

The Educational Possibilities in Beck's *Song Reader*: An interview

with Nathaniel Braddock Ensemble of the Old Town School of

Folk Musicⁱ

Matthew D. Thibeault, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaignⁱⁱ
mdthib@illinois.edu, matthewthibeault.com Twitter: @mdthib

Note: This is a pre-print version of a column that appeared in General Music Today. The final, definitive version contains additional edits and changes, and this version is supplied under General Music Today's copyright policies as found on <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/>

Keywords: Beck Song Reader, creativity, music education, Old Town School of Folk Music, pedagogy, secondary general music, technology

Abstract

This column presents an interview with Nathaniel Braddock, who created and teaches an ensemble devoted to the Beck's *Song Reader* at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, Illinois. *Song Reader* is a collection of 20 compositions published as sheet music for musicians to record and release, with over 17,000 versions presently posted to YouTube alone. An introduction explains the *Song Reader* project and discusses how several aspects of the ensemble may appeal to music educators. The interview covers Braddock's pedagogic techniques and conceptual approaches, providing teachers with strategies for successfully pursuing the inclusion of *Song Reader* or similar projects.

Introduction

In 2012, the popular musician Beck released his latest work, *Song Reader* (Hansen, 2012a). Unlike his previous recordings, *Song Reader* is a collection of 20 songs presented as sheet music, plus a preface and introductory essay. The preface notes, “These songs are being recorded by artists known and unknown. To hear their versions, and to find out how to contribute your own, visit www.songreader.net” (p. 4).

To avoid influencing the submitted versions, Beck deliberately chose not to record or perform the songs.ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, the variety of versions is stunning. Thousands of musicians have shared their takes on the tunes found in the *Song Reader* via Beck’s site, as well as in many other sites found on the web. A search of YouTube on August 24, 2013, returned 17,000 videos for the phrase “Beck *Song Reader*.” A quick examination finds highly divergent versions, from mashups and remixes to recordings of live performances in cafés, from string quartet arrangements to jazz band charts, and even solitary singers. The performers range from working professionals to self-taught musicians with unconventional technique and hesitant delivery. Some versions are professionally-produced multi-track recordings, and others come through cheap laptop microphones recorded in acoustically unfriendly environments. This variety is a testament to the success of Beck’s invitation, as presented in his preface, “As for these songs, they are here to be brought to life — or at least to remind us that, not so long ago, a song was only a piece of paper until it was played by someone. Anyone. Even you” (Hansen, 2012b, p. 2).

To better understand what *Song Reader* might offer educators, I visited the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago (<http://www.oldtownschool.org>), which presently offers a course called “Beck’s *Song Reader* Ensemble.” Nathaniel Braddock, who teaches the ensemble, invited me to attend. I saw the group practicing as well as giving a short concert at the School.

The Beck *Song Reader* Ensemble was a delight to behold. The rehearsal I observed took place on the last class of the eight-week session, so the songs were fairly polished. The group consisted of several acoustic guitars, ukulele, cello, trumpet, drum set, and two electric bass players. The players ranged from beginners to those with many years of experience, yet all seemed to find a fulfilling role, whether strumming chords or playing an intricate solo. Two players, clarinet and accordion, were absent; consequently, the group reorganized the arrangement on the spot. Classes at Old Town School typically perform one or two songs the last night of class; and, as noted above, I had a chance to watch their performance (two short excerpts are viewable here: <http://youtu.be/XBq9M1ji9-Q>).

The members of the Old Town School's Beck *Song Reader* Ensemble are engaged in exactly the kinds of creativity that our profession increasingly seeks: reading, arranging, creating, performing, improvising in a collaborative setting. The group also allows things uncommon to music education, such as simultaneous inclusion of those who read standard notation alongside those who play by ear. Their leader, Nathaniel, facilitated learning without dictating what would happen, producing support materials such as song sheets to aid the learning, helping to structure the process, and otherwise helping the music to blossom. The group

contributed their time, their talents, and their minds and hearts in the joyful pursuit of highly pleasurable music-making. I expect that many music educators who visited would feel like I did—that it would be a pleasure to join in and become part of the group.

Interview

I spoke with Nathaniel Braddock on May 10, 2013. We discussed some of the pedagogic choices, philosophical considerations, and particular pleasures in creating his Song Reader Ensemble. More about Nathaniel's work as a professional musician and teacher can be found at his website (<http://nathanielbraddock.com>). This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

MATTHEW: Tell me about the classes you teach at the Old Town School and the Beck Ensemble.

NATHANIEL: I do a lot of ensemble classes. I do a reggae ensemble; I do an Afrobeat ensemble. I have an ensemble called Kill Your Idols, which focuses on music from the rock and roll underground — right now we are doing the first Modern Lovers' record. Last session, we did a lot of first wave West Coast punk like the Dead Kennedys, so generally that sort of thing. And I have an ensemble called All Originals, where we take students' original songs and we work on them and build out arrangements.

The Beck ensemble seemed like a natural fit because of my interests and my work as a touring and recording musician. [Creating arrangements] is always more interesting to me than simply learning repertoire, because that is something that I do: create, arrange, and generate original parts. So the All Originals ensemble made

a lot of sense to me; and then, the *Song Reader* [ensemble] seems kind of closer to [the All Originals ensemble] in a lot of ways, then...the reggae ensemble, because what were doing is taking this music and, you know, taking it from the page and trying to make it into something that's living, without any real notion of what's about to happen. To me, that's exciting, and that's been a pretty new experience for a number of the students.

We just began a new session last week, so we started with “Eyes” and “Now That Your Dollar Bills Have Sprouted Wings” [both from *Song Reader*]. And that's a really great experience. I think it is, in some ways, scary for some of the students, but it is also empowering because [the teacher] doesn't have... The students have a lot of control, and, I think it is scary and sort of uniquely satisfying for that reason, because they're going in with no idea what's going to happen, and they come out having successfully done this thing.

MATTHEW: Can you describe the process the group has gone through or is going through in coming up with versions of songs? How has that played out in your group's meeting time?

NATHANIEL: Sure, here's how we started. It's a mixed ensemble, and it is slightly different this session than last session: some new people and some of the same people. We have a cellist, electric bass, a number of acoustic guitars, keyboard, accordion; and I've been playing trumpet because we are focusing so much on learning the melodies. What we are doing, because not everyone reads standard notation, and probably the people that do are in the minority, the first thing I do is

build a lead sheet or a song sheet. Some people call it a lead sheet; but, to me, it's not really the best name because it is essentially lyrics and chords.

MATTHEW: Which is typical for songs on the web such as guitar or ukulele sites.

NATHANIEL: Exactly, and which is the way songs have been taught at the Old Town School for a long time. At the Old Town School, the songbooks for a long time were essentially three ring binders that people had compiled, with music in the same format; and that is the format that much of the school still uses today. So I will make one of those for the song. And then I will take the melody line of the first verse and chorus and bridge and throw that into Finale, and then I make staves for other instruments. I make a bass clef version, I make a guitar tablature, I make ukulele tablature, and I make B-flat trumpet, I made A clarinet, and then I tweak it a bit to make it work for everyone.

I hand the song sheet out on the first day. We get a sense of the chord progression and then start playing the melody, which takes a while because it is a different kind of experience in the room. Once that has happened, we will sing the song. We will play the verse a few times, then we will sing the verse, then play the chorus, then sing the chorus, and so on. And by the end of that day, we have put the whole thing together. And now we know what it sounds like.

Once we have that learned, we go back to the score and start to pick out any kind of rhythmic figures that we need to include. So, we look at the piano accompaniment [provided in the *Song Reader*] to see if there's a specific rhythm. A good example of that would be "Saint Dude." The opening phrase has a very specific

rhythm, and it happens wherever the A to A-sus chord progression happens. And in other songs, we added some hard stops to the arrangement to emphasize certain structural breaks. And then we start to look for counterpoint that we might want to bring into the arrangement. One of the songs had a piano instrumental solo, which we wrote out for the clarinet and the guitar. And so that is how we start building the arrangement; and in some instances, I started changing the arrangement a little. For example, in "Do We? We Do," I put more hard stops in than there actually are in the score, because it makes it simpler if it is more uniform; and it is also more dramatic and more engaging for the player. And we also added a tag at the end, which is quite useful in a performance context, and it makes it more engaging. In "Don't Act Like Your Heart Isn't Hard," we added an instrumental chorus before the last chorus, where the cellist played the melody, and the clarinet and the trumpet did an accompaniment behind the cellist. And we did an instrumental verse where the clarinet took the verse and the cellist worked out an arpeggio pattern that sounded very Baroque.

MATTHEW: And that connects to the issue of harmonies. I heard some vocal harmonies when I observed the group, and I got the sense that the creative process and the arranging were communal in perhaps a way similar to how things happen in a garage band. Is that accurate?

NATHANIEL: Exactly, that was my goal. Here's an opportunity for people to get their feet wet making decisions about how to create the music. There is a certain amount that is understood, that you are getting from the score; but then it's really a blank slate in terms of how you deliver the rhythm, or what kind of harmonies or re-

harmonizations you are going to do. But not everyone is comfortable with that. For instance, I tend to have two types of guitar players in my class: those who want to play all their favorite songs, and those who write their own songs or improvise. So some find re-creation more pleasing, while others find creation more pleasing. I had more of these spectator-type players at the beginning of last session, so it took a while to get people comfortable with the process [of creative arranging].

Once I felt we had a pretty good grip on the starting tunes, I broke the class up into groups, and I let some students go work on vocal harmonies in another classroom, and people who are interested in traveling and playing rhythm gathered in a different room. And the rhythm section got together to work stuff out, and the more melodic players got together, like mandolin and cello, and discussed how they would approach something as a group. And that was great, because on one level they were able to start working on what they knew to work on; and on another level, they had a chance to talk with each other outside of the full large group context. So it was a chance for them to collaborate and build their trust and their friendship. And I could bounce between groups and make suggestions, and see how things were going, and answer questions.

MATTHEW: It's really interesting that you do have, and I think it's probably true of all the ensembles at Old Town School, that you have a very wide range of abilities in one group. Most people were able to find a place for themselves regardless of whether they were really comfortable and skilled or whether they were very unfamiliar with an ensemble setting.

NATHANIEL: It was the first time in an ensemble for some of the students.

MATTHEW: Are there any things that you are doing differently now that you are in a second cycle of offering this class? Other things you are changing around from the first time?

NATHANIEL: I'm introducing new material a bit more slowly. On the first week, we only worked on one song; and then introduced a second song during the next week, while also reviewing the song from the previous week. Some of this relates to the fact that one of the songs is a little harder to hear. It doesn't really look like it would be more difficult on the page, but we haven't really found what it sounds like, stylistically.

MATTHEW: Are there any pleasures that you specifically associate with getting to work with this *Song Reader*?

NATHANIEL: Getting it, actually getting my hands on a copy of the Reader. Pulling the sheets out and flipping through the songs, and looking on the back and seeing how they've got gag songs and other fragments. They are really humorous and funny. I remember buying sheet music from this era [early 20th century]. So seeing the *Song Reader* put together in that way, with the attention to detail and craftsmanship. It continues to delight as I slowly work my way through the different songs.

MATTHEW: If you had a public school teacher who came to you and was interested in doing something similar, either with different sheet music or with the *Song Reader*, what would you say?

NATHANIEL: You know, the thing that I think is most effective is engaging the imagination of the student, and also connecting them to this larger project. You are

in collaboration with the songwriter, and he's kind of a famous guy, But then, you're also in collaboration with thousands, conservatively, of musicians around the world. There are so many people recording their own versions of these songs and sharing them on SoundCloud or other sites. And they're doing it because they want to do it, and it's really this empowering thing.

I would advise a public school teacher to think about sowing those ideas in the imaginations of their students. Any public school teacher who wants to work with ideas like this is likely a very cool person, but oftentimes kids aren't interested in listening to their teachers in school. So if you make it about the students, and emphasize that *they* are doing this, connecting their ideas with other people by participating, and that it is a really cool thing. Then, I think that is the way in.

Because, for you and me, we see the layout of the songs and the formatting of it as similar to these old parlor songs that you can buy at a bookstore, and are immediately drawn into that. Young students may not get that, and that may not be what they are drawn toward. But young students are often really into comic books, let's say, or graphic novels; and if they can pour over this sheet music themselves, they might become fascinated.

MATTHEW: One of the things that attracted me personally to the *Song Reader* is Beck's decision not to release any recorded versions of the songs himself, and his request in the introduction to take the songs and do something different with them. He's inviting someone to interact around sheet music, but also to take a lot of liberties and be expressive and not necessarily try to sound like him. And this seems to me to connect with a renaissance of amateur work and creativity that have come

about in part because of some of the opportunities suggested by, or made easier or more likely, by technology. Do you see this class and the Reader as part of this larger phenomenon of do-it-yourself creativity?

NATHANIEL: Yes, and in my course description I talk about that. I talk about how there is a renaissance of community music making that Beck is connecting to in this *Reader*, and I love that. In the early 20th century, if you wanted music, you would play it yourself, and families would play and sing together. And that is a big part of what we do at the Old Town School. And people have always been in bands; but because of technology, there's a lot more home music making going on right now. And a lot of it is good, and a lot is good about it. There is an opportunity for people to record their own version of any song and put it on YouTube. And as a person who is interested in people's empowerment, I think that's great. Not all the performances are great, and that can be a little bit of the downside—in that the quantity can be out of control. But it speaks of a love of music, and we are in such a different musical environment now than we were even five years ago, and certainly since I started writing and performing. The means of distribution and the number of people doing it is so different. It took a lot more to connect with people 15 years ago. And this new environment is part of what has changed how people consume music. Partly it is filesharing and MP3s, and partly it is that people are connecting by doing all this stuff. That is why people post tablature online: they are trying to connect with people. It's a whole different world.

MATTHEW: It is a different world, and there is an opportunity for teachers to push it in a different direction if they choose. I see teachers like yourself and others

doing a wonderful job building on some of the possibilities. And I want to take an opportunity to thank you for inviting me into your class and to discuss your wonderful, beautiful class.

NATHANIEL: Thanks, I've enjoyed getting to share and talk about the class as well.

References

Coleman, M. (2013, July 7). Beck and Friends Perform "Song Reader."

rollingstone.com. Retrieved August 24, 2013, from

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/beck-performs-song-reader-with-jarvis-cocker-franz-ferdinand-and-more-20130707>

Hansen, B. (2012a). *Song reader: Twenty new songs by Beck*. San Francisco, CA:

McSweeney's Publishing.

Hansen, B. (2012b). A preface to a Song Reader. In *Song reader: Twenty new songs by*

Beck (pp. 1–4). San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's Publishing.

ⁱ The author wishes to thank Nathaniel Braddock and the members of his class for their generosity in allowing the author into their classroom. Special thanks to Mr. Braddock for taking time from his busy concert and teaching schedule to share his insights into an approach to teaching music I hope becomes more prevalent.

ⁱⁱ Author biography: Matthew D. Thibeault is assistant professor at the University of Illinois, where he teaches courses in general music, music education technology, and research methods. He was the 2013 recipient of the Outstanding Emerging Researcher Award issued by the Center for Music Education Research at the University of South Florida. www.matthewthibeault.com

Notes

ⁱⁱⁱ Rolling Stone (Coleman, 2013) reports that Beck eventually performed all the songs on in London in July of 2013.