

January 16, 2020

University of Utah, School of Music Review Committee

Re: Dr. Luke Dahn – Classroom Observation: reappointment to Assistant Professor (Lecturer)

I had an opportunity to observe the Special Topics in Music Theory class (MUSC 4565). The topic for this class is “The Chorale in Bach and Beyond” that provides a vibrant example of how research informs teaching. Dr. Dahn has published a new critical edition of the Bach chorales, which is used in this class. Moreover, Dr. Dahn states in the syllabus: “I welcome any feedback you have regarding the edition’s format.” This is an especially effective way to engage students with the basis of the course material and to empower them to be collaborators rather than merely participants. As the title suggests – while the Bach chorale serves as a starting point – the chorales of other composers such as Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms, Berg, and Maslanka are also engaged. Thus, a much broader swath of literature is canvassed, which prevents the topic from becoming too specialized and exposes students to a variety of harmonic practices within the genre of the chorale – a sound pedagogical decision.

Dahn opened by projecting an image from the Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch that showed a facsimile of the hymn “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (1682). The students were asked to sing through it in order to get it firmly ensconced in the ear. The class then went on to study different settings of this hymn tune in other Bach cantatas, and the students were placed into groups based on which setting they had. The student-to-student interaction I observed was very fruitful because the students were freely exchanging ideas and interpretations of each chorale. They were excited when they found an unanticipated harmony or innovative voice-leading solution. To be sure, this collaborative exercise was an excellent way to reinforce the previous class’ discussion and to encourage analytical insights. On the whiteboard at the front, Dahn wrote out the harmonic progression for the corresponding passages in each setting using a different color. In this way, the students were able to observe both a commonality of syntax alongside harmonic innovation.

Dahn is a consummate teacher who cultivates a collegial atmosphere in the classroom and provides a supportive environment for students to participate and to ask questions. Indeed, I never observed any hesitation on the part of the students to ask a question or to offer an idea. All students were eager to engage in the class activity and were attentive when Dahn spoke to the class collectively. There was one point where Dahn was pointing out the idea of metric ambiguity in the music, and the students were all focused on what he was saying. They were learning to distinguish Bach’s originality that transcends the convention of the chorale.

It is clear why students react so favorably to Dahn's teaching: he is patient, kind, discusses concepts clearly and – most importantly – empowers students to trust their own analytical instincts. We are very fortunate to have such a valuable teacher working with our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michael Chikinda', with a stylized, looping flourish at the end.

Michael Chikinda