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### Changing Philosophies Of Undergraduate Music Theory Instruction: Practical Implications And Recommendations

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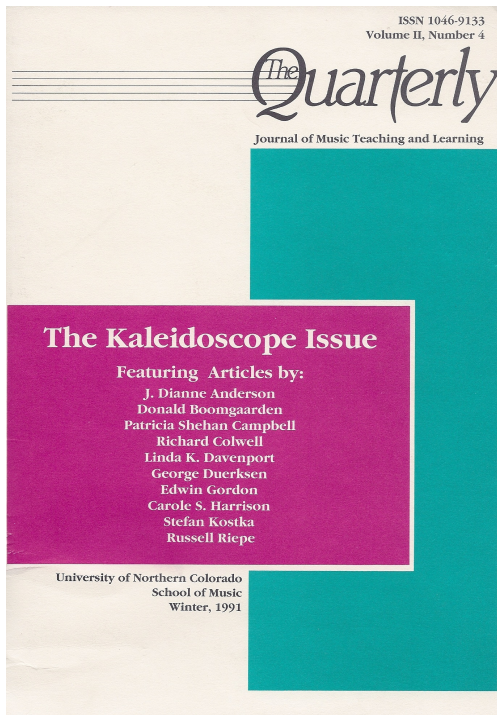
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# Changing Philosophies Of Undergraduate Music Theory Instruction: Practical Implications And Recommendations

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American colleges and universities are increasingly rethinking the pedagogy of undergraduate music theory as this century nears its end; and in terms of both course content and approach, the time is ripe to take a hard look at the existing philosophies that guide this fundamental and critical portion of the baccalaureate music degree program. Presented here are two diverse possibilities for revising the theory core, both assuming a four-semester sequence. These approaches differ, most notably in the area of partwriting or composition exercises, hereafter simply referred to as “writing,” and in the amount of time each devotes to the study of twentieth-century music.

The first proposed revision, entitled “Integrating the Twentieth Century into the Theory Core,” primarily addresses content by calling for more time to be devoted to the study of contemporary music. In contrast, the second proposal, “Didacticism and the Pedagogy of Theory: Remedying Current Ills,” principally concerns approach and emphasizes the need for devoting more time for student writing to counteract the current

practice of overly didactic teaching. Naturally, if greater emphasis is placed on a particular area, another one will be sacrificed; and the authors, as a result, advance their suggestions for such alterations. Music is, after all, a language; and to study it effectively, we are obligated to do our utmost to read it with comprehension and to express it with force and clarity. These are the ultimate goals of the two proposals presented here.

## **Integrating the Twentieth Century into the Traditional Theory Core**

No doubt most of the readers of *The Quarterly* have had experiences similar to ours. We were educated in undergraduate music theory programs devoted to passing on the great tradition of tonal music, the tradition of the so-called common practice period, embodied in the music of composers like Brahms, Mozart, and particularly Bach.

In those days, instruction was largely based upon rules derived from the intensive study of Bach's style, and it was directed, at least implicitly, at training students to imitate German Lutheran chorale harmonizations from the first half of the eighteenth century. Today, the perspective in theory textbooks has been broadened to include examples from beyond the chorale repertoire as well as examples from composers spanning the entire tonal era. All of this has been an im-

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provement; still, when it is time for actual writing, we generally fall back on Bach's chorale style, in the forlorn hope that imitating that style will somehow explain to students how Mozart wrote operas and Brahms wrote symphonies.

Unfortunately, these exercises, with the attendant endless harping on doubling rules and so forth, become less relevant with every passing year. We all know, although some of us may try to ignore it, that the twentieth century has almost run its course, and that the composers we all love—Brahms, Mozart, Bach, and all the rest—are receding steadily into the more distant past. Does this mean that their music is no longer performed or recorded? Of course not, and we are all grateful for that. But the traditional tonal music that we are talking about is accounting for less and less of the total musical pie, and that is particularly the case for students involved with band music, a genre that is still very much alive in the public schools. Concert bands and marching bands continue to purchase and perform new music as fast as it is published, and a lot of it, especially for the concert bands, is of very high quality. Thus, we assert that the freshman/sophomore theory core should include a substantial twentieth-century component. The philosophy of this first plan holds that it is not sufficient to try to work all of the diversity of this century into a three- or six-week unit, but that at least a semester is required.

#### **The Current Status of the Theory Core**

It is difficult to gather reliable statistics on the current status of twentieth-century music in the theory core, but a few theory pedagogues address the role of twentieth-century music at specific institutions. For example, Davidson, Scripp, and Maynaard (1988) report that courses in twentieth-century music are offered in the junior year at the New England Conservatory, but it is not made clear whether or not the required theory core in-

cludes such courses. In addition, some twentieth-century music is evidently performed in the sophomore-level sight-singing courses.

According to Wennerstrom (1989), music in the twentieth century is the subject of the fifth and final semester of the "Literature and Structure" sequence at Indiana University. The course apparently meets five times a week and is supplemented by a one-credit "Music Reading and Ear Training" class.

Buccheri (1990) explains that at Northwestern University one quarter (ten weeks) during the sophomore year is devoted to the

twentieth century, including eight hours of theory instruction per week. The approach reflects the goals of Comprehensive Musicianship, involving coordination between music history and the various components of the theory program. Comprehensive Musicianship is also the approach taken at San Diego State University where, according to Ward-Steinman (1987), students receive at least some exposure to twentieth-century music in four of the six semesters in the theory/history core.

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So at least three and perhaps all four of these institutions include some study of twentieth-century techniques in the required theory core, although in two cases this material is delayed until the junior year. Of course, these are major music schools with large, specialized faculties. One wonders whether comparable progress is being made elsewhere, and some notion of the answer to this question may be gleaned by examining college and university bulletins.

While the curriculum/course descriptions that appear in official college and university catalogs may not be entirely reliable, they would seem to bear out the notion that many faculties are making serious attempts to incorporate twentieth-century materials into the theory core. In a random sampling of some recent catalogs from institutions large and

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small from across the country, half reported a one-semester twentieth-century component within the theory core, but (at least based on catalog material) the other half apparently do not touch upon the subject at all.

Many music departments continue to lag behind, perhaps even more than the discussion above would indicate. Probably all of us have found the problems of integrating twentieth-century materials into the theory curriculum to be a favorite informal topic at meetings of theory societies, and this was true as well at the Second Institute for Music Theory Pedagogy Studies (Foltz & Lanning, 1989). The following section, then, not only considers some of the problems that arise in restructuring the core, but some possible solutions as well.

### **Bringing the Theory Core into the Twentieth Century**

There are a number of problems associated with restructuring the theory core to include one or more semesters of exposure to twentieth-century techniques. Not the least of these is the diversity of styles that will be encountered. Such diversity makes difficult any attempt to find a “common practice,” or to categorize each composer as belonging to one school or another, unless one wants to define dozens of schools. It also makes a mockery of any attempt to derive some sort of chronological sense of the whole thing, to find a single developmental thread. Who, for example, after listening to their music, would guess that Rachmaninoff and Schoenberg were born little more than a year apart, or that the same is true of Menotti and John Cage? A solution that is not recommended, but which is known to be employed in some instances, concentrates largely or wholly on atonal and serial techniques, since these are, in a way, the easiest to teach and to test. Such an approach is not acceptable, of course, because it ignores most of the music of this century, including the majority of important works of the last decade.

There are other problems, too. Traditionally, publishers, probably due to lack of demand, have not produced very many textbooks dealing with twentieth-century music from the theory teacher's perspective. Also, there is the problem of student reaction. In spite of their experience with some kinds of twentieth-century music, college students can be surprisingly unreceptive to unfamiliar styles. They may very well complain that some piece written three quarters of a century ago sounds “too modern,” or “too dissonant,” or that it's just “not pretty.”

All these problems can be overcome, however. The textbook issue has been addressed by three new examples (see Kostka, 1990; Lester, 1989; and Straus, 1990), each taking a different approach, but each more up to date than the few books that have been available in the past. As for the diversity of styles, instead of trying to force some new kind of common practice upon the twentieth century, we can adjust our goals. It is not really necessary to repeat our experience with the Bach chorales by learning to write music in every twentieth-century style, although we can give students some practice, of course. Instead, we should concentrate upon analysis, both visual and aural, and upon exposure to the music. Such an approach leans in the direction of a music literature course, and to some extent this is inevitable. For example, one cannot analyze in the the usual sense a piece like Cage's *Fontana Mix*, not to mention his *4'33"* or the many graphic and text scores that were so much in vogue for a time. But we can perform them, and listen to them, and read about them, all of which should lead to a discussion of a number of issues, including the philosophies and social conditions that led to these works.

Of course, to know twentieth-century music is not necessarily to love it, and students may react unfavorably to certain compositions upon first hearing. Nevertheless, this is where the incredible diversity of the music works to our advantage, because there is al-

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most certainly something in the literature to please every taste, and an important part of our job as music educators is to try to help our students to open up to new musical vistas, to be discriminating without making snap judgments. Also, as we gain experience, we will learn which pieces seem to work the best when we are introducing students to a new topic, and which ones require a greater degree of maturity and exposure before they can be properly understood.

Another difficulty, more of an administrative one but serious nonetheless, involves transfer students. One aim of administrators in higher education, especially those who supervise state college and university systems, is to establish uniform course descriptions so that students can easily transfer credits from one postsecondary institution to another. For example, the Coordinating Board of the Texas College and University System adopted guidelines that state, “Credits in the music transfer curriculum...may be transferred and will be accepted at face value” (Texas Association of Music Schools, 1982, p. 7). While guidelines such as these may not expressly forbid changing course content within a single institution, they certainly discourage it, since students who transfer into such a program will graduate with a very different educational experience from those who begin their studies there.

But the most critical problem with this proposal is one of time. Theory teachers everywhere feel they must struggle just to teach the traditional curriculum. Many of us must cover everything from scales and intervals to enharmonicism, from binary forms to the sonata in just two years. How can we possibly teach more? Well, let's look at that traditional curriculum, and see what can be done. There are three main elements in college-level theory instruction: ear training, analysis, and writing (partwriting). Many music programs include keyboard harmony as well, but this is usually a reinforcement of the other three areas rather than an end in itself.

The first of these, ear training, which involves such activities as dictation and sight singing, is the most important. We experience music through hearing, and someone to whom music is only unintelligible sounds is simply not a musician.

Analytical skills are also of obvious importance. We should be able to look at or listen to a work and say something meaningful about the way it is put together and how it compares in its technical details to some other work. This sort of analysis is expected of experts in almost any field.

Which brings us to writing. As much as we love teaching it, all of us must wonder at times why we devote so much time and effort to learning to write music in the styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the average music major, the reason may be to reinforce the analytical skills and, to a lesser extent, the aural ones as well. But writing relatively short exercises in which students are asked merely to imitate various styles is the least crucial link in our current theory program. If anything can be cut back, and inevitably something must, it can be this. This proposal, then, advocates leaving the bulk of writing music to more advanced work and would instead concentrate in the two-year sequence upon ear training and analysis. This would allow time for the study of music of the twentieth century now, before it too becomes music of the past.

### **Revisiting Computer-Assisted Learning in the Pedagogy of Theory**

Computer-assisted learning (CAL), often referred to as computer-assisted instruction (CAI), holds no real alternative to a high grade of musical literacy. The learning that takes place using commercially produced music-theory software packages designed for personal computers is much too passive, very much like watching TV or playing a video game. In fact, theory software for these

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computers is little more than an assortment of electronic program texts better used for elementary or amateur instruction where the burden of thinking is given to the machine. Learning, on the contrary, should be active, in the strenuous pursuit of the highest standard possible with assignments in analysis, musical writing, singing, and playing. It would, therefore, be unwise, if not abjectly irresponsible, to interpose computer-musicianship programs as experienced surrogate teachers capable of monitoring any collegiate or university course; in the arts, as in medicine, more time must be devoted to an empiricism that promotes autonomic integration and organization of theoretical knowledge.

Yet CAL can serve an important role as a tool for supplementary instruction, particularly for the slow learner. Computers are likewise essential in the advanced study of composition, sound production, digital recording, psycho-acoustics, and general research and development in music technology. In addition, some headway has been made in the area of musical analysis.

In short, there is at the theory teacher's disposal a veritable surfeit of computer programs. But do these programs really put forward proven long-term applications, or are they idiosyncratic presentations that will soon fall by the wayside? Unfortunately, there are already more than a few “dinosaurs” left over from attempts at teaching undergraduate basic musicianship classes with the aid of personal computers, as the detritus of runaway technological innovation and market conditions have all but buried “fossilized” hardware and accompanying software packages. Besides, most music departments simply cannot afford to keep up with this volatile change, so the ultimate responsibility will remain for the present squarely upon the shoulders of “living and breathing” teachers.

### **Didacticism and the Pedagogy of Theory: Remediating Current Ills**

Since theory teachers have felt pressed to cover more material, as the body of musical knowledge has certainly grown, the pedagogy of undergraduate, lower-division musicianship classes has become by and large too didactic, or overly instructional. Syllabi are overfilled, and subject content is at times presented in “cafeteria” fashion without stressing in-depth, critical thinking that would under other circumstances lead to independent and thus more meaningful integration of knowledge. Rather than stressing the importance of practical applications of musical intelligence, there is instead a tendency to place greater emphasis on the mere recitation of operations of “theory data.” In effect, there is too much theory!

In addition, students are on the whole ill-prepared upon entering the college or university to undertake musicianship classes which are generally composite studies of the following elements in various styles: 1) melodic material, 2) rhythm, 3) harmony, 4) counterpoint/simultaneity, 5) color/orchestration, and 6) form. Based on the results of diagnostic tests, many incoming freshmen lack even the most rudimentary keyboard and aural-perception skills, let alone a passable grasp of the aforementioned musical components.

Most accredited music programs must, then, offer classes in ear training and basic musicianship for the first two years in the curriculum—and more when possible—usually in the form of separate sections in keyboard, sight singing, and dictation as an accompaniment to lectures and seminars. (To be sure, aural learning has to be enhanced by private teaching in studio lessons, keyboard harmony classes, ensemble performance, and, later, other upper-division academic music studies.) Regrettably, most underclassmen know little or nothing about analyzing and writing music, so the previ-

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ously mentioned “didacticism” (that smacks of work in secondary schools) should be phased out while advanced learning is phased in. In contrast, the usual sequence of freshmen and sophomore theory classes, commonly based on a text or manual, inculcates an ethos based only on a simulacrum of advanced university studies in music, setting a questionable tone for the remainder of the student’s academic experience.

Over-assessment, too, discourages independent learning by encouraging quite the opposite, a kind of “spoon-feeding” dependency which places a quantitative rather than qualitative value on knowledge. In many music theory classes, there is quite a lot of anxious equating of grades to achievement. Evolving curricula in the future, therefore, must accommodate advanced learning by gradually removing the habitual quizzes and tests that exhort students to parrot a textbook and/or a teacher and that also invite over-teaching. Since the usual required four-semester sequence is (for most collegiate music programs) the terminal study of theory, it is critical to replace pedantry with a rigorous study in analysis, emphasizing major projects in musical writing, with the aid of a tutor.

This tutorial system, where within the theory core the student meets at least once a week with an assigned teacher on the music faculty, furnishes regular and personal supervision, including that required for the completion of large assignments. A mentor who is an expert in the field, then, has a unique opportunity, if not obligation, to support the student by facilitating independent work by laying out options for consideration.

### **Bringing Independent Learning into the Theory Core**

Introducing independent learning into the second year of undergraduate theory places a premium on critical thinking in achieving a higher level of musical literacy (see Figure 1).

Under this proposal, the first semester of sophomore theory includes, for instance, a required counterpoint-oriented class together with corresponding aural-learning classes. This permits the exploration of more advanced harmony and chromaticism along with the contrapuntal procedures in tonal music. While there are no exams in this class, each student completes two writing-intensive projects, perhaps one two-voiced eighteenth-century invention plus one Classical sonata or sonatina movement for evaluation with well-defined criteria for assessment.

The second-semester includes the study of nineteenth-century Romanticism and techniques of twentieth-century composition, again with corresponding but separate *solfège* and dictation classes. Tutors assist students in completing two writing assignments for grading, such as one art song plus one original work incorporating contemporary compositional devices, but without imitating a specific style.

The nature of these suggested assignments might be modified, of course, since they need to be sensitive to the individual missions of various degree programs. For instance, it might be decided that more time is needed to study twentieth-century compositional procedures with advanced analysis. In any event, by the time the student enters the sophomore theory class, it is enormously beneficial to monitor written projects closely in order that the apprentice have ample opportunity to exercise a musical literacy which would foster self-sufficiency. With the exception of keyboard and *solfège*/dictation classes, no exams are required; but writing projects are prepared for performance and evaluation. Moreover, all the theory teachers are encouraged as well to form an examination board, or jury, to assess all sophomore projects during mid-term and final-exam periods. This is an intrusive procedure, but it has the advantage of efficiently reviewing progress and maintaining equitable

	Freshman Year	Sophomore Year
<b>Goal:</b>	Basic understanding of principles of musicianship	Musical literacy and comprehension through independent, critical thinking. First semester: Counterpoint oriented Second semester: Nineteenth- and twentieth-century composition
<b>Structure:</b>	Three one-hour seminars per week	One-hour lecture/seminar plus tutorial session (either a 15-20 minute private lesson or an hour-long small-group discussion)
<b>Materials:</b>	Theory text and anthology	No text <i>per se</i> ; anthologies, scores, recordings, and readings on reserve
<b>Assignments:</b>	"Usual" array including analysis, part-writing, and so on	Two writing projects per semester. First semester: 1. Two-voiced eighteenth-century invention (mid-term) 2. Classical sonata/sonatina (final) Second semester: 1. Art song (mid-term) 2. Twentieth-century work (final)
<b>Assessment:</b>	Frequent assignments, quizzes, exams, and so on graded by the instructor	Written projects, each of which is worth 50 percent of the final grade, assessed by theory faculty as a team or examination board

**Figure 1. Suggested Freshman and Sophomore Music Theory Curriculum.** This figure excludes aural training. In addition to lectures, seminars, and tutorials, students would receive two hours per week of aural instruction addressing sight singing, dictation, and keyboard harmony. Aural learning may be treated as a separate course although it would naturally need to be carefully coordinated with the other aforementioned components of the theory curriculum.

marks. Reserved readings, scores, recordings, supplementary computer software packages, and the like are also made available, but no "official" text as such is used. It is necessary, however, for students to acquire anthologies for musical analysis assignments and sight-singing books for the assessed aural-learning work.

Assigning loads for conventional freshman theory teaching poses no extraordinary problems (see Figure 2), since most American music programs (influenced or validated by the National Association for the Schools of Music) already contain a five-hour weekly allotment for tuition during each of the four semesters required for awarding a bachelor's degree. Under the traditional structure, three hours per week could be set aside for the academic class, leaving two hours per week for ear training. (This by no means implies aural learning cannot take place in all sections of the theory program. Simply let it be said that separating aural learning from the lecture/seminar classes with individual course numbers is helpful in advising and placing transfer students from junior colleges and other sister institutions.)

The proposed revision of the sophomore year, on the other hand, presents a greater challenge, since it hinges on the incorporation of tutors and/or small discussion groups. In order for more advanced musicianship studies to take hold, each academic level must set aside at least one common hour for a weekly formal lecture or seminar, plus two hours per week for sight-singing or dictation classes. This leaves from the usual allotment of five hours for theory teaching a net of two hours for conducting weekly tutorial sessions in order to oversee major writing projects. This system forms the basis for an undergraduate teaching team, a by-product which guarantees individual attention.

An advantage to this arrangement is the promotion of literacy, inasmuch as the budding scholar would be engaged in manipulating musical parameters as well as in transcribing abstract musical ideas into written forms. Such a program would surely suppress the doctrinaire by encouraging graduates who would attain and demonstrate more flexible, tensile strengths and thus would command a more powerful musical knowledge,

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:00 AM	Fresh. A. Seminar (Teacher #1)	Fresh. A. SS	Fresh. A Seminar (Teacher #1)	Fresh. A SS	Fresh. A Seminar (Teacher #1)
8:00 AM	Soph. A Lect./Seminar (Teacher #2)	Soph. A* Tutorial (Teachers #1, #2, #3, #4 have four students each.)	Soph. A SS	Soph. A* Tutorial (Teachers #1, #2, #3, #4 have four students each.)	Soph. A SS
9:00 AM	Fresh. A Seminar (Teacher #3)	Fresh A. SS	Fresh. A Seminar (Teacher #3)	Fresh. A SS	Fresh. A Seminar (Teacher #3)
9:00 AM	Soph. B Lect./seminar (Teacher #4)	Soph. B* Tutorial (Teachers #1, #3, #4 have four students each)	Soph. B SS	Soph. B* Tutorial (Teachers #1, #3, #4 have four students each)	Soph. B SS
10:00 AM	Fresh. B Seminar (Teacher #1)	Fresh. B SS	Fresh. B Seminar (Teacher #1)	Fresh. B SS	Fresh. B Seminar (Teacher #1)

**Figure 2. Sample Semester Schedule.** In this example there are four sections of music theory being offered concurrently: two sections of first-semester freshman theory (Fresh. A), one section of second-semester theory (Fresh. B), one section of first-semester sophomore theory (Soph. A), and one section of second-semester sophomore theory (Soph. B). Each section accommodates anywhere from 20 to 30 students. The suggested program could be taught by four members of the theory faculty (#1 - #4). In addition, the same four individuals could teach the corresponding sight-singing sections, as sometimes other faculty or teaching assistants could be utilized.

NB) SS = Sight-singing and dictation classes at successive levels. Keyboard harmony could also be incorporated; however, it might be taught best through class piano.

\* During the periods designated as tutorials, the appointed teachers can individually meet with students on a regular basis. As noted here, each teacher can accommodate four students per period. This provides 56 sophomore students (A and B) with one 15-minute individual session per week with an assigned teacher. If each teacher met three students per period for 20-minute sessions, then 42 sophomore students would be accommodated. Some weeks the tutor may choose to have the assigned students meet as a group for the entire hour.

both self-reliant and immediately relevant to their areas of expertise. Most importantly, this proposal places a premium on analysis and original writing assignments with the latter being quite naturally dependent on the former. Such a course in undergraduate musicianship offsets pedestrian teaching, while simultaneously engendering independent learning and critical thinking essential in the development of first-rate teachers, composers, performers, and scholars.

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