Sound Reasoning: A New Way to Listen*

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IMPORTANT: You must have the latest version of Macromedia's free Flash plugin[1] to play the musical examples. The course works best using Internet Explorer 6[2] on Microsoft Windows, Apple's Safari[3] on Macintosh OS X, or Mozilla[4] on any platform. If you experience difficulties, please contact our technical support[5] .

Music is designed to express itself completely in sound. At its greatest, it creates a particularly concentrated, gripping and all-enveloping experience. It is able, with its transient presence, to create a sense of loss, longing or renewal, and to involve us emotionally in its destiny.

Sound Reasoning is designed to help you listen. This course encourages you to be self-reliant–to get up close to the music, without mediation or interference. Too often, listeners may feel that they need pre-concert lectures, program notes and other verbal explanations to fully appreciate a musical work. These certainly may enhance and supplement one's enjoyment. But, ideally, a musical performance is a direct conversation between performers and listeners. No matter what your knowledge or training, you should be able to enjoy music with the fullness of your thoughts, should be able to explore and interpret it with confidence. The fundamental premise of this course is that, if you listen attentively and think constructively about what you are hearing, your awareness will prosper and your direct connection to the music will thrive. The course assumes little or no prior musical background. The ability to read music is not required. A minimum of musical terminology will be invoked. When it is necessary, all terms are defined in a glossary easily accessible by hyper-link. Most importantly, musical examples are interpolated directly into the text, making it easy to evaluate all the concepts that are introduced.

Music's sounds lack literal or fixed meanings: as such, the experience of a musical work is a very subjective one. This course will not teach what to think. It will show how to think, to arrive at your own balanced and carefully considered opinions. A subjective perspective is strongest when it is built upon objectively verifiable observations. You will learn to develop a concrete understanding of the music's progress. The poetry and conviction of your interpretation will grow out of this concentrated hearing. You will also have the confidence to test others' views against your own perceptions.

Our musical awareness now stretches further back historically and wider geographically than ever before. It is important to be prepared for music both familiar and unfamiliar. Conventional musical training usually

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[1] http://www.macromedia.com/shockwave/download/download.cgi?P1_Prod_Version=ShockwaveFlash&application/x-shockwave-flash

[2] http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/downloads/ie6/default.asp

[3] http://www.apple.com/safari/download/

[4] http://www.mozilla.org

[5] techsupport@cnx.rice.edu

begins with a strong grounding in the elements, conventions and terminology of the classical repertoire. The risk of that approach is that it often leaves listeners at a loss in the face of music where these terms and conventions no longer apply. **Sound Reasoning** addresses this problem by focusing on style-transcendent principles. The concepts explored in this course apply to any piece of music, no matter when it was written. Composers of different historical periods and traditions have dealt with these concepts in different ways. But the concepts themselves are timeless: They are the issues with which any piece of music is engaged.

Each concept is illustrated with examples both from the classical and modern repertoires of the Western tradition. These repertoires are often segregated from one another. Presenting them side-by-side will help illustrate the continuity of musical thought. It will demonstrate how music of any time and any place may explore music's basic resources of resonance, motion and design. It will also help to prepare and encourage listeners to be active and curious explorers, prepared to greet both the known and the unfamiliar with engagement and insight.

One of the defining features of a musical performance is that, once it begins, it is unstoppable: Unlike a book, it is not possible for the listener to pause, review passages, or change the pace of unfolding. For these reasons, listening to music requires a very special kind of focus.

Conventional musical attempts to develop this focus by beginning with the smallest elements of music–chords, scales, melodies and phrases–and eventually building into questions of the larger musical form. The risk of this approach is that it conditions listeners to focus primarily on the moment-to-moment progress of the music: if the sounds are surprising or unconventional, listeners may easily get easily get thrown into confusion and lose track of what is happening. **Sound Reasoning** takes a "top down" approach to listening: It will show you how to stretch your awareness so that it takes in the full expanse of a composition. Details will then be contemplated with respect to how they contribute to the developing form. The advantage of this approach is that you will no longer be thrown off or disengaged by puzzling or unexpected sounds. No matter how unusual or unusual the music, you will be able to maintain your concentration and actually experience the entire work.

Intuition and analysis are often regarded as opposing and incompatible. Analysis is felt to fight spontaneity and deplete one's enjoyment. This is an unfortunate and misleading dichotomy. Intuition is speeded up thought: It is reasoning that occurs too rapidly for us to be able to articulate it to ourselves consciously. The purpose of analysis is to train our intuition, so that our visceral responses arise from the most comprehensive possible perceptions and understanding. At first, you may have to study musical concepts very deliberately; over time, however, these concepts will become part of your intuitive framework. Done properly, analysis strengthens our intuition and deepens our enjoyment.

Part of the purpose of the Connexions project is to invite scholars to provide additional examples, both from within the classical and modern repertoires, but also from jazz, folk music, music of other traditions, and popular music. Ideally, a large sampling of repertoires and styles will help demonstrate the reach and relevance of the concepts we will discuss.

Each module presents a particular topic, illustrated with musical examples. A "listening gallery" follows, in which the student is asked put the concepts into practice by interactively analyzing musical examples. Please feel encouraged to listen to the examples as many times as you need.

Listeners sometimes shy away from highly unfamiliar music. **Sound Reasoning** will show how much can be gained even at a first hearing. If we are attracted to the music, we will return to it for further, ever-deepening listenings. When we meet someone new at a party, a whole life is concealed from us. An initial conversation may inform us about the person's history, outlook, and character but there are many discoveries to be made. Many years later, we may look back at that first encounter and realize how little we yet knew, how many revelations would occur later. So it is with listening to music. It is impossible to develop a relationship with a piece of music without a first hearing; it is impossible to come to love something if we are not first prepared for it to be new. **Sound Reasoning** is designed to help you cultivate a lifelong intelligent and passionate connection to music.