
Refocusing Music Theory Curriculum: An Inquiry

Abstract

This paper questions how traditional Music Theory curriculum might be made more relevant and responsive to the evolution of social concerns and student needs in today's world. It asks us to consider what and how we teach, how materials could be updated and made more universal, where there are gaps, and the potential for flexibility. Collaborative innovations are encouraged across the music curriculum, not only in theory courses.

Questions for Music Theory Instructors

How Should We Define Music Theory?

Any attempt to refocus must begin with questions about the repertoire we examine and use as models in our theory classes. Let's start with a few assumptions about what Music Theory means and move from there. Here are a few reasons to study Music Theory:

Literacy: Mastering the language of music to communicate

Understanding: Enlightening performance, and facilitating memorization

Expression: Composing, arranging, and sharing creative ideas

Musicianship: Honing Aural and Sight Singing skills, as well as Keyboard Proficiency

What Must We Teach?

Music literacy involves understanding the fundamental concepts and knowing how symbols are used in the language of music. Fundamentals of the Western canon include scales, key signatures, intervals, chords, rhythm, and the proper notation of these elements. Some may argue that these basic materials are not really theoretical, any more than the alphabet is theoretical to a writer. However, the job of instilling an understanding of these elements is part of the theory curriculum at the beginning, and students cannot progress without a solid foundation.

Musicianship skills are also part of any integrated theory curriculum. Usually, they are taught separately in Sight Singing and Ear Training classes, along with Keyboard Harmony. Some may argue that these skills are critical for musicians to function at a high level. And the fact that knowledge and skill in music theory enables a musician to perform better, and to express original ideas more effectively through composition or improvisation is not really disputable. Instructional methods utilizing technologies are changing rapidly in this field and impacting theory teaching in general.

The main topics and the order of presentation are consistent among popular textbooks, and they generally follow a similar pattern. Fundamentals are addressed to varying degrees. Then non-harmonic tones, functional analysis, part writing, phrases and cadences, basic forms, simple counterpoint, and chromatic harmony follow. This is followed by an overview of 20th century techniques and ends up in the present. Upper-division courses usually address more advanced counterpoint, along with structural analysis, orchestration, and a deeper dive into musical matters that are truly theoretical. The goal is to develop a thorough understanding of the relationships between sounds in time, which to me is the main purpose of studying Music Theory. But most of these topics are not the exclusive domain of a specific style or cultural source.

Should the Canon of Western European Music Dominate our Curriculum?

Decentering a cultural or systemic bias should not be undertaken by music theorists alone, because choices in literature addressed in the music history class, the literature performed by ensembles, and the music studied in applied studios would ideally be considered holistically. While the bulk of the repertoire studied in most of these arenas was composed by white males in Germany, Italy, France, and England over the last few centuries, their music does not provide the only vehicle for studying music theory. While it does represent some of the highest artistic achievements and will remain a cornerstone of music training in some circles, it is a narrow cultural slice. To what degree should we reduce the influence of the models currently embedded in the curriculum, if at all? (Bach, Beethoven, Bartok, et al.)

If we choose to expand the concepts taught in the theory classroom to embrace other composers and musical styles, the question becomes what we sacrifice, or address superficially, to make time for new things. One example is the fixation on part-writing in the style of J.S. Bach according to a narrow set of guidelines. The more widely used textbooks allocate a significant amount of time and space to this topic. Perhaps deeper fluency in this particular skill could be taught in upper-division courses.

What Additional Repertoire Should We Include?

What is the reason that most Music Theory textbooks and anthologies used today predominantly address the music of European male composers from the 18th and 19th centuries? Is this phenomenon similar to the “Great Books of the Western World” concept, which assumes that a person would be educated if they had read a list of “Classics?”

Where do instructors find music to analyze and perform that was written by composers from different ethnicities, genders, and styles to illustrate musical concepts? Is an adequate amount of music by diverse composers accessible in the public domain, if publishers have not collected and distributed it?

Why not include non-western music in the curriculum and indigenous music from around the world, including Latin American, African, Asian, and Indian?

Questions for Everyone

Should We Focus More on American Music?

The quantity and quality of concert music composed by Americans is significant, and a growing body of works. However, an amazingly rich array of styles with multicultural influences exists outside of the classical concert hall, and it is seldom represented in equal measure with the classics in anthologies and textbooks. Ragtime, Blues, Jazz, Rock, Latin, and a diverse array of contemporary and popular forms provide an inexhaustible source of music with which students in the 21st century can connect. The playlist might include music that was actually written, performed, and recorded during their lifetime. How does much of this escape the theory classroom? For some theory instructors, it may be a matter of leaving the comfort zone of teaching what we were taught in the manner it was presented and finding new examples and ways to engage students.

There are inherent barriers to making curricular changes that would have a ripple effect on students. Graduate programs may expect or require a background that singularly focuses on the content found in traditional texts and anthologies. Do we need a new Graduate Record Exam, or different expectations for admission to advanced music degree programs? Faculty may also experience barriers to getting all the work done that real curricular change involves, especially if that work falls on part-time adjunct instructors who are not engaged to break new ground by an institution. How should higher education collectively address these kinds of barriers in an integrated way?

Should the Curriculum Become more Modular and Flexible?

In some cases, the theory curriculum has become like a frozen path for every student to follow, dictated by a common set of prescribed materials. Perhaps modules could be offered, each with a different topical emphasis, from which students could choose. What might some of these modules address? In a multicultural society, indigenous musics from around the world would provide interesting choices. Latin Claves? North Indian Ragas? Bulgarian Folk Music? African Rhythms? Delta Blues? The only limitations are the instructor's capacity to engage, along with the capacity of the institution to formulate processes that allow flexibility.

How do Students, Instructors, and Institutions Collaborate in Finding Answers?

Your turn.