenarios was to grasp music-theoretic concepts by exposing their connection to broader experiences. Conversely, the primary objective in the last scenario was to grasp a broader experience by exposing its connection to the musical/music-theoretic. The moral of my story, then, is simply that general, schematic experiences can help us understand music and music-theoretic notions more fully and vividly *and vice versa*.

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