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Andre M. Douw and Michiel C. Schuijjer*

Music Theory at the Amsterdam School of Music

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ABSTRACT: The theory curricula offered by the classical music departments of the former Sweelinck and Hilversum Conservatories represented two distinct trends in Dutch music theory teaching. While the Sweelinck Conservatory's courses reflected a pragmatic view of the discipline, and laid much emphasis on harmony and ear-training, those in Hilversum were more intellectually oriented, focusing attention on music analysis. After these two strongly different institutes decided to merge to form the Amsterdam School of Music, an entirely new theory curriculum had to be devised. Electives became a distinctive feature of the new curriculum. Paragraphs 1-7 of this article deal with the historical aspects of the merger, while in paragraphs 8-12 the new curriculum is described.

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[1] The year 1994 saw the merger of two Dutch conservatories: the Sweelinck Conservatory of Amsterdam and the Hilversum Conservatory of Music. The Sweelinck Conservatory was an independent institute, itself the product of a merger of three schools of music in 1976. It was a large, traditional conservatory that was strongly committed to the great canon of western art music. It had an excellent reputation in the field of historical performance, due to the achievements of such celebrities as Gustav Leonhard, Jaap Schroeder and Ton Koopman, all of whom occupied teaching positions at the Sweelinck. The Hilversum Conservatory of Music, situated in a small town about 18 miles away from the city of Amsterdam, functioned as a department of the Amsterdam School of the Arts since 1988. Besides educational and performance degrees in classical and early music, it also offered degrees in jazz, including a master's degree (MA) jointly with the University of Miami. Hilversum's pioneering role in raising the status of jazz in Holland can hardly be overestimated. Its jazz program provided a standard for similar programs at other Dutch conservatories, for example the Royal Conservatory of The Hague. [\[1\]](#)

[2] Increasing financial pressures forced the Sweelinck Conservatory to become part of the Amsterdam

School of the Arts and, consequently, to join forces with Hilversum. Hilversum's administration, in turn, had every reason to jump at the proposal. It had always been in a rather vulnerable position, since it belonged to the smaller of the 12 state-aided conservatories in Holland. Though already part of a larger unit, it could still be dropped on account of low enrollment figures. Besides, the Dutch Department of Education was preparing a nation-wide reform of the conservatory programs. This would shorten the duration of these programs from five to four years, and enable only the largest and best-equipped conservatories to provide education on an advanced level for two additional years. It was quite clear that this governmental policy aimed at a cutback in expenditure, and that small conservatories like Hilversum's would eventually fall victim to it. So, the Sweelinck and Hilversum Conservatories both had an interest in merging. The result of their amalgamation was the Amsterdam School of Music.

[3] Naturally, making two teaching institutes into one is no easy operation. It involves, among many other things, cutting down on trusted staff, revising well-tried curricula, and adjusting long-accepted admission and degree requirements. And when the individuals of these institutes are as different as those at the former Sweelinck and Hilversum Conservatories, it puts a severe strain on the acceptance and creativity of the faculties involved. On the other hand, it may also provide an opportunity to consider whether a particular program still serves its implicit goals and meets the requirements of the professional field.

[4] The classical music departments of the Sweelinck and Hilversum Conservatories offered music theory curricula that were so widely divergent that the creation of an entirely new curriculum for the Amsterdam School of Music, to which both theory divisions would agree, was necessary. Apart from bringing about an agreement, however, this new curriculum also needed to safeguard the continuation of music theory teaching on the same level as before under the more restrictive conditions imposed by the Department of Education. Furthermore, it needed to respond to the current differentiation of musical life, and to the specialization of musical knowledge going hand in hand with it.

[5] At the Sweelinck Conservatory every student enrolled had to complete a two-year music theory program. Apart from a short introductory course on the fundamentals of music, this program consisted of a course combining harmony and analysis, and one combining solfege and ear-training. Both courses extended over the full range of two years. There were also courses on modal and tonal counterpoint, but these were mandatory for special categories of students only: students of organ, composition and music theory. The modal counterpoint course was also intended for students of early music.

[6] The harmony and analysis course offered at the Sweelinck Conservatory was basically a harmony course occasionally touching on music analysis. Students were not trained in examining scores and writing analytical papers, but rather learned to respond verbally to what they heard in a musical piece. While music analysis was given only slight consideration, harmony was taught intensively. The entire range of the discipline, from the fundamental materials to chromaticism, was covered in the first year. The second year was devoted to writing exercises in various tonal forms and styles, for example Lieder, preludes, fugues and sonata expositions. Thus, students were made familiar with harmonic principles as embodied in musical compositions.

[7] At the Hilversum Conservatory of Music every student enrolled followed a three-year music theory program, the core of which was a course, extending over the whole study period, which combined harmony, analysis and ear-training. Solfege was taught separately, while counterpoint courses were required for only a few majors, as at the Sweelinck Conservatory. This lengthy and highly integrated program was adopted from the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, which counted several former music theory students on Hilversum's faculty. Contrary to the Sweelinck Conservatory's program it centered around music analysis. Hilversum students received a more scholarly training than their colleagues at the Sweelinck, a training that involved writing analytical papers, and that was expected to deepen their musical experience. Extra-curricular events added to this scholarly training. Several lecture series and seminars have been organized in Hilversum, some of which have explored specific areas of music theory. In 1989, for example, there was a four-day seminar on the theories of Heinrich Schenker.

[8] The theory curriculum offered by the classical music department of the new Amsterdam School of

Music, which has been drawn up by the music theorist Henk Borgdorff, is much more flexible than the curricula of the former Sweelinck and Hilversum Conservatories. Further, it allows more interaction with the music history program. From the second year onward students are offered elective theory and history courses, so that they can compile a program that suits their major, or that simply meets their special interests. The comprehensive approach that was characteristic for Hilversum's program in particular has been dispensed with, since it tended to invite a certain shallowness and rigidity in the last few years. The elective system replacing it offers sufficient time for thorough instruction, and sufficient scope for integrating new fields of study.

[9] The curriculum is organized as follows. The 34 weeks of the academic year are divided into three trimesters of ten weeks each, plus two periods of two weeks between the trimesters in which students take exams or participate in orchestral projects. Everyone is required to follow weekly lessons in harmony and ear-training and solfege throughout their first two years. In the first year, an introductory course in 18th-century analysis is a requirement for all students. In addition, they follow two trimesters of 20th-century analysis. In the second year, they are required to follow one trimester of early music analysis, two trimesters of 18th- and 19th-century analysis, two trimesters of twentieth-century analysis, as well as an instrumentation course of two trimesters. [\[2\]](#)

[10] Starting in their second year, students make a choice of specialized courses in both theory and history. Those who want to develop their writing skills may choose to do Renaissance counterpoint, Baroque counterpoint, melody in early music, and/or advanced instrumentation. A course in 20th-century solfege and ear-training is offered to those interested in contemporary music. Furthermore, a rich variety of analysis and history courses is offered, all taking up one trimester of ten two-hour lessons. Some of the courses focus on one, two or three composers while others will study single compositions, composition cycles or the music of a larger period. A similar albeit smaller choice of history courses is offered (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: The elective courses of the academic year 1996-1997, divided into four main categories (A-D)

A. Solfege, Ear-training and Writing Skills

1. Renaissance Counterpoint
2. Baroque Counterpoint
3. Melody in Early Music
4. 20th-Century Solfege and Ear-training

B. Analysis

Composers:

1. Schubert
2. Chopin, Liszt and Wagner
3. Wagner
4. Nielsen, Scriabin and Sibelius
5. Faure and Ravel
6. Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky
7. Stravinsky
8. Messiaen

Compositions and composition cycles:

9. The Eighth Book of Madrigals of Cl. Monteverdi
10. Cantata 73 (J. S. Bach)
11. *Die Kunst der Fuge* (J. S. Bach)
12. The Beethoven Piano Sonatas
13. Schubert's *Winterreise*
14. The Late Piano- and Chamber Music of Brahms

15. *Les Beati tudes* (Franck)

Periods:

16. Baroque Rhetoric
17. History of the Sonata
18. The Lied in the Romantic Era
- 19 *Wiener Espressivo*
20. From Atonality towards Twelve-Tone and Integral Serialism
21. From Avantgarde towards Contemporary Music

C. Music History

Early Music:

1. *La Vuelta - Giro d'Italia - Tour de France*
2. Variations, *Bearbeitungen*, Dances

18th and 19th Centuries:

3. Music of the *Fin de Siecle*
4. Vienna, Paris, Budapest

20th Century:

5. Symphony and Music Theatre in the 20th Century
6. Introduction into electronic and electro-acoustical music

D. Other Courses

1. Notation and Interpretation of Polyphony in the Late Medieval and Renaissance Periods
2. Music Philosophy
3. Introduction into Jazz Theory
4. History of Music Theory: From Aristoxenos to Stockhausen
5. Harmony at the Keyboard

[11] An identical number of courses is not required of all students. A 'standard' program is followed by students of early music, piano, college music, and conductors of brass bands. An 'extended' program is followed by students of composition, organ, church music, and music theory. However, most of the students follow a 'limited' program. This program is followed by students of the regular instruments as well as those of voice and opera and those of orchestral and choral conducting. On the other hand, some of the courses are compulsory for certain majors. For example, singers follow extra solfege courses and students of orchestral and choral conducting are required to follow specialized analysis courses. On average, a student will choose one course from each of the categories A, B and C in Table 1, and five courses irrespective of the categories to which they belong.

[12] So far, the response of both students and staff to the new curriculum is quite positive. In the one- plus year of its use only two minor disadvantages have emerged. The administrative complications are more elaborate now than they used to be. The expectation is that this problem will be solved in due course. Another disadvantage is that the second trimester takes place from November through March which means that it is interrupted by the Christmas holidays. This interruption tends to break the attention span. However, the general opinion is that the advantages outweigh the problems. Teachers give classes within their fields of specialization and, similarly, their courses are attended by highly motivated students!

Andre M. Douw
Amsterdam School of the Arts
Amsterdam School of Music
Van Baerlestraat 27
Amsterdam, Holland 1071 AN
andre@ahk.nl

Michiel C. Schuijjer
University of Utrecht
Department of Musicology
Kromme Nieuwe Gracht 29
Utrecht, Holland 3512 HD
Michiel.Schuijjer@let.ruu.nl

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1. In this connection it should be mentioned that among the recent winners of the Thelonious Monk Award are two former students of the Hilversum Conservatory of Music: Jesse van Ruller (guitar, 1995) and Michiel Borstlap (composition, 1996).

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2. The history courses offered in the first and second years are divided in a way similar to the analysis courses. Thus, there are history courses concerning the early music (i.e. pre-classical) period, the 18th and 19th centuries and the 20th century. All of these are mandatory.

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prepared by
Lee A. Rothfarb, General Editor
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