

Date: Tue, 13 Jan 2004 18:18:46 +0000

Reply-To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>, Abigail Wood <A.C.Wood@SOTON.AC.UK>

Sender: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>

From: Abigail Wood <A.C.Wood@SOTON.AC.UK>

Subject: Transcription for undergraduates

Content-Type: TEXT/PLAIN; charset=US-ASCII

Dear colleagues,

I teach an undergraduate unit called 'Introduction to Ethnomusicology', which includes a transcription project: students are required to transcribe a 2-3 minute extract of one of the musics covered in the course.

I'm currently reviewing this assignment, and wondered if anyone has any good tips for teaching transcription. All my students are music majors and (at least theoretically!) have good skills in Western notation. I want to encourage them to experiment with ways to notate interesting aspects of the example they choose. However, in the past I have found that students have been very daunted by the task of transcription, and have lacked self-confidence in their own ability to transcribe non-Western music. This seems to be a psychological barrier as much as anything, since these same students often produce great transcriptions in the end.

I wondered, then, if anybody has experiences or advice that could help me as I revise the assignment. I'd particularly be interested to hear about any of the following:

- Do you include a transcription assignment in your teaching? What exactly do you ask students to do?
- How do you introduce transcription in your teaching?
- If you have found similar issues of students lacking self-confidence in transcription, how did you address these?

Thank you in advance,

Abigail Wood

--Abigail Wood

Music, School of Humanities

University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

Tel: ++44 (0)23 8059 5064 University network: 25064

Date: Sun, 18 Jan 2004 19:04:38 -0700

Reply-To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>,

Brenda Romero <romerob@SPOT.COLORADO.EDU>

Sender: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>

From: Brenda Romero <romerob@SPOT.COLORADO.EDU>

Subject: Re: Transcription for undergraduates

Comments: To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List <SEM-L@indiana.edu>,
Abigail Wood <A.C.Wood@SOTON.AC.UK>

In-Reply-To: <Pine.SOL.4.21.0401131755330.6241-100000@willow.sucs.soton.ac.uk>

Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii" ; format="flowed"

For a few years I assigned a transcription in my own Introduction to Ethnomusicology class, although not all of the students are music majors in my class. Because of this I accepted either a prescriptive or descriptive transcription, and assigned the Transcription and Notation chapters in Helen Myers' book. All prescriptive transcriptions are to be used for performance but the descriptive ones could describe some element of the music that one might be interested to highlight in addressing a research problem of some sort. The students typically used Western notation for the prescriptive transcriptions and various kinds of graphs for the descriptive ones. For additional guidance they read Sue Carole DeVale's article that David Harnish included in the list of references he sent you. I also showed some of the more creative transcriptions from previous classes. I stipulated that if they used Western notation they had to observe the conventions of that notation

system (although they could innovate), and all transcriptions had to include a legend that made it possible to read the symbols, etc.

They had to include an indication of seconds passing. A student who read your email posting wrote to me to say that she felt that they were allowed to be creative and that the assignment "made the point that these transcriptions were "A" representation of the music, not definitive performance/transmission representations. "AN interpretation or representation vs. an absolute performance "transcription." -- Referring mostly to the option of descriptive transcription, I think.

My personal goal was for the students to gain a deeper appreciation of non-Western musics by engaging with it as directly as possible, and to consider the possibility of using transcription as an alternative to verbal description. Some of them were very clever and sometimes humorous.

Brenda Romero

I've done this quite regularly too. I've found even 1 minute of music is plenty (particularly in strophic or reiterative forms). The working process that I've used is roughly as follows:

1) Some time in class over several weeks looking at different transcriptions even when the focus of the class is elsewhere;

2) Class exercises on transcribing over several weeks (which we work through collectively in class):

- outline scores / graphic notation (to encourage students to map large-scale features before worrying about exact pitches and rhythms)

- filling in blanks of a semi-transcribed piece (usually involving repeats and small variations of material that already appears somewhere in the transcription)

- a kind of simplified cantometrics sheet (followed by comparison of what this tells us about the example in question as compared to a staff transcription)

3) A group tutorial with more specific hints about how I transcribe (lots of listening, singing along / or playing along on an instrument, singing the

example without the recording, background research into the instrument or style, writing out the rough shape of the extract [phrase structure, any repeats, section changes,...], and then, finally, writing out the music in some form(s) or other [here, I'd encourage students to put timings in so that they can work in several places at once on each play through, not just from the beginning]) and also about what I think the challenges of the particular example selected might be. (I have a list of fifteen or so tracks from three CDs which I know fairly well, that offer a range of challenges and don't seem to be available in notation already.) Generally, I tell them that it is good to write something down on each listening, as errors are more easily spotted when comparing a specific way of writing to the recording.

4) The students also complete an essay looking into the style they chose.

It sounds like student reaction (scary but worthwhile after the event) is similar in Southampton as here in Sheffield.

Jonathan Stock.

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Dr Jonathan P. J. Stock

Director of Graduate Studies and Studies in Ethnomusicology

Department of Music 0114 222 0483 (tel.)

University of Sheffield 0114 222 0469 (fax)

38 Taptonville Road j.p.j.stock@sheffield.ac.uk

Sheffield S10 5BR

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/music/staff/js/JShomepage.html>

Abigail,

I taught a blues courses this past fall and had students do transcription. Some were enthusiastic; some were daunted. Granted, students are probably more familiar with blues than with musics from other cultures. I myself recall the fear factor when I had to do transcription for the first time when I took Intro to Ethnomusicology in graduate school.

I don't think there is any way to reduce the amount of anxiety, except perhaps to give them a small assignment to begin with and then give them increasingly more demanding excerpts. Anything new--and something that seems very far from music with which they are familiar--is bound to intimidate. But that's the challenge of learning, really: to master things that are new.

Fortitude.

Gayle Murchison
Assistant Professor
Dear Abigail,

I've taught a similar class (though in a conservatory) for many years, and always include a transcription assignment.

I've done it this way--I let the students find their own instance of music and then give them an option: to make an "absolute" transcription, or to make a "playing arrangement"--that is, for their own instrument. I ask them in either case to give me a cassette of the original.

That flexibility seems to help.

All the best,

Ed Green

I teach a similar course at the same level but do not include transcription. To take on a transcription project, I think it is important to approach the topic critically. For instance, what is the purpose of transcription? What are you trying to demonstrate or show? These should not be aural skills exercises simply written out in Western score. Students should have options of graphic representation, depending upon what it is they want to emphasize in a piece of music. As Seeger argued long ago, notes on a page do not "look like" what the music sounds like. What kind of analysis can a particular transcription lend itself to?

In a transcription/analysis section of a graduate class, I have

students read the below; I also play some "simple" music or tap out rhythms and ask them to represent what they hear. For projects, they select two 1-2 minute pieces (2-3 minutes, by the way, might be a heavy assignment for undergraduates unless you give them ample time) and transcribe or otherwise represent the music in two different formats; Western score, sometimes modified, is expected for one of the representations.

I'm not sure I would recommend all of the readings below for your students but you might consider some of them. Hope this is helpful,
David Harnish

Seeger, Charles

1958/90 (Shelemay, Vol 4) "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music-Writing," 26-50.

Hood, Mantle

1982 The Ethnomusicologist, pp.50-61 "Transcription and Notation," through p.122

Ellingson, Ter

1992 (in Myers) "Transcription" and "Notation," pp. 110-164

Readings from Shelemay, Kay Kaufman, ed. The Garland Library of Readings in Ethnomusicology, Vol. 4 unless otherwise noted

Jairazbhoy, Nazir A. 1977. "The 'Objective' and 'Subjective' View in Music Transcription," 167-77

DeVale, Sue Carole. 1984. "Prolegomena to a Study of harp and Voice Sounds in Uganda: A Graphic System for the Notation of Texture," 250-81.

England, Nicholas. 1964. "Symposium on transcription and Analysis: A Hukwe Song with Musical Bow," 51-105

Zemp, Hugo. 1979. "Aspects of 'Are 'Are Music Theory," Vol. 7, 225-68

Koetting, James. 1970. "Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music," Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology, i/3, 116-46

Harnish excerpts from "Musical Traditions of the Lombok Balinese..."
MA thesis, 1985

Blum, Stephen

1992 (in Myers) "Analysis of Musical Style," pp.165-218

Herndon, Marcia

1990 "Analysis: The Herding of Sacred Cows?" (Shelemay)

Vol. 5, 259-302

Date: Wed, 14 Jan 2004 12:14:15 -0500

Reply-To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>,

Gordon Thompson <gthomps@SKIDMORE.EDU>

Sender: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>

From: [Gordon Thompson <gthomps@SKIDMORE.EDU>](mailto:gthomps@SKIDMORE.EDU)

Subject: [Re: Transcription for undergraduates](#)

Comments: To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List <SEM-L@indiana.edu>,

Abigail Wood <A.C.Wood@soton.ac.uk>

In-Reply-To: <Pine.SOL.4.21.0401131755330.6241-100000@willow.sucs.soton.ac.uk>

Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"; format=flowed

I also have a transcription project, but I've purposely kept the extract much, much shorter. Depending on the example I give them (each student in the class gets a different example, based in part on their interests and in part on my read of their abilities), they might transcribe as little as 20 seconds of music or as much as a few minutes.

We read Ter Ellingson's chapter on transcription (and some of his chapter on notation) from Helen Myers' Norton book (unfortunately out-of-print) as well as Nazir Jairazbhoy's EM article on the "objective" and "subjective" in transcription. We look at a number published transcriptions and talk about the purposes and goals of this process.

I also use the assignment to develop their facility with the notation program, Finale so part of the process has them learning (if they are not already familiar with the program) the possibilities and limitations of this kind of data entry. I allow them to hand-mark what they produce to account for those aspects of music for which they found staff notation insufficient. I also encourage them to find another way of representing a musical idea in their example.

They then present their transcriptions to the class and talk about the process. Finally, they write a short (400-word) summation about the experience. They make lots of mistakes, but I try not to grade on the preciseness of the transcription. Indeed, I emphasize the value of transcription as a way to understand music and to communicate to others what you hear and think about music. They are routinely self-conscious about the exercise. I try to reassure them that even experienced transcribers are usually similarly self-conscious about what they do. Self-consciousness (when it comes to how you perceive and represent what you hear) is a good thing.

Was that what you had in mind?

Gordon

te: Fri, 16 Jan 2004 04:46:36 -0500

Reply-To: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>, Susan Oehler <soozn@HOTMAIL.COM>

Sender: Society for Ethnomusicology Discussion List

<SEM-L@LISTSERV.INDIANA.EDU>

From: Susan Oehler <soozn@HOTMAIL.COM>

Subject: Re: Teaching transcription for undergraduates

Comments: To: SEM-L@indiana.edu

Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed

Abigail,

Thanks for the interesting question. I'm enjoying the pedagogical conversation.

I think that teaching transcription, as others have alluded, may as much about inviting students to cultivate different awarenesses in how they

listen and what they may choose to focus on in 'performance.'

Would the anxiety about transcription of music notation (which I always associated with tests of my success or failure in ear-training before entering study in ethnomusicology) be diffused a bit if you asked students to transcribe an excerpt of a video recorded performance that integrated various arts? This adds more material into the sample for analysis, which means the task assigned to students is in many ways even more complex. If you did not want to assign students such a transcription as exercise, perhaps you could address the question in the classroom--ask students to come up with a plan for transcribing a video performance excerpt without really doing it-- so that they could gain ideas, confidence, and examples of the goals of the exercise.

Enjoy, Susan

Susan E. Oehler, Ph.D.

Tokyo, Japan

Relocating to the U.S. in March 2004

sozznn@hotmail.com

81-42-363-8940 (home)

81-42-330-5629 (office)

Just a brief message to thank all those who responded to my query about teaching transcription. Having now had time to look in detail at the responses, I found your thoughts and stories very useful, and have incorporated much of what was said into redesigning the assignment I have set for this semester.

May we all be blessed with students so creative as to bring fruit-based transcriptions to our classes...

Thank you again for your insights,

Abigail

--Abigail Wood

Music, School of Humanities

University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

Tel: ++44 (0)23 8059 5064 University network: 25064