

PREFACE

Dance of Apollo with the Nine Muses by 16th century painter Baldassare Peruzzi graces the cover of this book. Apollo, the Greek god of reason and of music, is pictured dancing with the goddesses of the arts. The figures are on the tips of their feet, lightly stepping; the line of their arms and held hands flows in a wide, undulating ring; the fluid folds of the drapery and the rich coils of each figure's hair, the flourish of Apollo's quiver holding his bow and arrows, the mix of vibrant colors thrown into relief against the golden background—all the elements contribute to the theme of vital and joyous dynamic motion.

This book deals with precisely that: the phenomenon of living linear movement in music. It teaches:

1. melodic shape—its rise and fall—and melodic connection and coherence
2. the elements and basis of melody: interval, scale, and time
3. the art of combining lines in a musical fabric (polyphony)
4. the development of the harmonic system from the practice of polyphony

The book also deals with the error that has arisen from the harmonic way of thinking, which consists of inverting the hierarchy of knowledge, placing central trust and importance in the concept of chord, while neglecting what is actually first, primary and central to the subject: melodic line.

The method of this book is historical. It seeks to present the essentials of music, the basic concepts, in their proper order—which is the order in which mankind originally learned them.

However, history presents us with an overwhelming deluge of detail. Too often the subject causes us mentally to drown in a sea of minutia. We must sift through the facts of history to find the key turning points or milestones, and we must work to gain a broad perspective in order to embrace a wide range of relevant, interrelated facts. We must reduce the amount of material so that we can manage it mentally, but without losing completeness of understanding.

Therefore this book includes *only* the essentials of the subject, but *all* of them. Generally speaking, my test of what to include has been: the idea is a significant advance in our understanding of music, which lasted for centuries and led to impressive practical results. Staying power and practical usefulness are consequences of an idea being true and clear.

I take pride—in my classroom and in this book—in never resorting to the sentence “because I said so.” Some teachers unfortunately have had a tendency to present the facts, concepts, and rules of music as a kind of authoritarian dogma, according to the pattern of religion, as though it were a revelation from God: “Accept it and learn it, because this is the material and that’s that.”

And yet every teacher of music theory using such a method experiences that decisive moment each semester when the class concludes once and for all that this content is nothing but baseless dogma and a total waste of time. Then their boredom becomes permanent and impenetrable.

I side with the students here: time should only be spent only on things that are worthwhile. If there’s no reason for something, it should not be done. (Of course, understanding music is not a waste of time when it is done right!)

Compounding this motivational issue, we live in a culture of subjectivist skepticism, of pervasive doubt and suspicion or outright rejection of the validity of knowledge. Getting over these motivational hurdles is the principal challenge confronting teachers today.

The historical method sweeps these problems aside. It shows at every step the realistic basis for ideas, their grounding in facts. Even for ideas that proved false, the method reveals why people thought the way they did.

Using history teaches the student not just the content, but its full meaning and context, including the answers to the questions: Where do these concepts come from? How did they come to be? Why are they what they are? Why are they worth knowing?

A further advantage of the historical approach is that it enables the presentation of knowledge as much as possible in the form of *stories*. Compared to a dry exposition of technicalities, stories are much easier to learn from. They take the curse of boredom off of the traditional material and make it vivid, engaging, and dramatic. To learn about the living, breathing men who discovered things, and how they did it and why, brings the knowledge within the student’s ability to thoroughly understand and evaluate—and to enjoy and admire.

This book does not accept or embody a separation of the fields of knowledge. There is no division here between musical theory (technical concepts), music history (the facts of music in the past), and the philosophy of music (broad ideas about what music is and means, and how it relates to human life). The three are integrated and blended, not driven apart as specialties. Fields of knowledge do not exist as separate, independent bubbles of reality; they are merely different aspects of our knowledge of the one reality we perceive around us. They must be treated as such.

This book also takes a holistic view of cognition and emotion. Issues of both structure and expression are addressed in tandem throughout. I do not agree with the modern view

that regards concepts of musical emotion as baseless or illegitimate. Nor do I agree with the writers who treat music as pure structure with no content of feelings. Our thinking about the subject must obey the fact that music is both intellect and passion.

The integrative, historical approach gives rise to some further original aspects of this book's content. The book gives a new, biologically-based theory of rhythm. It establishes both empirically and mathematically that the diatonic scale is not an arbitrary Western social construct, but a timeless, universal phenomenon natural to human music. It gives a new explanation of the way in which the fact of *volition* or mental goal-direction is manifest in music—in the system of tonality. It provides a more realistic assessment than those traditionally offered of the role of the church in music history.

This book grows not only out of my research into music history but also out of my experience as a composer, writer, lecturer and listener. Most especially it grows out of my more than ten years of experience teaching music to pre-college students, first at the University of Michigan School of Music and then at the Mannes College in New York. This book is a compilation and expansion of the teaching materials I have created over the years for my students.

In teaching I've dealt with a wide range of ages, from first graders through college students. I've been able to see the continuous development of some students for many years running. This has helped me learn what questions come up when, and what students can understand at each stage of knowledge. It has helped me learn the most intelligible method and order of presentation.

The result, I hope, is a book that serves the youthful mind at any age. Its origin for and tailoring to teenagers makes the book a suitable source for understanding the basics for any interested person. Ironically, the student who masters this material will know far more than the graduates of most university degree programs.

So this book represents my own re-conceptualization and completion of the material provided by traditional curricula.

To readers who are musicians I say: you have to know all of this. To those who are not, I say: use the book to pursue the things which interest you and which you can follow. It is fine for the start of the learning process to be a glancing survey; that is how one develops an initial familiarity that serves as a base for later, more thorough understanding.

Be aware that the first chapter of the book deliberately throws everything at you at once. The purpose is not to overwhelm you or intimidate you, of course, but rather to give you a sense of how the ideas come together as a system—in other words, to give you the big picture. So don't expect to understand everything there immediately—just use it as an overview and introduction to the concepts and methods, with the idea in mind that you will be filling in detail to your understanding, and gaining clarity on the elements, as we go over the components one at a time. But in order to provide the overall framework, this holistic immersion comes first.

I hope you'll find that I bring the value of a composer's perspective to the subject as well, so that the ideas here are not just some fixed abstractions floating in the sky, but part of a dynamic understanding and learning process, undertaken for the practical reason of making something.

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Audio examples corresponding to the written music examples in this book will be available at: www.MZacharyJohnson.com/DwtM

To engage the author for appearances as composer, conductor or lecturer—including for talks on this book—please contact:

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