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The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills, by Joel Phillips, Jane Piper Clendinning, and Elizabeth West Marvin. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.

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REVIEW

THE MUSICIAN'S GUIDE TO AURAL SKILLS, BY JOEL PHILLIPS, JANE PIPER CLENDINNING, AND ELIZABETH WEST MARVIN. NEW YORK: W. W. NORTON, 2005.

BRENT AUERBACH

The stated goal of *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills*, by Phillips, Clendinning, and Marvin, is the same to which all conscientious theory instructors strive: to teach “the necessary practical skills—dictation, sight-singing, keyboard, improvisation, composition, and learning to hear theoretical concepts in context—that students will need as professional musicians” (I:xi).¹ Given the worldly limitations of time, energy, and student skill level, the distance to that lofty goal can stretch away from us with an elasticity that is seemingly infinite. Often, we settle for partial or immediate successes. We might privilege sight-singing at the cost of a keyboard component, or we might avoid having students bring their instruments to class to allow more time for dictation practice. If time and class size are the major obstacles to bringing keyboard study, improvisation, and guided listening into the aural skills classroom, then no text can be of aid. It may be, though, that some teachers omit practical musicianship skills because they are unsure how best to integrate them into the curriculum. For them, or for anyone looking to significantly broaden and enliven their pedagogy, I recommend devoting serious study to the *Musician's Guide to Aural Skills* and considering it for adoption.

¹ All cited page numbers correspond to the teacher's edition of *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills*; the volume number appears before the colon.

The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills is the companion to a written theory text by Clendinning and Marvin, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*.² To facilitate pairing, the two texts correspond nearly exactly in design.³ The authors note, however, that *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills* (hereafter, *The Guide*) "can be used by itself or in conjunction with other theory texts" (I:xi). In light of this comment, this review will consider *The Guide* largely on its own terms.

The Guide covers the material commonly taught in the two-year undergraduate theory core curriculum. It is divided into thirty-four chapters that group into six larger units called Parts (see Figure 1).⁴ *The Guide* is styled as a two-volume workbook, printed on high-quality paper that is perforated and collected in sturdy comb bindings.⁵ The ample margins, 11-point font, and judicious use of headings and bulleted lists make it extremely easy on the eye. The majority of space is reserved for hands-on activities, such as echoing back calls, the analysis of audio examples, and dictation. Plenty of room is allotted for free responses, with blank staves appearing in abundance.

The main feature setting *The Guide* apart from other texts is its philosophy of integrated skills, the idea that every concept should be put into practice in multiple modes of musicianship. This philosophy emerges most clearly in the design of the chapters, which are consistently divided into six sections: "Key Concepts," "Call and Response," "Contextual Listening,"

² Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

³ A slight divergence in chapter organization results from *The Guide's* omission of approximately three chapters of material from the written textbook.

⁴ As impressive as this list may appear in scope, it represents only about three-quarters of *The Guide's* contents. Beyond these categories, there are separate chapters and subsections covering notation, part-writing textures, notation, transposition and scoring, figured bass realization, motivic analysis, and poetic interpretation of popular and art songs.

⁵ For an indeterminate reason, only the second volume of my review copy was three-hole punched.

FIGURE 1. Part and chapter summary of *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills*

Part I (Chapters 1–7): “Building a Musical Vocabulary”

Fundamentals of pitch, intervals, rhythm, meter, modes, scales, triads and seventh chords.

Part II (Chapters 8–11): “Linking Musical Elements in Time”

Introduces the concept of working in a two-voice framework (outer voices) and comprehending basic non-chord tones such as passing tones, conjunct neighbor tones, and suspensions.

Part III (Chapters 12–20): “The Phrase Model”

Introduces the tonic and all dominant-functioning chords, predominants, and all $\frac{6}{4}$ chords, prolongation via melodic embellishment, diatonic sequences, and secondary dominants. Also teaches phrase structure, hypermeter, and how to hear regular versus irregular phrase rhythm.

Part IV (Chapters 21–25): “Further Expansion of the Harmonic Vocabulary”

Takes up harmonic issues typically introduced in the third semester of theory study: secondary dominants of all other diatonic scale steps, modulation to closely-related keys, mixture including chromatic mediant relations, and the use of Neapolitan and augmented sixth chords. A single chapter on binary and ternary forms also appears.

Part V (Chapters 26–29): “Musical Form and Interpretation”

Three chapters covering art and popular song, variation and rondo, sonata form, and a fourth illustrating chromatic techniques for voice exchange and sequences.

Part VI (Chapters 30–34): “Into the Twentieth Century”

Provides an introduction to working with and hearing both ordered and unordered pitch-class (pc) sets. Among the topics covered are transposition and inversion of unordered sets, normal and prime forms, interval vectors, set classes, and twelve-tone serialism.

“Melodies for Study,” “Improvisation,” and “Composition.” These exercises engage all learning styles—visual, aural, and tactile.

“Key Concepts” provides an abbreviated, hands-on lecture on a theoretical topic. Along with the prose instruction comes a series of listening and performance exercises that may involve singing, playing model progressions, or responding to audio tracks from an accompanying set of three CDs. The “Call and Response” sections break the material of the chapter into very short figures and patterns. The instructor first sounds one of the melodic or harmonic patterns in rhythm. An equal-length pause is given to allow for audiation, a silent hearing performed mentally, after which the students echo the call by singing or playing it. Direct echoes are a

starting point. The text, however, always suggests more imaginative modes of response that involve sequencing, varying, and harmonizing the calls.

In “Contextual Listening,” students listen to recorded musical examples, then answer free-response and multiple-choice questions that delve into both small- and large-scale issues. The majority of the text’s dictation exercises occur in this section. Primarily Classical and Romantic works in homophonic texture are studied; however, an impressive number of jazz, folk, and twentieth-century pieces are present as well.

The fourth section of each chapter typically offers eight or nine “Melodies for Study.” These melodies are not primarily intended for singing; in fact, about half of them are taken from florid, instrumental works. The authors advocate a flexible approach here, where melodies may be sung on solfège or scale degrees, played, embellished, or harmonized; they may even serve as compositional models. *The Guide* endorses movable do, do-based minor, and scale-degree approaches. The last of these systems effectively eliminates any potential conflicts that could arise in fixed do and/or la-based minor classrooms.

To facilitate “Improvisation” in the fifth section, *The Guide* provides score templates and detailed instructions to aid solo and group performances. Beginning with stepwise elaboration of monophonic melodies, students eventually learn to improvise over chord symbols and figured basses. The emphasis on chordal improvisation is well balanced by melodic concerns as students also improvise monophonic phrases, consequents to given antecedents, and even small binary forms. Last, in “Composition,” students are given primarily verbal directions for structuring pieces in a large variety of styles, including blues and ragtime; post-tonal idioms are incorporated as well.

The Guide comes equipped with a full host of ancillaries, including an indispensable teacher's edition (more on this below) as well as a full glossary, index, and guide to orchestral instruments. Three CDs are packaged with the book, which contain all audio examples but one (due to licensing restrictions). A multitude of genres and textures by male and female composers is represented. The sound quality is quite good, as are most of the performances. There are only occasional lapses in musicality: for example, the recording of the entire first movement from Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A \flat , Op. 26, is noticeably labored and under tempo (II:249–55). More problematic is an outright inaccurate performance of $\frac{3}{8}$ meter in Bartók's "Change of Time" from *Mikrokosmos*, which serves as a dictation exercise in a chapter on twentieth-century rhythm and meter (II:512). Instructors who wish to implement computer-aided drilling will be interested to learn that *The Guide* is specially coordinated with the ear training program *MacGAMUT*.⁶ Included with all newly shipped *MacGAMUT* instructor disks are presets and libraries designed to complement *The Guide*, which permit students to practice skills chapter by chapter and in shared terminology with the book.

Critique.

The Guide is a practical skills text that reinforces concepts taught in written theory. As each new "Key Concept" is introduced and explored, students gain fluency in aural analysis, keyboard skills, improvisation, and composition. The book incorporates singing; however, it is not to be taken as a sight-singing text. It provides virtually no drills or instructions for reliably producing intervals, and no strategies for navigating tricky vocal passages. *The Guide* is best

⁶ MacGAMUT 6, computer software designed and programmed by Ann K. Blombach (Columbus, OH: MacGAMUT Music Software, 2008).

suited to students who arrive on the first day of class already somewhat fluent in music, who will relish the experience of passing musical objects off from the page to their eyes, ears, and instruments. Of course, any students lacking these abilities can and should be encouraged to develop them. For them, too, this book is eminently suitable.

The six sections of each chapter are fleshed out with a multitude of well-designed exercises of significant scope. There are in fact so many activities that it is hard to imagine a class making it through everything in a standard two-year timeline. The depth of content means that instructors will never need to scramble for class materials. The challenge of preparing for class, rather, will involve selecting exercises at an appropriate skill level and strategizing how to guide students confidently through them. The teacher's edition presently offers little aid on the former front, except for the two general semester plans provided in the introduction (I:xiv). In the future, the authors could provide more detailed suggestions for tailoring daily curricula to suit particular needs. For example, the topics and skills emphasized in a "practical skills track" would differ from those in an "AP track" or "graduate review track."

As for helping instructors implement the material, it is here that the teacher's edition of *The Guide* proves invaluable. The authors offer detailed, stepwise instructions that will guide a teacher through all procedures from tonicization to group improvisation. They offer a further boon in the form of dozens of ready-made calls in each chapter that will support less-experienced instructors and drastically reduce preparation time for everyone. Also presented are numerous and valuable "teaching strategies," which range from simple tips and reminders to ideas for communicating complicated theoretical topics. Hardly an afterthought, these teaching strategies are ubiquitous, making the authors' intentions for the exercises wholly transparent.

FIGURE 2. Teacher's manual solution for melodic and harmonic dictation of Amy Beach's "Minuet Italien," from *Three Pieces*, Op. 28, No. 2

Ab: I (arp.⁶/₄) V₅⁶ V⁷ I

vi V

I: *d d d t d r f f f m f s si si si l m r d t l l s s fi fi s*
 vi: *t t t d s f m e r d*
 V: *r d d t t d*

The teacher's edition provides thorough and musically sensitive answers to the hundreds of questions posed in *The Guide*, including those concerning the dramatic and emotional impact of works. Wherever multiple readings are possible—think “parallel” versus “contrasting” labels for period types—it lists a number of the criteria to be cited in support of each. In many instances where an excerpt features tonicization, the authors align multiple solutions to reflect differing perceptions of tonal permanence (see Figure 2). All these features are packaged in a pitch-perfect book design that utilizes gray shading and page annotations to facilitate seamless coordination with the student version of the text.

At all turns, *The Guide* reflects a deep concern with skills-based pedagogy. There is a commitment not just to tell, but to show readers how musical elements work. Such is the prime

motivation for the “Call and Response” activities, which allow students to pop small, pre-formulated goodies (three-note fragments and such) into the oven on their way toward learning the art of managing and mixing up more impressive creations (such as phrases and miniature pieces). To help classes engage with the listening examples, *The Guide* employs spiral learning, in which select topics and pieces periodically return in new contexts. Mendelssohn’s famous “Spring Song,” for example, appears four separate times as it is used to teach melodic dictation, cadences, secondary dominants, and phrase structure.

The Guide further immerses students in the theoretical material through the doctrine of kinesthetic learning. For every chapter that introduces a new aspect of pitch, harmony, or rhythm, students are directed to feel out the novel structures at the keyboard, in their voices, and on their instruments. As an example, students are first taught the major and minor scales in terms of component tetrachords (major, minor, harmonic, and Phrygian) that are played with the fingers 4–3–2–1, 1–2–3–4. This fundamental knowledge supports a later lesson on pitch intervals: “every time you play a M6 above a tonic pitch, regardless of key, it will always be between LH 4 and RH 2” (I:167).

For theorists interested in new models for describing familiar topics, this book will prove a wellspring. Linear tetrachords and pentachords are employed first to teach all of the common tonal and synthetic scales. When later arranged in the format of Figure 3, they provide a powerful framework for conceptualizing melodic space, one that is highly useful both in “Contextual Listening” sections and during the planning of compositions and improvisations. The countless additional tips and tactics lining the book will make welcome additions to many a teacher’s repertoire. Examples include using the Phrygian mode to teach minor intervals, having students sing back harmonic dictations as bass lines while calling out figures (for example,

activities are a mainstay. In general, the goal is to capture entire excerpts in two voices, which is no small task given the length of many of them: at one extreme I noted a Mozart transcription that requires 105 melodic and thirty-two bass pitches. The level of detail demanded even in the shorter dictations runs a bit higher than in the typical second-year aural skills class. To protect students from homework assignments that could unintentionally run into the multi-hour range, teachers will need to exercise caution.

The last five chapters of *The Guide*, focusing on twentieth-century music, also offer up some challenges that may go beyond the skill level of the typical undergraduate. Students are asked to dictate pitch-class cells, to analyze transpositions and inversions, and to put them in normal and prime forms. These are well-designed exercises, and the pieces on which they are based provide crystal-clear instances of the techniques surveyed. The inclusion of these exercises is without question a worthwhile addition to *The Guide*. And yet, based on even my own inability to complete them perfectly in a timely fashion, I would probably not assign these exercises to students without the support of scores.

A further issue is that the text frequently addresses details that are quite microscopic, such as “the third note” of a passage or the quality of a fleeting chord. It is worthwhile to ask such questions, but doing so too often fosters a habit of nervously clicking the scan button on CD players and computers, which can damage them. Having myself experienced drive burn-out years ago during transcription, I recommend that *The Guide*'s CDs be downloaded to a computer before any “Contextual Listening” questions are attempted. Another concern arises in the analysis of sonata forms (Chapter 28), where many “Contextual Listening” exercises are in multiple-choice format. *The Guide* relies on a verbal approach to orient readers to musical locations. Without scores, however, only the most precocious students will find such instructions intuitive.

Most would benefit from more concrete signposts such as track times or visual representations of melodies and rhythms.

Finally, I wish to note a few problems concerning specific topics in *The Guide*. In Chapter 5, on compound meter, only time signatures having 8 as the lower value are introduced. Almost never in the entire curriculum are students asked to think in $\frac{3}{2}$ or $\frac{9}{4}$. More worrisome is that the summaries provided in the “Key Concepts” sections frequently seem to be rushed or incomplete. Single-paragraph and occasionally single-sentence glosses introduce concepts as critical and complex as sequence, motive, and interval class. This abbreviated presentation style will severely impact younger and less theory-savvy instructors, who may be unable to explain the subtleties of these topics. A conspicuous lack of footnotes and bibliographic data compounds this issue. *The Guide* employs some very particular terminology and techniques, among them linear intervallic patterns and phrase rhythm. Readers need to know where they can learn more about the origins and proper use of these concepts; to introduce them to an inquisitive class without sufficient background reading and preparation is to court disaster.⁷

Elsewhere, topics with major billing in chapter and section headings feel as if they get short shrift, with their meaning occasionally obscured by the text itself. A primary case involves “The Phrase Model,” the titular subject of Part III (Chapters 12–20), which is not clearly described or shown anywhere. Within these chapters, the text loosely applies harmonic function labels, largely destroying the efficacy of the phrase model. The whole point of Chapter 12, we read, is learning “to expand the tonic using the *dominant-function* chords V and V⁷” (I:404,

⁷ In some cases, called-for citation may lead back to the companion text, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, where topics such as phrase rhythm often receive fuller treatment. For a description of linear intervallic patterns, see Allen Forte and Steven Gilbert, *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982). Phrase rhythm is introduced in William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (New York: Schirmer Books,

emphasis mine). These days, it is rarely taught that connective V and V⁷ chords—especially those in inversion—have dominant function at anything but the lowest level, and certainly not at the level of the phrase.

My final reservations concern *The Guide's* handling of form: the book is at times inconsistent with its terminology and labeling systems. As an example, rounded binary form is graphed for the first time as $\parallel: A :|||: B A' :||$, where uppercase letters show a three-part melodic design within a two-part formal arrangement (II:97). On the same page, small binary forms in popular tunes (called quaternary form) are shown as $\parallel: a :|||: b a :||$. Later in Chapter 27, students analyze the form of the first movement of Beethoven's piano sonata, op. 26, mm. 1–34, another clear-cut rounded binary form. Though the total stretch of music represents a section in itself—specifically, the theme to a set of variations—*The Guide* inexplicably determines “the design of the theme's sections” to be A–A'–B–A' (II:251, emphasis mine).

The Guide also takes a decidedly awkward approach to the larger forms. The possibility of composite forms is mentioned, yet the skill of hearing them is only approached obliquely via multiple-choice questions. It is suggested to students that they “sketch structural diagrams as [they] listen,” but they are never *required* to do so. Perhaps this is a good thing, as no explicit instructions are given as to how one distinguishes the capital As and Bs of smaller sections from those denoting the layout of ternary and rondo forms. A single diagram implies that capital letters gain importance if they are boxed (II:103). However, this issue of nomenclature is explicitly addressed only by the written theory text, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*.⁸

1989; reprinted Ann Arbor: Musicalia Press, 2007). See also Ryan McClelland, “Teaching Phrase Rhythm through Minuets from Haydn's String Quartets,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 20 (2006): 5–35.

⁸ Clendinning and Marvin, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, 454.

Despite these minor flaws, *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills* stands as a truly impressive addition to aural skills pedagogy. Joel Phillips, Jane Clendinning, and Elizabeth Marvin deserve praise for offering a refreshing new approach for putting theory into practice. The recorded material teaches students how to listen attentively and analytically to great literature. The exercises are imaginative, musical, and challenging. Far more importantly, they are serviceable with the right amount of guidance and encouragement. With a text like this one in the students' hands, and the teacher's edition in the instructor's, everyone in the classroom stands to gain from a resource that will afford valuable new techniques for audiating and thinking about music.

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