



# Beyond Mainstream: An Interdisciplinary Study of Music and the Written Word

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In a radio interview a few months before his death in August, 1992, composer John Cage aptly described the wonderful diversity of life at the turn of the twenty-first century:

Today our experiences more and more are populated with more and more people and more and more things that strike our perceptions. We live in a time I think not of mainstream but of many streams or even, if you insist on a river of time, that we have come to delta, maybe even beyond delta to an ocean which is going back to the skies. (Cage interview)

Cage's "ocean" may be an accurate metaphor for our time as our knowledge of the world and its histories expands exponentially. Fiber optics technologies have begun to revolutionize the way information is processed and disseminated. In the future, the entire world may be linked by a massive global telecommunications network that will allow us to transfer information at incredible speeds into every home. These technologies have the potential to break down the world's geo-political boundaries. Marshall McLuhan's vision of a "global village" may soon become a reality; or, more pessimistically, we might envisage a situation where everyone has access to a diminishing fragment of the whole.

Institutions of higher learning and their epistemological paradigms are not exempt from these profound cultural changes. "Undergraduate education," write the authors of *Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles For Effective General Education Programs*, already "strikes students as a bewildering introduction into diversity, different bodies of knowledge, modes of inquiry, ways of knowing, voices, historical periods and cultures" (Association of American Colleges 12). In finding their way through that plethora of material, viewed and interpreted from a wide

array of cultural perspectives, today's college students attempt an incredible task—a task that is exacerbated in a situation where teachers find themselves bewildered by what and how to teach. The rapid growth of knowledge and the resultant emphasis on specialization has proceeded at a feverish pace, while the introduction of diverse and hitherto unheeded voices into the academy has placed in question the notion of a stable canon. In literary studies alone, Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn note, “[a]s the parameters of individual historical fields have been redrawn and new theoretical and methodological orientations have been devised, the possibility of a unifying, totalizing grasp of our subject has, for all but the very few, receded” (2). The very ideal of universal knowledge is no longer fashionable, for scholars have questioned the validity of meta-narratives in a wide variety of disciplinary contexts. The academy is fragmented—or better, “balkanized.” We seem, to invert the optimism of Cage’s metaphor, to be lost among the multiplicity of streams of an ever-widening educational delta.

If we are not all to drown in something like what Allen Ginsberg referred to in *Howl* (1956) as a “total animal soup of time,” our college curricula and the epistemological assumptions that underpin them must rise to the challenge. The field of general education is where these issues are being examined and most fruitfully engaged, partly because it directly shapes an institution’s curricular structure but more profoundly because it tackles the issue of epistemological coherence. The authors of *Strong Foundations*, for instance, argue that although “exposure to diversity is an essential component of general education,” an equally essential component is the “counterbalancing centripetal pursuit of coherence” (12). As the title of that booklet implies, the pursuit of coherence is itself far from a new idea. From the beginnings of higher education in the United States, educators have valued what John Henry Newman termed the “integrative habit of mind.” Newman viewed the university as a place where students and teachers join together in the pursuit of universal knowledge. He envisioned the college curriculum as a coherent and organically unified whole and described the university according to its classical designation as a *Studium Generale* or “School of Universal Learning” (1856, 6). More recently, as Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine argue in *A Quest for Common Learning*, each successive attempt to implement general education reforms has occurred in an era of “social drift and personal preoccupation,” necessitating a new focus on “shared values, shared responsibilities, shared governance, a shared heritage, and a shared world vision” (17).

Those objectives are not easily achieved, and still less so because the consensus today is that previous curricular models for general education—notably “cafeteria-style” distribution requirements—are no longer satisfactory. Distribution requirements maximize students’ exposure to materials from diverse disciplinary contexts and have the potential to counterbalance the pursuit of depth of knowledge gained in the major with the breadth resulting from studies in a broad range of areas. But in practice this strategy commonly results in a series of courses that are so narrow in focus that breadth of knowledge is scarcely attained. Even more importantly, distribution requirements frequently do not provide students with a coherent and unified understanding of disciplinary relationships, let alone the world around them. As Ernest L. Boyer has explained, “Students move from one departmental requirement to another, rarely discovering connections, rarely seeing the whole” (*College* 90).

Making connections across disciplines thus seems essential. Interdisciplinary courses, which seek to investigate common material through a variety of disciplinary lenses, offer a promising method of working toward more holistic ways of knowing while respecting the specific languages and protocols of each discipline. Potentially, they provide students with models and methodologies with which to decipher the complex world around them. But not every interdisciplinary connection is meaningful, as Hermann Hesse suggests in *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), a prophetic novel that describes the ultimate exercise in interdisciplinarity—a game based upon the sum total of all human knowledge. Hesse writes about a period in the history of an imaginary scholarly community called Castalia during which working across disciplinary boundaries yielded laughable results. This era, which he named the “Age of the Feuilleton,” was a time where intellectual freedom and ardent individualism led to a superficial and narcissistic academicism. Literary works such as “Friedrich Nietzsche and Women’s Fashions of the 1870s,” “The Composer Rossini’s Favorite Dishes,” and “The Role of the Lapdog in the Lives of the Great Courtesans” are some examples of Castalian interdisciplinarity run amok (18ff).

As we plan interdisciplinary courses for our general education programs, it is crucial to avoid the sorts of superficial interdisciplinary connections mentioned above, even though few educators today would question the value of interdisciplinary curricula in the area of general education. At Mills College, a small liberal arts college for women located in Oakland, California, faculty have been working to reform the

College's general education program by instituting several interdisciplinary components, in part to address the problem noted by the AAC in *A New Vitality in General Education* that "most of us who teach undergraduates do not ourselves engage in the sort of integrative learning across fields we expect of our students" (48). At Mills, interdisciplinary seminars are now required for all entering students. Our own team-taught interdisciplinary seminar entitled "Music and the Written Word" has been offered for four consecutive years. Our latter-day Castalia, Mills has turned out to be a fruitful proving-ground for contemporary educational and curricular practices.

This article summarizes the educational philosophy, content, and pedagogical methods employed in this seminar. Though a success, the course has always posed for us challenging questions about the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of interdisciplinary study. From the beginning, we were particularly concerned with two problems that seem to us endemic to interdisciplinary study today. First, this course confronted us with the problem of how to bridge disciplinary boundaries. Should we attempt to negotiate a common ground or find a new and uncharted territory between the disciplines—a kind of virtual space that would change its form and function as the semester progressed? Second, the course brought forcibly home to us a problematic relationship between the aspirations of general education and the tenor of postmodern thought, which is in some of its aspects profoundly at odds with the centering and integrative spirit of general education. Cage's metaphor of what happens beyond the mainstream frames the problem neatly, if ambiguously, for it makes a great difference whether one conceives of the field of knowledge in terms of a single (though limitless) ocean or in terms of the multiplying streams of a delta.

Addressing issues like the value of interdisciplinary work in a postmodern age in a seminar intended for entering students may seem a tall order. Yet we found that these issues arose spontaneously as a function of our pedagogical strategies, which ended by problematizing the very principles that shaped them. From that point of view alone we felt this essay worth writing; and it is our hope that this discussion will provide a useful model for others engaged in planning—or questioning—interdisciplinary general education curricula.

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From the outset, looking for interconnections between poetry, narrative, and music seems natural, since language and music are easily

related forms of human expression. Oration and music were virtually inseparable in classical antiquity; Homeric epic poetry was invariably sung or chanted. There is a rich history of literary/musical genres, such as opera, *Lieder*, sound poetry, madrigals, melodrama, motets, oratorio, and chant. Since ancient times the theory of music has incorporated terminology from rhetoric and poetry, while poets have just as often theorized about the musicality of their work—a traditional relationship that has continued to the present day. A recent, much-acclaimed monograph on musical structure and perception, for instance, has been authored by a music theorist working in collaboration with a linguist.<sup>1</sup>

Such connections, however, still left open the question of what kind of interdisciplinary activities would serve as our goals, particularly in light of the AAC's warning that an "[i]nterdisciplinary synthesis is achieved not by arraying disparate subjects sequentially before students" (*Reports* 66), or, as Steven S. Tigner has argued more recently, "[c]onnecting disciplines to create interdisciplinary learning is more than a process of course blending" (5-6). "Music and the Written Word" began with a provisional assumption gleaned from Leonard Bernstein's *The Unanswered Question*—which is the published version of the Norton lectures he delivered at Harvard in 1973—that "the best way to 'know' a thing is in the context of another discipline (3). This seemed an ideal strategy for a course combining music, narrative, and poetry. Students invariably come to a seminar like "Music and the Written Word" with far more background in language and literary works than they do in music, for linguistic competence develops almost from the moment of birth while musical skills are acquired years later, and, in most cases, develop at a markedly slower pace. The concepts and vocabulary we develop supply us with a way to look at music that transfers our students' linguistic abilities to musical contexts.

Posing the rather monumental question "Whither music in our century?" (269), Bernstein's six lectures range provocatively from music to poetry to the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky, whose account of linguistic deep and surface structures inspires Bernstein's own attempts to fashion a satisfying theory of musical deep structure. Chomsky posits a universal linguistic competence that allows all human beings to generate an infinite variety of linguistic performances (the surface structure) from a limited number of grammatical elements and forms (deep structure). For Bernstein, the overtone series comprises a musical analogy to Chomsky's concept of deep structure in that it represents a universally acquired language—a "worldwide,

inborn musical grammar” (7)—whose presence makes possible the tonal system that structures and makes comprehensible all musical performances. Bernstein claims, moreover, a connection between transformational grammar and music (119). Using Chomsky’s descriptions of the transformational rules common to all languages, Bernstein seeks to identify some of the complex rules (such as processes of transposition, deletion, conjoining) that govern the emergence of any unique composition from universal materials and forms.

The concept of deep structure developed in *The Unanswered Question* allowed us to solve several pressing pedagogical problems. First, it grounded our discussions within a conceptual framework capacious enough to include both disciplines. Although Bernstein’s technical vocabulary (derived from Chomsky) proved unnecessarily complicated for our first-year students, his often witty demonstrations of how both poetry and music might relate to the operations of transformational grammar prevented the course from having to rely on the language and strategies of one discipline—or, just as problematically, from having to rely on two separate hermeneutic languages. Using Bernstein’s book circumvented (though perhaps did not solve) the problems faced by students as they become, in Lucille McCarthy’s terms, strangers in strange lands: heir to multiple discourse communities that seem confusingly different in the strategies and languages they privilege (McCarthy; see also Bartholomae).

We found, for example, Bernstein’s discussion of metaphor in music and poetry particularly helpful. In poetry, metaphor is a wonderful way of establishing connections between ideas, people and things, that are, at least on the surface, differentiated. A metaphor like “Juliet is the sun,” to use Bernstein’s example out of Shakespeare, equates a person with abstract properties like radiance or life-giving capacity. Most importantly for Bernstein, a metaphor is *configured language*. A metaphor like “Juliet is the sun” conforms to a structural relationship whereby “this equals that, where *this* and *that* belong to two completely different and incompatible orders” (123). In a deep structural sense, “Juliet is the sun” is precisely similar to “Henry is a lion” or “Jeremy trashed my car.”

Turning to music, Bernstein distinguishes usefully between two kinds of musical “metaphor” which he terms *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. In extrinsic metaphor, musical sounds bear a relationship to extra-musical ideas and feelings. A famous example is Beethoven’s *Pastorale* Symphony with its musical portrayals of birdsong, thunderstorms, and

country dances. Our examination of this type of musical relationship presents an opportunity for students to share their personal responses in both written and verbal form to a wide variety of musical works, ranging from the overture to Wagner’s opera “The Flying Dutchman” to recent works by composers at Mills, including Maggi Payne’s “Subterranean Network” (an electronic work depicting the horrors of tunnel fighting during the Vietnam War) and Alvin Curran’s “Notes from Underground” (a sound/installation work with music rising up from speakers buried beneath the ground, portraying the outcries of horror and mourning by victims of the holocaust.). Our students discuss the extra-musical images invoked by these pieces in class—a challenging form of hermeneutic analysis requiring a creative response that translates abstract musical information into metaphoric language.<sup>2</sup>

*Intrinsic* metaphor, according to Bernstein, results from the development of a motive. As a result, certain musical configurations bear a relationship to each other and thus yield a “metaphoric” (or “this is that”) correspondence. For example, consider the well-known opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (Ex. 1a):

Example 1

The image shows two staves of musical notation, labeled 'a' and 'b'. Both staves are in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. Staff 'a' shows the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: a four-note motive (G4, A4, B4, C5) marked with a dashed line and 'x', followed by a rising step (D5) marked with a dashed line and 'y'. Staff 'b' shows a later theme starting with a four-note motive (G4, A4, B4, C5) marked with a dashed line and 'x'', followed by a rising step (D5) marked with a dashed line and 'y''. The annotations 'x' and 'y' in staff 'a' are connected by a dashed line, and 'x'' and 'y'' in staff 'b' are also connected by a dashed line, illustrating the structural equivalence between the two themes.

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The theme consists of a four-note motive (x) whose repetition is separated by a rising step (y). Later on in the movement, at the beginning of the second theme (Ex. 1b), the listener encounters new material. But the new theme also contains the motivic building blocks from the opening (x’ and y’). Thus, despite their surface dissimilarity, the two themes are, on a deeper level, equivalent. We might say that Ex. 1a is a metaphor for Ex. 1b. This sort of equivalence is not trivial, for it is an example of the musical organicism that lies behind the formal structure of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical works. And students can learn to appreciate and recognize these sorts of connections when they are taught to extend their knowledge of more familiar

materials (i.e. poetry and its use of metaphor) to more abstract musical situations. The results of pedagogical strategies such as this have been startling. Our students have been able to understand and write about music with a level of sophistication that would not have been possible without this interdisciplinary framework.

The kind of common ground based on structural resemblances that Bernstein has in mind can always be disputed, and he himself hints that his theory of metaphor, like many of his connections between music and language, is meant to be understood metaphorically—as a provocative analogy rather than as intimations of a universal aesthetic language. On the other hand, one cannot see the point of or dismiss his analogies without first beginning to think in interdisciplinary fashion. The heuristic value of terms like extrinsic and intrinsic metaphor in music is apparent only when they are conceived of in relationship to a discussion of linguistic metaphor; they are useful for our interdisciplinary purposes because they are not self-explanatory nor terms commonly used in the discipline of music appreciation. While we and our students often critique Bernstein's arguments, therefore, his methodology seems to us pedagogically sound.

The concept of deep structure proved to be still more productive once we began to explore possibilities only latent in Bernstein's lectures, such as a consideration of meter, which creates another kind of deep structure in music and poetry. As one might expect, our complementary discussions of musical and poetic meters helped students grasp the mechanics involved. More importantly, the interpretive framework of deep structure helped them grasp the idea that metrical forms possess profound historical and cultural significances. We studied, for instance, the ways in which several major poets in English have employed various meters, particularly iambic pentameter, in order to enter and revise centuries-long literary traditions. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) exemplifies the elevated tone and epic qualities of a metrical form associated with Shakespeare and Chaucer; Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) calls upon the inherited meanings of the metrical form in order to satirize the pretensions of his subjects, transforming epic possibility into mock-epic actuality; and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850) transforms the cultural significance of the form again by placing its associations of grandeur at the service of an individual's life and aspirations. Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, who chooses to write his contemporary epic *Omeros* (1990) in unconventional hexameter, provides an intriguing foil, for his metrical form



allows him to step outside an English tradition of epic in poetry while reminding us of still older forms: the hexameter, for instance, of Homeric epic.

Our discussion of metrical forms culminates in a more intensive analysis of innovative works like Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1912-13) and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Stravinsky's rhythmic innovations were perhaps his most important contributions to twentieth-century music. Throughout the *Rite* his musical setting works against the bar-line and strongly undermines the listener's sense of metric regularity. In many passages meter is no longer an element of this work's "deep structure"—a feature that distinguishes the *Rite* from works stemming from previous musical traditions and shows one of the ways that this work responded to *fin-de-siècle* political and social disintegration.

In *The Waste Land* the irregular meter of the first 18 lines of becomes problematic at the very moment when the emergence of a new, prophetic voice suddenly returns us to iambic pentameter:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief (ll. 19-22)

In response to the poem's own rhetorical question about clutching roots, two lines of iambic pentameter (ll. 19-20) reflect what has been lost: a tradition in which stable metrical patterns intimated order, grandeur, and continuity both social and cosmic. Subsequent lines, keyed by the post-war pessimism of "you know only/A heap of broken images," slip back into increasing irregularity (11 syllables, then 12, 14). As if further to mock the return to a metrical deep structure, the next occurrence of iambic pentameter falls ironically on "Madame Sorostris, famous clairvoyante" (l. 46), whose "wicked pack of cards" provides a bathetic modern counterpart to ancient wisdom.

The above mode of inquiry focuses upon structural or syntactic similarities between the languages of these two disciplines and also begins to explore how works from different disciplines relate to similar social, political, and historical contexts. Our studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music, poetry, and fiction have proved an extremely productive approach to this latter pursuit—the "business" of intellectual

history. In “Music and the Written Word,” works from the romantic, modernist, and postmodernist periods compose the body of the course. Several lectures on romanticism examine the basic tenets of transcendental philosophies and how they are reflected in paired works like the *Prelude* and *Liebtestod* from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or Whitman’s *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (1859) and Charles Ives’ *Fourth Symphony* (1916). Our early discussions of the romantic predilection for cosmic unities and universals allow us to explore the concept of deep structure anew in a specific historical context.

In discussions of several works from the early twentieth century, our students learn about relationships between modernist aesthetics and social and intellectual upheavals at the turn of the twentieth century. Our examination of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* accompanied by lectures on Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* introduces the class to modernist techniques of fragmentation, discontinuity, and allusion, and demonstrates how music and poetry composed with these methods reflect the political, moral, and social climate during the years prior and immediately following World War I. Virginia Woolf’s experiments with different types of fictional time in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) supplies a connection to composers whose experiments with musical time run from the discontinuities of Stravinsky to the more recent minimalism of Reich, Riley, and Glass. Similarities in form and technique lead, however, to questions about these artists’ social and political intent, particularly in reference to the changing roles of women in early twentieth-century society. Close readings of the female characters in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (Mrs. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe), Alban Berg’s 1922 opera *Wozzeck* (Marie), and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* provoked much thought among our students with regard to the ways in which experiments in form affected—or were affected by—the portrayal of women.<sup>3</sup> Building on these socio-political considerations, we subsequently compare Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* with the “Free Jazz” movement and explore some of the ways in which artists reacted similarly to the social and political situation of the McCarthy period and its aftermath.

The final section of the course investigates postmodernism with the rather ambiguous goal of unifying our thinking about deep structure while beginning to characterize a postmodernist aesthetic of structurelessness and decenteredness. Here again, Bernstein’s lectures, which always invite readers to reflect on historical continuities and

transformations, have proven extremely useful. *The Unanswered Question* is as much a polemic about the perceived demise of tonality in music in the twentieth century as it is an interdisciplinary inquiry into relationships between language and music, and in its former guise Bernstein's argument unfolds historically. According to Bernstein, the nineteenth-century's growing obsession with chromaticism in music leads to a twentieth-century crisis—indeed, a “life-and-death crisis in musical semantics” (263)—whereby the rise of nontonal music threatens the universality of the harmonic series and thus the “deep structures implied by, indeed inherent in, these notes” (289). Bernstein thus resists what we might be tempted now to call a postmodernist fascination with the loss of the universals and deep structures that made powerful, in Jean-François Lyotard's terms, “*les grands récits*” of Western culture. His lectures actually tap into some of the most contentious philosophical issues of the last forty years.

These ideas are taken up as the seminar begins to move from modernist to post-modernist musical and literary works. Early in the semester, we compare tonality—an ordered system of tension and relaxation based on the tonic/dominant relationship—to the effect of orderly rhyme schemes and meters in poetry, and place such music and poetry in the context of the philosophical and religious suppositions of their age. Seen through Bernstein's lens, the breaking of tonality in the twentieth century anticipates what we often call the postmodernist turn in writing, an idea we introduce by looking briefly at the literary experiments and aesthetic assumptions of Gertrude Stein. In her 1912 portraits of painters (“Cezanne,” “Picasso,” “Matisse”) and her still more radical *Tender Buttons* (1914), Stein freed words from their semantic obligations. By exploiting the aural and visual aspects of language, Stein disrupts the word/thing (or signifier/signified) relationship that underpins most people's linguistic assumptions. The “A Box” section of *Tender Buttons*, for instance, begins “Out of kindness comes redness,” a statement that seems nonsensical until it is read as a statement about the aural play that pervades Stein's work: the piece goes on to discover the possibilities of the “ness” motif as it modulates to “rudeness” (which itself becomes “rudimentary”), or splits into alliterated pairs like “something suggesting” and “substance strangely.” Stein's writing could thus be called nontonal in the sense that it eschews the word/thing relationship that seems to center and stabilize all linguistic systems.

In music, similarly, John Cage was concerned with “letting sounds be themselves.” He wrote works employing chance operations so that musical materials could exist independently within a given work without forming the organic connections that were so highly valued in the music of earlier periods. Cage was fascinated by the randomness and the musical potential of noise. In an essay entitled “The Future of Music Credo,” he rejected the distinction between “noise” and so-called “musical sounds.”

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck going fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. If the word “music” is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound. (Cage 3)

Ironically, Cage’s composition without sound, a work entitled *4’33”* (1952) did more than any other work to alter our definition of music so that it could include noise as well as any other possible sound. During each of the work’s three movements the performer simply sits motionless in front of the piano. As one might expect, there was quite an uproar after the first performance. One irate audience member even stood up and said “Good people of Woodstock, let’s drive these people out of town.”

Our seminar includes a live performance of *4’33”*, and fortunately we have not yet experienced a similar reaction. After a few moments of uneasy silence, the students begin to listen to the sounds around them, from the croaking frogs in a nearby pond to the muffled drone of the freeway outside of the campus. In fact, the description of *4’33”* as a composition without sound is misleading. According to Cage, any combination of sounds, whether they are “musical” sounds, noises produced by percussion instruments, or the ambient sounds of our environment, can be aesthetically pleasing. In this way, the materials available for a musical work are virtually unlimited and Cage rejoiced in the existence of these infinite possibilities.

*4’33”* allows us to explore forward-looking aspects of Cage’s musical aesthetics. Cage’s position within the history of twentieth-

century music is very much like Stein's in the way that he anticipated the postmodernist aesthetic tradition. He rejected several basic musical assumptions: the need for musical relations (i.e. syntax and organic form) and the necessity for criteria used to determine the sounds that are appropriate for musical works. Cage thus joins Stein in the de-centered, level "playing field" of the postmodernist aesthetic arena.

Our course and our discussions of postmodernism conclude simultaneously with the work of contemporary composer Robert Ashley, who has recently completed an extraordinary trilogy of operas, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, *Perfect Lives*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*. Ashley, a composer in the American experimentalist tradition, was a founder of the legendary *Once Group*—an interdisciplinary arts collective that flourished in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the 1960s. He is known for pioneering a new form of operatic production based on a collaborative multi-media presentation and a form of vocal delivery somewhere between speech and song.

In some ways, Ashley pays homage to his modernist antecedents. The introduction to the libretto of *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)* (the first part of *Now Eleanor's Idea*), for instance, contains an elaborate chart, strongly reminiscent of James Joyce's famous schema for *Ulysses* (1922), detailing categories like "Idea," "Technique," "Theme," and "Code" for all four parts of *Now Eleanor's Idea*. In *Improvement*, the character of Linda supposedly represents "The Jews," Don "Spanishness," and the Airline Ticket Counter "The Inquisition;" its "Code" is 1492, signifying the beginning of America and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Such complex schemas do indeed remind us of the desire of a Joyce, Pound, or Yeats to compose vast cosmic and historical allegories. One critic, Charles Shere, likens Ashley's work to Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* for the way his operas invoke a "universal resonance" (Ashley xii) in each particular, an interpretation that Ashley himself supports when, in an interview, he refers us to the Neo-Platonic idea that "the whole thing is contained in the smallest detail" (Burch 118).

But Ashley's operas—each one designed for that nontraditional yet quintessentially postmodernist medium, the television—constantly force us to rethink these analogies to modernism. Consider, for instance, the dialogue at the Airline Ticket Counter (the Inquisition), featuring Carla and Carlo (alias Don):

Where was your wife when you left her?

She was in the toilet at the turn-off.

She went into the toilet and you left her?

Yes.

You took her baggage and the rented car?

Yes.

You left urgently to meet another person?

Yes.

That person is a woman?

Yes.

Your wife will be angry and jealous.

No.

How is that possible? (Scene II, 30-36; Burch 124-5)

Ending on a ne'er-answered question, Scene II puts in doubt the very nature of our reading (and listening) experience. The echo of an interrogation, we might argue, lends ominous overtones to an amusing situation. Or is it that what might have been an ominous allusion surrenders to a kind of tabloid narrative (wife abandoned at a toilet), so that the whole piece becomes a kitsch version of James Joyce? The question is whether Ashley's own exegeses and self-conscious pontificating ("For the sake of argument Don is Spain in 1492/and Linda is the Jews," [Act I, 35-36]) can be taken seriously, or whether the entire opera becomes a jokey parody of modernist techniques. Like Cage and Stein, his work opens up discussion about the viability of the modernist project—in particular, its quest for interconnectiveness and universality.

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The foregoing discussions of music and poetry may seem too sophisticated for many first-year students. But this has not been the case, for our seminar has been well received by both our students and those involved in assessing our efforts. The key to this success is the kind of interdisciplinarity achieved by our seminar, in which different disciplinary languages allow our students to approach complex issues and ideas from several perspectives, but also in which the disciplinary languages themselves are reframed (and revitalized) by each other. Moreover, as we move back and forth from poetry to music (and sometimes narrative) throughout the semester, our course consistently maintains a common ground of inquiry established on the historical

circumstances shared by writer and composer but also, crucially, on Bernstein's account of the historical fate of deep structure in the context of the harmonic series.

Bernstein's lectures played multiple roles in our course. They facilitated the acquisition of skills like understanding metrical arrangements in poetry and music. More importantly, they provided a kind of deep structure to our own course: a continuing interest in the fate of a concept like deep structure, beginning with a Romantic predilection for transcendental unities, moving to a modernist yearning for (in Eliot's phrase) "roots that clutch," and concluding with a postmodernist celebration of decenteredness. Various concepts of deep structure loosely organized and provided a subtext to the chronological format of the greater part of our course, which thus allowed students to approach the relationship between writer and composer synchronically (in terms of common historical affiliations) and diachronically (in terms of their affiliations to the way an important concept has unfolded over two centuries).

But what made Bernstein's work so pertinent to our course was the way in which its narrative of a growing disenchantment with deep structure embraced our own interdisciplinary aspirations. Our final discussions of a postmodern fascination with decenteredness and syntactic rupture forced us and our students to confront a series of productive ironies within the very construction of the course: that our ideas, conceived within the syncretic and centering spirit of general education, had also to entertain an aesthetic and a philosophy that questioned the very premise of needing a core or center; that our final disagreement with Bernstein's insistence on musical deep structure extended and completed a discussion of deep structure that in important ways unified the course; that an ideal of integrated knowledge collided with our sense (as Aronowitz and Giroux argue in their *Postmodern Education*) that "postmodernism asserts no privileged place" (13) for the observer and educator. A pedagogical strategy that encouraged students to think beyond the disciplinary mainstream was therefore implicated in what many have seen as the problematic, even the scandal, of the desire for universal, "centered" knowledge.

The relationship of our method of interdisciplinary investigation to general education was therefore a vexed one, for our method raised questions about the ideal of integrated knowledge even as we collectively provided the means of that questioning. But we found these ironies stimulating rather than destructive. Our course did not achieve

interdisciplinarity, if by that we mean the product of two disciplinary perspectives or the discovery of an ur-language (in our case based on Bernstein's reading of Chomsky). But it did foster a process of interdisciplinary inquiry—a kind of restive dialogism—that was more open-ended and less conclusive than we originally intended. In so doing, we argue, interdisciplinary investigation was liberated as a tool for probing rather than establishing connections between the disciplines.

In the end, the educational objectives behind general education courses such as “Music and the Written Word” go beyond course content and skill acquisition. They involve goals that look past the syllabi of specific courses and toward transforming the student populations of today into the responsible citizenry of tomorrow. During the final classes of the semester we focus upon the fact that today such notions as deep-structure and universal truth are often viewed with suspicion and that these epistemological assumptions may be the basis for many of today's social, political, and moral dilemmas. At the same time, we explore the question—if a class like “Music and the Written Word” has any validity—what kind of common ground of inquiry and what kind of (in E.D. Hirsch's term) cultural literacy might prove valuable in our age. Our discussions of Eliot, Stravinsky, Stein, Cage, Woolf, and Ashley therefore introduce our students to several vital issues in late-twentieth-century intellectual history and try to come to an understanding of how these crucial issues may help us find new ways to adapt to a rapidly changing, complex, and diverse society. In this respect, the fact that those discussions themselves refused to come to closure seems less to be lamented than a sign of how far we have come “beyond mainstream.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Jackendoff and Lerhdahl.

<sup>2</sup> For a homework assignment, students write essays about the extra-musical images invoked by several musical selections on tape.

<sup>3</sup> An accompanying “literary letters” assignment, in which pairs of students were asked to assume the role of Eliot/Woolf or Woolf/Berg and correspond about their respective works, proved to be a lively and challenging way for students to articulate their thoughts about modernism.



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