

Notes from the Field

Three Perspectives on Teaching Music Online

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Copyright Conundrums and Creating Constructive Classrooms in the Age of Distance Education

As I walked into the Education Building on campus one evening in early April 2013 to invigilate the final exam of *North American Popular Music (NAPM)*, I heard a young man a few feet behind me say to his friend, “*Psst* – that’s *her*, that’s our prof...”. Two days earlier, a young employee at the local drycleaners had nearly leapt over the counter in excitement to tell me that she was in my class this term; she recognised me, as had the other student, from the mini video-lectures embedded into the online course units. This final exam would be our first face-to-face encounter and, yet, after months of emailing back and forth, reading their bi-weekly tweets, and grading their written assignments, their names were utterly familiar to me. Distance courses – and the virtual relationships they foster – are strange beasts, bringing to the fore challenging pedagogical questions that are often taken for granted in on-campus courses.

In winter 2012 I was invited to develop a new online course on popular music for the School of Music and Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS).¹ *NAPM* is an undergraduate course that traces the history of popular music in North America from the mid-19th century to the present day. The development process involved working with an impressive team of instructional designers, video and audio producers, graphic designers, copyright officers, and computer programmers over approximately nine months to create a unique, asynchronous online learning environment that met what seemed at the outset to be fairly straightforward goals: to create a musically rich online course; to include activities and assignments that would hone students’ listening, analytical, and writing skills; and to include components of class interaction.²

Figuring out how to incorporate all these elements into an online platform required some imagination. For practical reasons, with an anticipated enrolment of 100+ students, common forms of online “group discussion”, such as chat rooms, eLive sessions,³ or discussion forums were not realistic options. I eventually settled on a bi-weekly Twitter assignment (worth 15% of the final grade) in which students post a minimum of two “tweets”: one tweet to express

their own ideas in relation to the week’s question and one thoughtful tweet in response to the posts of other students. The challenge for students, of course, is that they have only 140 characters at a time in which to express themselves. The challenge for me has been to devise a tweet-grading scheme for this assignment. The aim of this assignment is to encourage them to ask questions about popular music – questions that would help us identify “trending topics” (as Twitter calls them) – and, hopefully, move us toward asking deeper questions about the role of music in our society. Tweeting has proved a very useful tool in this regard and the feedback from my students has been enthusiastic.

Figuring out how to teach listening skills in this online environment opened up a different can of worms, as Turnbull discusses in her contribution to this issue. I incorporated multiple-choice listening exercises in the online content to accompany each musical example. The aim of these exercises is, of course, to teach students how to listen – to *really* listen, which brings us to questions of sources, quality and ... copyright. There is no doubt that, for many of us, seeking copyright permissions is one of the most time-consuming and yawn-inducing activities in our profession, particularly as universities like MUN routinely revise copyright regulations, making it increasingly complicated to share particular materials. These issues are only amplified in the case of distance courses.

In the case of *NAPM*, the options for sourcing musical recordings included the Naxos music catalogue, YouTube, online music streaming websites like Grooveshark.com, or instructor- or university-owned CDs. I quickly dismissed Grooveshark.com as a contender, since the site is currently embroiled in a lawsuit with all the major music companies. The Naxos catalogue covered a large number of the pre-1960s musical examples I wished to include. But the problem remained of where to legally source tracks from the 1960s onward. Should I create a course playlist and ask students to buy some tracks from iTunes? While I quite liked the idea of having students purchase a select number of tracks, perhaps to a total cost of \$15, I couldn’t help but wonder, *would they actually purchase them? Or would students just search online for YouTube or other illegal sources,*

or copy the songs illegally? To what lengths should instructors and course developers go to ensure that students follow instructions? How do we guarantee that students are listening to the intended version of the song, i.e., live vs. studio recordings, or Aretha's solo version of "Respect" instead of her version recorded with the Blues Brothers? Considering that the final unit deals with issues of music and copyright in the digital age, I was intent that the course, and students, model responsible music-sharing behaviour. Moreover, if a primary goal of the course is that students hone their listening skills, it seemed paramount that they listen to CD-quality recordings. While YouTube proved useful for some examples, particularly those in which we analyze music videos, I wanted to be mindful that the majority of examples were not accompanied by visual distractions, be they videos or even a still image of the CD cover that would detract from the experience of focused listening. When I heard that CDs owned by the instructor or university music library could be copied and placed in the course, my copyright-logged heart soared: it was a viable solution that required purchasing only a few CDs. But, I was subsequently advised that under Section 29.5 of the Copyright Act, audio can be digitized but must be *destroyed* by 30 days after the end of the course, and cannot be kept in the course until the next offering. CDs must be acquired anew and re-digitized for each offering. While it seems to fly in the face of efficiency, these are the requirements clearly outlined by the Act.

The pilot version of *NAPM* ended a few weeks ago and all-in-all I have found the development and teaching of this course eye-opening; it's made me think about teaching in entirely new and exciting ways, although I can't help but wonder if the issues around sources and copyright legislation led me to create a slightly different canon for the course than I might have otherwise designed. I'll end with a word of caution: Using Twitter in your courses is not for the weak-hearted. Some of my students did not create a new Twitter account for the course, using instead their existing – and in some cases very active – accounts, leading the rest of us on a few memorable cases to stumble into their "other" Twitter lives.

Meghan Forsyth

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¹ Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN)'s unit responsible for the development and delivery of online and distance education, as well as learning technologies that support and enhance teaching and learning both on-campus and at a distance.

² Dr. Kati Szego (MUN) was a key advisor in the development process.

³ See Janice Esther Tulk's contribution in this issue.

The Pedagogical Challenges of Teaching Folksinging Online

While a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University in Fall 2010, I was given the opportunity to design an online version of a well-established folksinging course for the School of Music and Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS). Music 2021, *Newfoundland and Labrador Folksinging*, is a three-credit course that can be applied toward the Bachelor of Music degree, but is more often an elective for non-music majors, especially in education programs and the Newfoundland and Labrador Studies minor. While the course introduces the contexts, meanings, and functions of folksong, it differs from other courses devoted to the topic (like Folklore 3200: *Folksong*) in that there is a practical component: ideally the course is taught by a tradition-bearer and students are expected to sing as part of the course delivery and evaluation.

Presenting the contextual basis for folksinging through a distance format was relatively easy, given the availability of traditional resources and multimedia objects to enrich the understanding of song texts and contexts. The primary texts for the course were my online instructor's notes, Doyle's *Old Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (1940),¹ the *Folklore of Newfoundland and Labrador: A Sampler of Songs, Narrations, and Tunes* CD,² and several pre-recorded interviews with tradition-bearers in the province that were hosted in the course shell. These were supplemented by other online audio and video clips (some drawn from YouTube), articles (including one from *Canadian Folk Music*), and links to relevant websites. Students engaged in weekly discussion forums and completed self-tests at the end of each unit, and there was a final exam that focused on terminology and issues related to the performance of folksongs.

Finding a way to engage students in the act of singing was much more challenging. In the on-campus version of the course, students would participate in group singing in the classroom and, as part of their evaluation, prepare and perform folksongs. The final class was often held in a downtown location, such as the Crow's Nest Officer's Club, where folksinging is alive and well. In an online version of the course, with students potentially located anywhere in the world, this sort of group experience would not be possible. Part of the attraction to online courses is that they are (usually) asynchronous. This means that students who are juggling work, family, and other life commitments can log into their course and complete components at times convenient to them instead of a schedule set by a university or instructor. They can

still engage with their peers (through discussion forums, for example), but they don't have to be online at the same time. An asynchronous approach to folksinging, however, would require students to record their performances for viewing at a later time, thereby inhibiting the immediate feedback experienced in live performance. This raised a few concerns for me, and these weren't simply issues of aesthetics or faithfulness to tradition. Many of the students who take this course are training to become primary or elementary school teachers, who will be required to sing in front of students in the classroom. They won't have the luxury of recording their performance as many times as it takes to render it "perfect" and there is something to be said for having the experience of preparing for and executing a live performance.

In the end, I determined that, while the bulk of the thirteen-week course would be asynchronous, there would be synchronous singing sessions in three of those weeks. During these weeks, students would sign up for a session that fit their personal schedules, creating small groups of five or six. They each prepared a song according to that week's guidelines and joined the synchronous session through Elluminate Live! (eLive).³ After I introduced and sang the first song of the session, they in turn introduced their chosen songs and performed them. The students and I were able to provide immediate feedback, through spoken comments and the "applause" function in the software. This function contributed to a positive singing environment – once students realized it existed, every performer saw flashing "applause" icons from their peers at the end of their song. While I feared it might be perceived as an easy way for students to avoid spoken dialogue, this didn't become an issue. Each student took turns commenting on song selections and performances throughout each session. As eLive permits the recording of sessions, students were able to listen to the performances of other groups (or their own performance) at their convenience (asynchronously).

While I still think this was a good solution to maintain the integrity of the course's original purpose – the singing of folksong rather than the study of folksong texts and contexts – it was not without its challenges in the actual execution. Online technologies for distance education have their limitations, as I quickly learned when I piloted the course in Spring 2011. For example, in Elluminate Live!, group singing, while theoretically possible, is not feasible in practice. You can have up to six microphones on at once; however, as the number of simultaneous users increases the sound quality decreases. There is also a timing issue at play, since the length of the delay in transmission for each participant varied. As such, in reality, only one student could sing at a time. These

individual performances worked for the most part; however, it was very difficult to set appropriate sound levels to avoid distortion. An added frustration came from the fact that not every student followed the course guidelines and used a headset while in the eLive session. Where students used built-in speakers and microphones (presumably on laptops), the rest of the class was treated to the echo created by sound feeding from speakers into microphone. Where students did use headsets, the microphone was sometimes too close and the singing voice overwhelmed it. On the fly, we would try adjustments, such as holding the headset a few inches away from one's mouth while singing. Fortunately, our class was patient with the technology (for the most part, anyway) and students offered constructive feedback to overcome technological challenges.

As I reflect on this experience, I can't help but think that the technology available for distance learning isn't quite at the level of quality required for this sort of course. I also wonder, given how few students used the (allegedly) required headset, whether they themselves really understood (or cared about) the quality issues and how we could better educate students about this (or, whether we even should). I think that my personal preference would still be for the traditional, on-campus, in-person version of this course. But my students commented that the course's appeal had little to do with its flexible and (generally) asynchronous nature. Rather, the fact that there was a degree of anonymity provided during the synchronous sessions was highlighted. Students who might never sing "in public" were willing to do so in an online context because they couldn't actually see their audience and their audience couldn't see them (performances, for quality reasons related to bandwidth, were audio only). Ultimately, the virtual space was perceived as a safer place for non-singers to make their first forays into folksinging. And that may be the best reason for pursuing online delivery of folksinging (and music) courses.

Janice Tulk

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¹Reprinted in 2008 by MUN Folklore and Language Publications (St. John's, NL).

²Produced by Peter Narvaez and MMaP Research Centre in 2005 (St. John's, NL).

³Elluminate Live! (now known as Blackboard Collaborate) is a web conferencing platform that provides an interactive, collaborative learning environment. It is possible to share files (such as PowerPoint presentations, images, or videos), hold small group discussions, chat in real time, and draw on

a whiteboard (among many other functions). For more information, visit:

<http://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Products/Blackboard-Collaborate/Web-Conferencing.aspx>.

Teaching Listening Skills in an Online Music Course

On a cold Tuesday this past March, I watched as my student packed up her belongings after visiting me during office hours. “Thanks,” she said. “I don’t know how I would have figured out this material without coming to talk to you.” We had spent the last half-hour listening closely to examples from the online course I was running, *Introduction to World and Early European Music*. I took her through the different musical concepts, elements like texture, meter, melodic movement, and imitation, that were central to the listening skills students were developing over the semester.

This was a student who was already a musician, but when faced with an overwhelming amount of text and listening examples to get through every week, she panicked. “How am I supposed to hear everything at once?” she asked me. In any given week, the material might cover a variety of musical techniques that are not addressed singly, but are contextualized within the complex history of Western classical music. Trying to remember the reasons why the music sounds as it does, while also trying to catch every bit of sonic information as it passes by in a YouTube clip, can be difficult tasks for students taking a music class for the first time.

Notwithstanding the typical issues of how to deal with different learning styles in an online delivery format, or the fact that music is by its very nature difficult to teach without an aural lecture or practical component, a course like this one is subject to myriad problems. Regardless of the musical background of students in a traditional class setting, I take them through examples in a methodical way. I first project a listening analysis chart that details all of the characteristics they should listen for. I then play the example, and while it is going, point to the individual characteristic as it happens, and call out the thing I want them to really pay attention to. At key moments, I rewind and play sections repeatedly, so that they can begin to hear what is important. Even if I’m using a YouTube clip in class, I don’t let them see the video, knowing they are all too easily distracted by it. I think this is a pretty common approach for most professors reading this reflection, but none of it is possible in the online format.

My student suggested that I create little videos that flash information as the clip plays. At 1:29, tenor

voice enters, imitating alto. At 2:06, texture switches to monophony, that sort of thing. It is a good idea, and something I may attempt the next time the course runs. Nevertheless, the instructor never knows how students are listening to the examples: as background while they do the dishes? Do they stop a clip 20 seconds in because it is a “boring” Renaissance motet? Are they distracted by the other options that appear on the YouTube sidebar? (As an example, I discovered a “pretty gothic” playlist by user “bad2 bone”, then went to “Flow My Tears”, which inevitably took me to Sting and finally a live Peter Gabriel concert, simply by searching for Machaut. It does not take long.) Of course, these are also very real possibilities in the contemporary classroom setting, where students are encouraged to download the day’s notes onto their laptops before lecture starts.

While the interactive potential afforded by technology for an online music course is valuable, attempting to teach students from a variety of musical backgrounds to learn basic listening skills via internet can be frustrating. There is no way to monitor the development of those skills; where in class I can get students to call out what they are hearing, to sing along with melodies on the piano, to clap out rhythms, there is no obvious way to do this from behind a computer screen. Moreover, there is little chance to discuss cross-cultural understanding in the world music component of the course, to properly situate the examples against what was heard in the classical portion, or to generate discussion about how various cultures perceive and use music. Many of these issues can be explored in short discussions after listening examples, or in moments where we might, say, learn Ghanaian Gahu rhythms and dance steps for a small in-class performance.

In contrast, the visual component offered by YouTube clips allows students to see how violinists playing Bach strike the strings differently than they would for a Wagnerian piece. Students might witness a drummer accenting the offbeats and finally understand syncopation. They might scroll through the course notes as examples are playing in their headphones and catch the definition of polyphony at the moment they recognize it happening. These moments of clarification cannot always be guaranteed by the professor’s presence.

I look forward to being part of the process of using technology to its full potential, so that it facilitates a variety of learning styles and the particularities of teaching music.

Gillian Turnbull