Review of Evan Jones, Matthew Shaftel, and Juan Chattah, *Aural Skills in Context: A Comprehensive Approach to Sight Singing, Ear Training, Harmony, and Improvisation* (Oxford, 2014)

Hali A. Fieldman

[1] The 846-page wire-bound tome that is *Aural Skills in Context*, with its lightweight paperboard covers, does not seem likely to physically survive the four semesters of extensive use for which authors Evan Jones and Matthew Shaftel, with Juan Chattah, planned its contents. In its breadth as well as its purposes and aspirations, the project—the book and its

computer-based peripherals—is clearly modeled on other richly contextualized and integrated scholarship that characterizes many of the recent texts designed for written-theory curricula.[1] This essay will review the authors' strategy for creating a similarly "comprehensive approach" to several of the salient components of aural skills, and will consider their success in doing so.

Overview

[2] The subtitle of this book—*A Comprehensive Approach to Sight-Singing, Ear-Training, Harmony, and Improvisation*—also serves as a clear and succinct summary of its goals.[2] The pedagogical strategy behind the subtitle is most clearly stated early in the Preface: "The consistent goal is to help students become fluent in musical patterning while providing them the freedom and opportunity to manipulate those patterns in a creative and real-time manner" (xiv). As "creative" and "manipulation" imply, improvisation is embraced throughout this book; it is both a teaching agent and "an important vehicle for musical expression, which demonstrates a synthesis of theoretical understanding and musicianship" (xiv). Methods and materials are brought together to provide a "programmed arrangement of musical extracts and exercises . . . designed to foster a heightened awareness of melodic function, rhythmic patterning, and the harmonic-contrapuntal structure of tonal music" (xiv). But the authors recognize that drills and exercises alone will not lead to real fluency; rather, skills need to be made relevant through their incorporation into other parts of a growing musician's musical life. Two of the book's foundational elements play especially significant roles in encouraging this sort of integrated practice. One is the decision to use "real" musical examples throughout the book, an element I will consider later.

[3] The other is the determination that "every melodic extract [be] consistently retained in its harmonic and/or contrapuntal context . . . allow[ing] an overall organization along harmonic lines, paralleling a written theory curriculum" (xiii). For this reason the book is laid out in three units of seven chapters and one unit (IV) of six, preceded by an unnumbered chapter, "The Foundations of Aural Skills" (hereafter, "Foundations"). The unit titles indicate a fairly standard harmony sequence; Unit I is purely diatonic (this includes some work with pentatonic scales), to which Unit II adds chromatic embellishments. The second year of study begins with "Advanced Melodies, Modulation, and Introduction to Musical Form" in Unit III, and ends with "Advanced Chromaticism and Larger Forms" in Unit IV, tracking common-practice harmony up to the edges of tonality. While a generic harmonic design like this will not satisfy all needs or align well with all harmony curricula, part of the authors' intent here is to enable flexibility in the book's usage, another aspect to be considered in later discussions.

Materials

[4] Aside from the Preface and part of the "Foundations" chapter, the book has little prose beyond a brief overview at the

beginning of each chapter and occasional commentary about a particular musical example or set of exercises. That allows most of the book's great heft to be devoted to the nine to fifteen or more musical excerpts that constitute the subject matter of each chapter, and to the pages of focused studies that follow. While "Foundations" gives an overview of the book's practices and procedures, the book's actual instruction is accomplished almost entirely through these exercises.

[5] A typical chapter offers plentiful exercises of various types. Those labeled as "Drills" are interval-based and use a mix of solfège syllables, scale-degree numbers, and interval names to locate and rehearse particular intervals and interval patterns in scales.[3] "Chorale Workshops" are designed around each chapter's newly introduced harmonic idea. There is no staff notation for these exercises. Instead, a page is laid out in two columns. The left column contains several rows of Roman-numeral chord symbols representing typical progressions. In the right column are rows of numerals representing scale degrees. As many as six rows may be grouped with a single left-column chord progression, each row denoting a top voice to be used in realizations of the given progression. In early chapters, these are usually three or four chords long, but beginning in Chapter 11, progressions gradually become longer, extending across one or more vertical slashes indicating barlines. These exercises are done at the keyboard to facilitate part-against-part practice—playing one line while singing another—and are also to be performed *a cappella*, as vocal arpeggiations. Whether sung or played, all of these exercises proceed at the pace of one chord per beat, and quadruple meter is used almost exclusively until Chapter 22. Dictation fragments, too, get slightly longer over the course of the book, but remain partitioned into two sections, "Short-Term Musical Memory" and "Dictation of Longer Examples." Fragments of the chapter's repertoire provide the material for all dictations, and the source of each fragment is identified very specifically, raising the possibility that students might know an excerpt too well for dictation to be a meaningful aural challenge.

[6] While exercises like those mentioned above are probably familiar to most of us, that is not the case with the two sections of exercises in each chapter that are usually devoted to improvisation, one that focuses on pitch materials, the other on rhythm. A number of these offer excellent opportunities for deep and creative engagements with the book's materials; it is typical in later chapters to ask students to improvise new top or inner voices over the bass line of a repertoire example, or to improvise variations in several styles on a given tune (477). A different kind of engagement is offered by the "Contextual Listening" and "Expanding the Repertoire" sections found at the end of each chapter. The exercises here all require close listening, sometimes with scores, but mostly without. The included worksheets pose a wide variety of questions and challenges about each example; the book's website provides the audio and, occasionally, the video for these exercises.[4]

[7] One of the book's real strengths is that so much of its teaching material is designed to be interactive both in and out of the classroom, putting students in groups or pairing them with instructors, with one another, or via interface with the peripherals. One project is built up over several chapters, where a series of group exercises treats small segments of John

Cage's "Story" from *Living Room Music*, leading to a performance of the entire piece in Chapter 21 (565–73). [5] This is a wonderful way to enable study of a large piece of music within the practical constraints of 50-minute classes; and the extended study allows students to become aware of their continuing progress, very much like what happens over time in the studio.

[8] The target of the skills acquired and developed by these means is, of course, the music. The book contains literally hundreds of pieces, drawn from existing music, a significant portion of which is international in origin, and spanning at least seven centuries. These are selected from a delightfully eclectic array of sources, styles, and genres that includes folk songs, dances, and other traditional pieces, several styles of jazz, and an interesting sampling of rock 'n roll, from its mid-century origins to successors as far into rock's recent present as 2010. While jazz or rock pieces make up almost all of the book's "Expanding the Repertoire" exercises, popular genres are by no means confined to any single section, but are thoroughly integrated into the repertoire of almost every chapter. The authors' commentaries provide bits of background information and often-thoughtful analytical hints, the best of which have the potential to spur conversations of real musical interest—this is the broader relevance the authors intended, but no small thing to have brought it about!

[10] As we would expect in an aural-skills text, much of the repertoire is drawn from songs and choral works. [6] Of the instrumental music represented, some selections are from chamber music, and a lesser number are taken from more heavily orchestrated works. Most of these—bits of string quartets and piano quintets, Bach orchestral suites, Beethoven symphonies, Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*—are reduced to a three-staff arrangement featuring two treble voices and a bass line, playable on piano. But actual keyboard repertoire is itself the source of a surprisingly large number of excerpts—surprising, because students have been told from the outset the importance of singing every part of a texture, and idiomatic keyboard writing is often especially difficult to sing. [7] Though the authors have taken care to modify some of the extracts with this in mind, many others, including several of the Bach inventions and Beethoven sonatas, as well as many song accompaniments, will likely remain out of reach even for serious undergraduate singers. [8]

[11] The book's central identity is that it is built on a repertoire foundation. Indeed, in their opening statement the authors write that of the several pedagogical problems they intend the project to address, "foremost among [them] is the unavailability of singable selections drawn from "real music' in their harmonic context" (xiii). Using real music avoids the artificiality that so often characterizes music composed for specific aural-skills purposes, and it increases our students' exposure to repertoire, perhaps especially the vast majority of it that lies outside that of any particular major. But these are benefits only to the extent that the book's stated pedagogical goals are sufficiently met, and there can be no unreflective answer to that question. It does not appear that the authors considered the pedagogical design deeply to begin with, trusting instead that with real music at the project's core and ready parallelism to harmony curricula in its layout, pedagogical

dynamism would automatically result.

[12] It is precisely in this crucial regard to pedagogy that the project loses its footing. Some part of this comes from a profound disconnect between the stated emphasis on *melody in the context of harmony* and the way this idea is performed in the text, as harmony into which melody as a distinct entity has largely dissolved. The interconnected facets of pedagogy and repertoire thus lose the fixed rope binding aspiration and methodology together. The result, seemingly, is neglect, both of pedagogical common sense in general and the teaching of aural skills in particular. In the remainder of this essay we will look at some of the missteps that impinge most heavily on the project's ability to succeed in its goals.

Navigation

[13] We have only to turn to the table of contents to recognize that the book will be unnecessarily difficult to use. A major source of this difficulty is that only chapter titles are paginated, and there is very little else of the information by which users customarily navigate. Chapter repertoire is not listed, and in turning to the chapters themselves it becomes clear that some chapters do not even include subheadings for their most important topics; for instance, there is no subheading referring to rhythm in Chapter 9, "Diatonic Sequences II and New Rhythmic Configurations." Elsewhere, chapter titles and subheadings are confusingly out of sync: Chapter 6 is titled "The Octave and Beyond," but already in Chapter 4 a subheading reads, "Expanding the Melodic Range Beyond the Octave." Formal units such as parallel periods are introduced in Chapter 6 (Unit 1), long before the topic of musical form is announced in Unit III. Cumulatively, what is most striking is that, while aural-skills concerns are often distinct from harmonic issues, the distinction barely registers in the table of contents, where most headings at all levels are like those we would expect to find in a harmony text. That there is no heading of any kind for the part of each chapter—the exercises—whose purpose is the teaching of aural skills only confirms this bias. Perhaps in elevating harmony itself to an "aural skill" in the subtitle of this book, the authors have obviated the need to distinguish between the two.

[14] The single index is equally unsympathetic to pedagogical use, and a decided inhibition to using the book with any flexibility. It is simply a list of the examples by name and page number(s), organized by composer. Not even example numbers are part of this listing; it takes a maddening back-and-forth through the book to learn which repertoire is aligned with which topics. But even in this minimal state the index is astonishingly incomplete, as it lists none of the works that the "Contextual Listening" and "Expanding the Repertoire" exercises are based on.[9] A few of these pieces appear as repertoire elsewhere in the book, and do appear, in that context only, in the index; but the worksheets the book provides for these exercises have no such information. Nor do they readily direct students to the source material for the tasks at hand; for this information, students would need to have read the preface and "Foundations," which supplies an address for the companion

website—www.auralskillsincontext.com—or the book's back cover, which supplies a different one—www.oup.com/us/jonesshaftel.[10] Setting this confusion aside, it is easy to see tremendous promise in the idea of a companion website, but the site as realized is disappointingly limited. That so few items are offered—only the examples for Contextual Listening and Expanding the Repertoire worksheets are given here—may be due to licensing issues, as all of the video clips, and a good many of the audio files, are taken from YouTube and other commercial sources. But it is harder to explain why so few of the audio examples identify the performers, even in chamber and vocal works and concertos; even if the information could be easily found by following YouTube's links, students should hardly be encouraged to further detach the musical "product" from the individuals whose creativity is ostensibly the raison d'être.[11]

[15] A more pervasive concern is for overall functionality, whether caused by the absence of some promised features or by actual flaws. For instance, the authors note that the website provides "streaming audio at various tempos" (xv), but of the many commercial files examined, none offered tempo variation or a means by which a user can manipulate tempo. Neither, for the most part, did the recordings made for this project by University of Miami performers. Most of these examples do feature the advertised multi-track mixer—again a promising idea, but, as currently constructed, virtually unusable. Sliders are often poorly labeled; for instance, a Mozart string quintet example has a slider for "Quartet," one for each of the two violins, and one each for viola and cello.[12] None of them made a marked difference in the aural mix. In another, the "Horn" slider controls both horns and trumpets; the separate slider for the trumpets has no effect. A slider for an early example, "Aiken Drum," became stuck at 0 decibels and could not be moved even after the example was reloaded. At times, separate tracks were out of sync; and for nearly all of the in-house examples, a second click on "Play" made all the audio controls disappear. One is almost obligated to wonder why the authors chose to submit material in this state of unreadiness, and why a highly regarded publisher would proceed to release it.

Teaching (Aural Skills)

[16] It does not bode well for the project's effectiveness that attempting to access its materials is this difficult. But a more detailed look only reveals further and far more significant problems. Put bluntly, despite the promise of its title, the book is not designed to teach aural skills, and, with few exceptions, neither does it reflect an abiding interest in the work, the process, of teaching itself.

[17] We see this in countless ways. For instance, several worksheets ask students to name the keys of the pieces they hear without scores, even though, short of possessing perfect pitch, students have no way to discern this information.[13] More pervasive are the kinds of miscues that indicate the failure to create a through-line for teaching. The authors often neglect what ought to be the self-evident potential in their own methods and materials. For instance, throughout the book, both key

and tempo are established before a dictation excerpt is played; yet even into Chapter 25 the shorter dictations begin as they have from the first chapters: by telling the students on what beat of which meter, with what note value, and on what scale degree (and in which octave!) these brief snippets begin. To not expect students to use the skills the book is designed to help them acquire undermines the book's very premises. They—and we—lose confidence in the authors as well, when a subheading in Chapter 11 (vii, 301) announces the solfège syllables for rising and falling chromatic pitches when these have been spelled out much earlier, on page 185; or when they immediately contravene their own instructions: "be prepared to sing every part of an excerpt—melody, bass, and inner voices" from page 1 gives way to "play the melody on the piano while you sing the lower part" when the melody in question "goes beyond the scale degrees that are emphasized in this chapter" (37).

[18] Lack of attention to teaching becomes more corrosive when the selected repertoire is entirely inappropriate for its ostensible purposes; are students really supposed to sing a three-part arrangement of Wagner's *Tristan* "Prelude" or to use the "Forlane" from Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* for dictation? Will students just learning to sing tonic triads be able to appreciate a part of Florence Price's E-minor Symphony when they are faced with its rapid arpeggiations of minor-minor seventh chords across nearly two octaves (66)? If repertoire is to be sung, it must be singable.

[19] It is especially damaging when information is presented incompletely, or in a way that creates conceptual ambiguities. For instance, in "Foundations,", several exercises use triple meter in discussing melodic ornamentation, showing melodic hierarchies with neighboring and passing motions around each scale-step (18–20). Prefacing these exercises, the authors write "[j]ust as there are strong and weak beats in a metric context, certain pitches will seem to have greater weight than the ones around them" (18), but as there are no such exercises in duple or quadruple meters, it will be easy for an observant student to create strong conceptual associations between embellishing melodic function and the weak beat(s) in triple meter. While the comment clearly means to separate metric placement from melodic function, the $\frac{3}{8}$ context makes conflating the two almost unavoidable, at least for observant students. This might have been an ideal place for the authors to show a melodic idea "in its harmonic and/or contrapuntal context" (xiii).

[20] Most of us would probably point to modulation as the most difficult aural challenge in tonal music. Chapter 16 covers that topic in *Aural Skills in Context*. The prose introduction clarifies the difference between tonicization and modulation, and then proceeds with eight examples. While some of these are straightforward, others are problematic. For instance, the passage from Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp starts in G minor "and then reaches the dominant of F major after a sequential modulation. The sequence progresses by ascending thirds, with secondary dominant seventh chords tonicizing the triads. . . . Mozart approaches each new dominant seventh chord from a fully-diminished seventh chord" (407–8). Without relying on the provided score, it is highly unlikely that most undergraduates could follow Mozart's trajectory; even aurally

discerning a move to the dominant can be difficult for students at first. [14] Yet there is no instruction on hearing modulations in this chapter or elsewhere, and given the wide range of tonal destinations and the overall difficulty of the examples, it seems clear that the authors never considered how to build the ear training of modulations into their comprehensive approach. [15]

[21] There are individual moments of excellence and inspiration in this book, but on balance it is clear that the project does not meet the aspirations and goals around which it was imagined and built. In my view, if the project is to be redeemed, it will require truly fundamental rethinking. The authors end the book's preface by suggesting that this text "obviates [the instructor's need to choose between] texts that engage and enhance their students' harmonic-contrapuntal hearing and texts that acknowledge and capture their students' love of music" (xvi). But this is an invented, false dichotomy; we need no labels on what constitutes an acceptable demonstration of "love of music." The process of rethinking this project might begin, then, by deleting this statement; for the essential thing that unites all of us who would be musicians is a limitless commitment to studying music's craft. In that regard, there is certainly enough for the authors, and the rest of us, to invest in.

Hali A. Fieldman
University of Missouri – Kansas City
Conservatory of Music and Dance
4949 Cherry St.
Kansas City, MO 64110
fieldmanh@umkc.edu

Works Cited

Laitz, Steven G. 2004. *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening.* Oxford University Press.

Clendinning, Jane and Elizabeth West Marvin. 2005. *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis.* W. W. Norton.

Footnotes

1. Laitz 2004 and Clendinning and Marvin 2005 are the strongest exemplars of such scholarship in the service of teaching.

Both books are currently in their third editions.
Return to text

2. The Library of Congress registers the book with the words "keyboard harmony" instead of the cover title's "harmony."
Return to text

3. The book uses moveable do throughout, with do-based minor; the majority of the exercises use scale-degree numbers, sometimes in combination with solfège syllables.
Return to text

4. Other exercises are included in SmartMusic, optional software available for purchase and for that reason not addressed in this review. For further discussion of the project's own, dedicated website, see below.
Return to text

5. Earlier in the book a similar strategy is used with Toch's *Geographical Fugue*.
Return to text

6. Some of the selections, certainly, are unambiguously canonical—for instance, "Der Lindenbaum" from Schubert's *Winterreise*—but there are also plenty of rarities: a partsong by Robert Cornysh and a three-voice round by the eighteenth-century Briton Philip Hayes, to name only two. Authors' commentaries attend many of these songs: about an eight-bar fragment of Gershwin's "Bidin' my Time," for instance, students are asked, "What type of phrase structure is presented here? Also, why doesn't the D♮ resolve to E♭ as expected? Could there be a relation to the text?" (303).
Return to text

7. "All of the excerpts in this book are arranged to be sung, either by yourself with a piano . . . or in a group with people singing each part. It is critical that you always be prepared to sing every part of an excerpt—melody, bass, and inner voices—since it is from simultaneous familiarity with all the parts that you will best be able to negotiate the relationship between harmony and melody" (1).
Return to text

8. Even some of the vocal pieces are likely to be too difficult to be readily sung, the Bach cantata movements among others. This is one of several factors that brings into question whether pedagogical decisions alone are driving the choice of examples.
Return to text

9. Several times, students are instructed to listen to other named pieces to compare particular features; none of these appears in the index.

10. At the earliest stages of preparing this review, each address led to a different website, neither of them complete or fully functional. By the time of final revisions, the two websites had been reconciled into one, accessible from either address —though still missing at least one example, that from the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 4 (Contextual Listening 26.3, 791–92).

11. The links I followed led to the name of the uploader, not the performer(s).

12. Contextual Listening 12.1, from the second movement of Mozart's C-minor String Quintet K. 406 (317).

13. This question is asked about Prokofiev's *"Classical" Symphony* excerpt on pages 753, for instance, and about all three pieces for "Expanding the Repertoire" (587). Several other examples ask, "If it modulates, what key does it go to?" without having identified the starting key (513, 517, 615, and elsewhere). In a private communication, the authors explained that they envision students using a piano, tuning fork, smartphone, or the "flash piano" application on the book's website to identify keys.

14. One factor to consider as students learn to hear modulations is the melodic approach to a change of key. If a melody is centered on $\hat{5}$, for example, it can be very difficult to hear a modulation to the dominant. The opening section of Chopin's Mazurka in A minor, op. 7, no. 2 is an example.

15. Chorale Workshop exercises for V^7/V begin only in Chapter 13 (332); that chapter also includes drills on secondary dominants (335). Prior to the "Modulation" chapter, there are sections on tonicizations of V only, via both its dominant and diminished-seventh chords (390–91).

Copyright Statement

Prepared by Rebecca Flore, Editorial Assistant

SMT
SOCIETY FOR MUSIC THEORY