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The Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center
For Music Theory Pedagogy
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From the Co-Editors

We are pleased to present *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, Volume 38 (2024), featuring four articles that explore diverse pedagogical topics in creative and applicable ways.

Paula Maust and **Vid Smooke** recount how they crafted mission, vision, and values statements—drawing on nonprofit models—to refine the music theory curriculum at the Peabody Conservatory. **Alyssa Barna** explores the intersection of music theory and technology with a model assignment designed for TikTok and other social media platforms.

Turning to assessment, **David Orvek** reflects on piloting an ungrading approach in his music theory courses, offering insights for further research and experimentation. Finally, **Aaron Galliher** demonstrates how “model-eliciting activities” in aural skills teaching foster critical thinking. His article is based on his award-winning presentation at the 2024 *Pedagogy into Practice* Conference.

This volume also includes thoughtful reviews of recent materials and events. **Karin Buer** provides in-depth evaluations of two new aural skills text editions: the 7th edition of *A New Approach to Sight Singing* (Berkowitz et al.) and the 4th edition of Carol Krueger’s *Progressive Sight Singing*, helping instructors assess their adoption and necessary supplementation. **Bryan Espinosa** reviews John Mortensen’s *Improvising Fugue: A Method for Keyboard Artists*, which employs partimento to teach improvisation within a rich pedagogical tradition. Finally, former *JMTP* editor **William Marvin** and editorial board member **Jeremy Orosz** summarize pedagogy-related offerings from the most recent Society for Music Theory conference in Jacksonville, Florida.

Additionally, we present two resources on our website:

- **Anna Stephan-Robinson’s** multimedia anthology of Katherine Ruth Heyman’s works for undergraduate analysis courses.
- A poster on timbre analysis in popular music by outstanding undergraduate winners **Alexa Valles**, **Sophie Andersen**, **Aidan Ramos**, and **Leonardo Huerta-Lima** from the 2024 *Performance into Practice* conference at the University of Oklahoma.

We extend our gratitude to Reviews Editor Philip Chang, former Resources Editor Danny Stevens, Production Manager Christopher Winders, and Web Manager David Marvel. Special thanks to Steve Laitz and Jennifer Snodgrass for their ongoing support of *JMTP* through the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center.

We are currently accepting submissions for Volume 39 (2025); contributor guidelines are available on our [website](#).

We hope you enjoy Volume 38!

David Thurmaier, *Co-Editor* (University of Missouri-Kansas City)

Melissa Hoag, *Co-Editor* (Oakland University)

Determining ‘The Why’ First: Using the Nonprofit Mission, Vision, and Values Statements Model to Reimagine the Undergraduate Music Theory Curriculum

BY PAULA MAUST and VID SMOOKE

The Department of Music Theory at the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University recently joined many other institutions across North America in reimagining our undergraduate curriculum. Following practices more commonly found in the nonprofit sector, we began this undertaking by crafting mission, vision, and values statements. These newly articulated ideals for our department then served as a lodestar, effectively guiding the rest of the curriculum review and revision. The process we effected created an environment that facilitated creative thinking while simultaneously engendering clear consensus among our colleagues.

In this paper, we—as co-chairs of the committee charged with reviewing the undergraduate music theory curriculum—discuss the steps that we followed in this process, as well as the results. We believe that this way of organizing curriculum review provides a useful framework that other schools can mirror when they reassess their curricula. Thinking critically about why we teach specific topics helped us to clarify exactly what should be required in the new curriculum and what could be optional for the students. As a case study, we present our mission, vision, and values statements, as well as the new curriculum that these led us to create. In so doing, we illustrate how adopting this approach from the nonprofit sector and applying it to curriculum reform guided us in unexpected directions that have been broadly supported within the Department and the Conservatory as a whole.



Introduction

As part of the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University’s Breakthrough Plan to turn our school into a leader in twenty-first-century music education, the administration has been emphasizing diversity across the institution. The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Task Force was empaneled by the administration in 2020 and was charged with reimagining a conservatory curriculum that enables students to experience, discuss, and perform music that is broad, diverse, and socially relevant. This group produced a report designed to guide Peabody’s future efforts towards creating a more equitable and welcoming learning environment.¹ One of the recommendations

¹ This task force was composed of approximately 30 faculty and administrators drawn from across the institution. The final committee report is for internal distribution only, but the committee’s work

was that the Department of Music Theory (inclusive of classroom theory, ear training, and keyboard studies) complete a thorough undergraduate curriculum evaluation.

Music theory has historically been a substantial component of the undergraduate curriculum at Peabody, and the faculty in our department were becoming increasingly aware that our curriculum as it stood might no longer be best serving our undergraduates' evolving needs.² Since 2017, the student body at Peabody has grown from 575 to more than 800 students. This tremendous growth can be attributed to: 1) recent program expansions including new majors in music for new media and hip hop along with greater recruitment in computer music, voice and opera, composition, and jazz; and 2) the institution's efforts to recruit students from a wider array of backgrounds. Not only is our student body transforming, but the skills our students need for their careers are changing too. Few of our alumni earn a living solely by performing in an orchestra or as a soloist. Instead, they engage with a variety of musical genres and assume many different roles. They might be called on to perform classical and pops concerts, improvise in various settings, record performances, edit recordings, compose music in a variety of styles, read lead sheets, accompany or form rock bands, conduct ensembles and program concert series, and teach in a variety of contexts.

Indeed, scholars in the field have advocated for revising the undergraduate music theory curriculum since at least 2014.³ Many have made compelling arguments for why we should make our courses more antiracist, inclusive, and geared towards the increasingly diverse professional needs of twenty-first-century musicians.⁴ New

is discussed as part of Peabody's ongoing DEI initiatives. "Diversifying the Conservatory Curriculum," <https://peabody.jhu.edu/explore-peabody/dei/diversifying-the-conservatory-curriculum/>.

2 For an overview of the former curriculum, see Example 1 on Page 14 of this document.

3 The Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major released by a taskforce from the College Music Society in 2014 spurred a tremendous amount of curriculum reimagining within the larger field of music studies in higher education. The copyedited version of the report was officially released two years later by Campbell, Myers, and Sarath (2016, 45–85). Some of the more recent scholarship focused specifically on music theory curriculum reform (arranged chronologically) includes: Murphy and McConville (2017, 177–228); Kim (2021, 23–46); Abrahams (2021, 81–108); and Geest, Pierson, Burns, Smucker, Pukinskis, and O'Hara (2021, 3–80).

4 A complete list of this type of work would be massive and extend beyond the scope of this paper. Some select recent examples of this type of work (listed chronologically) include: Cohn (2015, 5–23); Agawu (2016, 334–56); Madrid (2017, 124–29); Palfy and Gilson (2018, 79–110); Attas (2019, 125–39); Ewell (2020); Endicott (2020, 109–46); Molk and Ohnona (2020, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/promoting-equity-developing-an-antiracist-music-theory-classroom/>); Maust (2021, 21–23); Hiasma and Lumsden (2021, v–x); Philpott (2022); London (2022); and Ewell (2023).

textbooks and pedagogical materials that address broader topics and repertoire are becoming readily available,⁵ and those who have undergone curriculum reforms in their own institutions have begun sharing their innovations at conferences and in publications.⁶ This discourse is propelling the discipline forward in meaningful directions that will have a direct and lasting impact on the next generation of music students.

When we received our charge from the Peabody administration to evaluate and potentially revise our undergraduate music theory curriculum in Fall 2021, we recognized that the process would be time-consuming and perhaps even controversial. As co-chairs of the committee formed to undertake this task, we (the authors of this paper) endeavored to devise a thorough process that would honor as many of our department’s core values and goals as possible.

This article is primarily about our process, rather than about the product we ultimately devised as our reimaged curriculum. Since we all teach in different types of institutions serving a wide variety of students with diverse educational needs and aspirations, there is not a perfect one-size-fits-all music theory curriculum. Every school engaging in curriculum revision will arrive at different conclusions, and we do not presume that the new curriculum at Peabody is necessarily the best model for any other school. However, the process we engaged in to develop the new curriculum was in many ways unusual for an academic department, and we assert that it could provide a useful methodology for music theory departments in many types of institutions. Most significantly, we looked outside the academy and utilized the nonprofit model of writing mission, vision, and values statements for our department *before* we did any work to reimagine our curriculum. In this article we will share our approach of developing these mission, vision, and values statements and then demonstrate how our new curriculum aligns with those documents. As we will show, our methodology ultimately rendered the decisions we needed to make about the curriculum clear, aligned with our unified guiding principles, and much more straightforward than we initially expected.

5 Some recent examples focused primarily on diversifying the Western classical canon include Maust (2023); Hoag (2022); “Composers of Color Resource Project,” <https://composersofcolor.hcommons.org/>; Murdock and Parsell, <https://www.musicbywomen.org/about-us/>; and “Music Inclusion Hub Curriculum,” <https://www.boulangerinitiative.org/music-inclusion-hub>.

6 Some noteworthy recent examples include: de Clercq (2019); Lavengood (2019); Peebles (2019); and Loudon (2023).

Background

The undergraduate music theory curriculum at Peabody was last reconsidered in the 2011–12 academic year. Most undergraduates in this curriculum were required to take four semesters of ear training and keyboard studies and six semesters of classroom theory.⁷ In the classroom theory portion of this curriculum, we tried to create enough choice to allow students to take ownership of their music theory education. To do so, we compressed what had previously been a prescribed six-semester curriculum into five semesters, covering 1) diatonic harmony and voice leading in the first semester; 2) chromatic harmony and voice leading in the second semester; 3) Baroque counterpoint in the third semester; 4) Classical forms in the fourth semester; and 5) a class that spans late-Romantic through Contemporary techniques in the fifth semester. Students choose among several writing-intensive classes on various topics that are created on an ad hoc basis for the sixth semester.

Although the flaws in this curricular model quickly became apparent, we maintained it without change for twelve years. In particular, the sixth-semester elective never adequately fulfilled its function. Because students needed to take the class at a specific point in their education, they were not able to plan ahead to find topics that genuinely interested them. Instead, they tended to enroll in a course based on their previous experiences with the instructor or how conveniently the class time fit into their schedule. Ultimately, we lost some of the rigor of the former curriculum without creating true freedom of choice. Additionally, the focus of this theory curriculum remained the same as had been the case for generations at Peabody, without any real consideration of music beyond the Western classical canon. Even as specific instructors worked diligently to find repertoire examples from underrepresented composers, the biases of the program were clearly evinced by the fact that we generically called this our “music theory” curriculum even though it was laser-focused on only one specific repertoire.

We wanted a curriculum that fully embodied our departmental values, but since we had not yet articulated those values, we were unsure as to what this would entail.

⁷ Exceptions to this structure include jazz majors, who took one year of each discipline in addition to theory and musicianship classes that are geared specifically towards their discipline. That these additional classes are administered by the Jazz Studies Department rather than the Department of Music Theory was a source of much soul searching during our curriculum review process, because of what this says about the limits of how we have traditionally defined “music theory” at our institution.

Process Part 1: Forming a Committee and Making a Plan

In Fall 2021, an official committee was formed to evaluate and propose revisions to Peabody’s undergraduate music theory curriculum. The authors of this paper co-chaired this committee, which included six other full-time faculty members drawn from each of the three areas of the Department (classroom theory, ear training, and keyboard studies). Our charge was to critically answer the following questions:

1. What does our current music theory curriculum (inclusive of classroom theory, ear training, and keyboard studies) value as essential skills for our undergraduate population?
2. How does our undergraduate music theory curriculum compare with the curricula at our peer institutions?
3. What should our undergraduate music theory curriculum look like moving forward in order to best serve our students?

Additionally, we were asked to draft a recommendation about the curriculum and bring it to the full Department for discussion, revision, and eventual approval by the Department and Conservatory administration. At Peabody, this entire process took three years, and we are implementing our new curriculum with the incoming cohort of first-year students in Fall 2024.

Revising a music theory curriculum is a daunting prospect. After all, there are a wide variety of opinions in any department about what concepts are most important and a limited number of semesters in which to fit an ever-growing set of relevant musical skills. Students also arrive at music school with different levels of preparation and training in a diverse array of styles, and they have an increasingly broad spectrum of professional goals. Paula Maust (as co-chair of the committee) suggested that we look outside the academy to the nonprofit sector for models to guide our process. Maust had recently worked with a consultant to develop mission, vision, and values statements for a nonprofit organization Maust co-directed. This experience had transformed that organization’s strategic planning, and Maust surmised that it would also be beneficial to our curriculum revision process at Peabody. At her suggestion, the committee carefully crafted and revised these documents *before* making any decisions about the curriculum. Once the documents were finalized, they became crucial to our curriculum revision process.

Process Part 2: Writing Mission, Vision, and Values Statements

Mission, vision, and values statements codify “a shared understanding of why an organization exists and its aspirations for the future,” and developing these statements is a crucial fundamental task for most nonprofit organizations.⁸ This strategy, however, is rarely applied in academic departments, although some critical literature on music pedagogy does recommend that we first codify our rationale for revising the curriculum before doing so. For example, the College Music Society’s much-discussed “A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors” begins by explicitly outlining why such a document was needed before offering recommendations for structural change.⁹ More recently, Jennifer Snodgrass has similarly asserted that it is imperative for theory pedagogues to first define *why* we want to change our music theory curriculum before engaging in the process of figuring out the specific details of what a new curriculum will include.¹⁰ Beginning by discerning the “why” for curriculum revision aligns closely with the nonprofit model of devising mission, vision, and values statements.

During the year we worked to craft these documents at Peabody, we aimed to write statements that convey our department’s core goals and demonstrate how we envision our role within the institution. Of critical importance was ensuring that our mission, vision, and values statements actively honored the conservatory tradition while also looking towards an innovative and broadened future. Collaboratively creating these documents was not only instrumental in our curriculum revision process, but it also brought into clear focus the myriad ways that a Department composed of individuals with many differing viewpoints and perspectives could unite over a shared goal of improving the student experience.

Mission

Literature on creating a mission statement suggests that it should be as concise and focused as possible.¹¹ Michael Allison and Jude Kaye advise mission statement writers to find a way to incorporate both the organization’s purpose (ends) and program

8 Allison and Kaye (2015, 77).

9 Campbell, Myers, Sarath (2016, 57–62).

10 Snodgrass (2020, 1–14).

11 Allison and Kaye (2015, 78–9). Others who have written on this include Sheehan, Jr. (2010, 51) and Brinckerhoff (2009, 39–40).

(means) of how that purpose is accomplished.¹² This clarifies to both internal and external stakeholders what the organization does and why it matters. We frequently came back to three core questions while writing our mission statement: 1) Why does the Department of Music Theory exist?; 2) What is the Department’s function within the broader Peabody undergraduate curriculum?; and 3) What are the Department’s broad overarching goals? In answering these questions, we were able to articulate our purpose, which then naturally led us to clarify the precise ways to accomplish that purpose. Following Allison and Kaye’s model of purpose and means, we wrote an initial sentence focused on an active infinitive verb (in our case “to develop”) to clearly state *what* we aim to do. The second and third sentences of our mission statement provide a more thorough description of *how* we intend to accomplish our purpose.

Our work resulted in the following mission statement:

The Peabody Department of Music Theory, Ear Training, and Keyboard Studies strives to develop well-rounded musicians who are able to advocate for their artistry within the Western canon and beyond. We cultivate an atmosphere of curiosity and inquisitiveness in order to inspire our students to become life-long learners, active voices towards equity within the arts, and leaders within the musical community. Through our classes, students acquire a robust set of tools towards the comprehension, creation, and performance of music, and learn to express their insights verbally, through writing, and through their individual musical practice.

Vision

Vision statements are intended to show what success will look like when an organization’s mission is successfully enacted. Allison and Kaye suggest that a vision statement should “challenge and inspire the group to stretch its capabilities and achieve its purpose.”¹³ Although intended to spark inspiration and motivate hard work, it is also important for the vision statement to be grounded in reality. As we worked to craft our vision statement, we focused on what we envisioned as the most ideal outcomes for the wide array of undergraduate students our department serves. The questions we focused on as a committee while writing our vision included: 1) Why does what we do in the classroom matter?; 2) Where do we want to be as a Department in five years?; and 3) How do we balance the longstanding Conservatory educational model with an ever-changing music industry? As in the mission statement, we were intent on finding active verbs that most clearly defined our desired outcomes (in our case “building,” “broadening,” and “empowering”).

The following is the Department’s vision statement:

¹² Allison and Kaye, (2015, 78).

¹³ Allison and Kaye, (2015, 85).

BUILDING upon our foundation of teaching the materials of Western Classical music within their cultural practice and context.

BROADENING our course offerings to reflect the interconnectedness and wide range of contemporary musical practices.

EMPOWERING students with more agency towards pursuing their own interests while maintaining a solid core curriculum designed to provide foundational knowledge.

Values

An organization's fundamental values are meant to align passion and intellect. Allison and Kaye propose that values "focus on service, quality, people, and work norms,"¹⁴ and they also readily acknowledge that homing in on these values is a process likely to spark spirited debates.¹⁵ While writing our values statement, we asked the following questions: 1) What broad skills do we want our students to get from the music theory curriculum?; 2) What kind of classroom experience do we want our students to have?; and 3) How does what we do fit into the Conservatory's mission and the larger field of music? We wanted to create a values statement that demonstrates our department's greatest strengths and priorities and also allows room for future growth and development. In particular, we sought to incorporate feedback that we had received from applied faculty across the Conservatory in a series of informal conversations about what they hoped the theory curriculum could provide for their students. Additionally, we wanted to emphasize Peabody's continued commitment to having full-time faculty teaching the majority of undergraduate courses and to situate ourselves as a Department at the nexus of tradition and innovation. We again chose active verbs that came up repeatedly in our meeting discussions, including *provide*, *amplify*, *help*, and *foster*. However, rather than emphasizing these verbs for the values statement, we chose to instead highlight the most impactful nouns to give weight to each of our core values. To that end, we settled on foundation, curiosity, connections, respect, full-time faculty, and innovation and tradition.

The following is the Department's values statement:

- Provide a strong academic **FOUNDATION** for students that allows for the development of practical musical skills applicable in a variety of contexts.
- Amplify students' intellectual **CURIOSITY**, dedication to their craft, joy in learning, and persistence towards achieving their goals.

¹⁴ Allison and Kaye (2015, 87).

¹⁵ Allison and Kaye (2015, 90).

- Help students make **CONNECTIONS** between music theory and practice to create more sophisticated musicians who possess a broad understanding of music and are fluent in a variety of theoretical techniques.
- Foster a classroom environment grounded in mutual **RESPECT** that supports a variety of analytic and personal perspectives.
- Dedication to effective teaching focused on individual student success, led by **FULL-TIME FACULTY** who are invested in undergraduate teaching and to continued development of impactful pedagogical techniques.
- Continued assessment of our curriculum in order to ensure that it is tailored to the changing needs of our student body, and balances **INNOVATION AND TRADITION**.

Once our mission, vision, and values documents were in place, they served as a lodestar throughout the curriculum review. By the end of the first year of our process, we had worked out nearly all the details of a revised curriculum that the majority of people in the Department were excited about presenting to the school’s administration. That is not to say that we did not have numerous spirited discussions about what precisely would go into each new syllabus or the ideal number of topics classes, for example. Yet every time we found ourselves at an impasse, we returned to our mission, vision, and values statements to help us make a decision and move forward in a way that felt focused and genuine.

Process Part 3: Collecting Data

As we began drafting the mission, vision, and values statements, we simultaneously charged members with collecting data along two streams: 1) what the undergraduate theory curriculum looks like at peer institutions; and 2) how the Peabody curriculum has been experienced by students.

We sought data about the undergraduate theory curriculum from the following schools (listed alphabetically): Cleveland Institute of Music, Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester, The Hartt School of the University of Hartford, Jacobs School of Music of Indiana University, School of Music of James Madison University, Schulich School of Music of McGill University, School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan, and Oberlin College-Conservatory of Music. We found that several of these schools had recently reconsidered their music theory curriculum, although most still focused their undergraduate music theory classes almost exclusively

in the Western Classical canon. Both Oberlin Conservatory and James Madison University stand out as exceptions, with curricula that focus on electives where the students decide for themselves what music theory topics they should engage with beyond a short, shared core. Several of these schools have incorporated some elective choices into their curriculum, including Eastman, Indiana, and Michigan.¹⁶

In order to assess the efficacy of the Peabody curriculum, we sought data on the success rate of students in our music theory classes. Under this curriculum, incoming students took a placement examination and were then tracked in one of three ways: 1) an accelerated class that covers the first four semesters of our curriculum in two semesters; 2) the standard curriculum; or 3) an intensive class where students spend more time working on fundamentals for their first year, and then rejoin the regular classes in their second year. We were particularly interested in how many students failed at the end of each semester of our six-course curriculum. As one might expect, students who arrived with less training in notated music theory and were placed into the intensive track were more likely to fail a theory class than those who passed the initial placement examination.¹⁷

In perusing Peabody's enrollment data, our most surprising realization was regarding the placement levels of incoming students over the previous four years. In most years, approximately 60% of the incoming students placed into the intensive track.¹⁸ We realized that we can no longer assume a shared background in notated Western Classical music theory among our undergraduate students. For this reason, we determined that the design of a new curriculum should either 1) allow the bulk of our students to enroll in what we consider the standard music theory curriculum from the start of their time at Peabody; or 2) change the names of the classes so that the one

¹⁶ We are grateful to the various faculty at these schools who took the time to discuss their curricula and philosophy with us. In addition, we would like to note that this data was gathered in Fall 2021, and these schools may have revised their offerings in the interim period.

¹⁷ Over the four years for which data was collected, 93% of students passed Theory 1 Intensive, while 98% passed Theory 1. Similarly, 83% passed Theory 2 Intensive, compared with 90% passing Theory 2. Ear Training had similar issues, with 89% passing Ear Training 1 Intensive compared with 95% passing Ear Training 1, and 88% passing Ear Training 2 Intensive versus 93% passing Ear Training 2. No data had been collected on the comparative success rates of students from the various first-year classes as they continued into their second and third years of study.

¹⁸ Academic year 2017-18: 30 students began in Theory 1, and 44 in Theory 1 Intensive; 2018-19: 32 students began in Theory 1, and 53 in Theory 1 Intensive; 2019-20: 49 students began in Theory 1, and 64 began in Theory 1 Intensive; 2020-21 was the outlier with 65 beginning in Theory 1, and 38 beginning in Theory 1 Intensive. 2020-21 was also the year when all classes were remote due to the Covid pandemic and was therefore an outlier in many other ways as well.

serving the majority of students would be considered regular music theory.

At this time, we also informally surveyed members of Peabody’s applied faculty to determine how well they believed the music theory curriculum served their students. Most expressed broad support for the music theory curriculum in general. Despite this, many faculty found that their students often did not make the leap from learning theoretical topics in the classroom to applying these tools to their own repertoire. These faculty encouraged us to find ways in the curriculum to help students more effectively forge the connection between theory and practice.

Process Part 4: Crafting a Revised Curriculum

The data we collected and our department’s consideration of the new mission, vision, and values statements created broad agreement that our classroom theory curriculum needed to be revised. We began by asking ourselves the following questions:

1. What topics in our current curriculum are necessary for every student to know?
2. What topics are not in our current curriculum that are necessary for every student to know?
3. What topics in our current curriculum should students have access to but not necessarily be required to know?
4. What topics are not in our current curriculum that students should have access to but not necessarily be required to know?

We then divided into two subcommittees that worked independently to draft a variety of proposals for what a new curriculum might look like. Both working groups created models based on a shared three-semester core followed by topics classes that allowed student choice. That there was clear agreement as to the general direction of our proposed curriculum change was a surprise to all involved, because previous reconsiderations of our curriculum had never begun with such a distinct consensus. We attribute this to the fact that both groups were guided by our mission, vision, and values statements, which helped significantly to clarify both our purpose and means. Once we had articulated our ideals, it became apparent that doing so had created clarity as to what we sought to become as a Department and how this might translate practically into a new curriculum.

The next step was then to propose exactly what should be required in that common initial core and how to empower students with more agency to pursue their own interests while maintaining some semblance of a shared curriculum. We had four

goals in mind while creating the new undergraduate music theory curriculum: 1) to adhere to our mission, vision, and values statements; 2) to create a curriculum that would allow students the tools to consider theories of music more broadly, while also providing a solid foundation in analysis of the Western Classical canon that many of our students still consider their professional home; 3) to create required classes that would be useful for all of our students, providing the grounding in fundamentals necessary for those without strong backgrounds in notated Western Classical music theory without boring those who already felt confident in applying those tools; and 4) to consider this revision as part of an ongoing process in which we will regularly reevaluate the efficacy of our curriculum.

SEMESTER	2012 CURRICULUM	2024 CURRICULUM
1	Diatonic Voice Leading: Harmonize Diatonic Melody; Diatonic Figured Bass; Analysis	Fundamentals: Sound; Hearing Structure; Notation; Scales (all); Sonorities (all); Counterpoint
2	Diatonic and Chromatic Voice Leading; Introduction to Form: Harmonize Chromatic Melodies; Chromatic and Sequential Figured Bass; Analysis	Tonal Harmony 1: Diatonic Harmony; Melody Harmonization; Figured Bass Realization; Score Analysis; Composition
3	Baroque Counterpoint: Analysis of Baroque music with special attention to the contrapuntal works of J.S. Bach; Model Compositions	Tonal Harmony 2: Chromatic Harmony; Basic Form through Sonata Form; Post-Tonal Analysis
4	Classic and Romantic Styles: Classical-Era Structure with special consideration of sonata form; Analysis; Romantic-Era Expansions	Topics Course 1: See below for list of topics
5	Late Romantic through Contemporary Musical Practices: Extended Modulatory Techniques; New Tonalities; Pitch-Set and Serial Theory; 20 th - Century Styles	Topics Course 2: See below for list of topics
6	Special Topics in Music Theory: Focus on analytic writing	Capstone Practicum Seminar

Topics Include:

Baroque Styles	Renaissance Counterpoint
Classical Styles	Romantic Styles
20 th -Century Styles	21 st -Century Styles
Jazz Harmony	Popular Music
Music of the World	Tonal Improvisation

Example 1.
Comparing Curricula.

A case study in three parts follows that illustrates the defining aspects of our new classroom theory curriculum and also demonstrates the ways the curriculum was directly derived from our mission, vision, and values statements.

Case Study Part 1: Theory 1–3 Shared Core

With the aforementioned goals in mind, we proposed a new shared three-semester core. Most incoming undergraduates will take a new Fundamentals class in their first semester. Recognizing that our mission statement calls for students to work within the Western canon and beyond, we decided to begin this course with the analysis of sound, providing tools that may be applied toward the analysis of any music. The first unit will be focused on topics including: the harmonic series and tuning, timbre, sound envelopes, filtering, dynamics, and texture, while also covering notation and hearing structural elements in music. The second unit of the first semester will encompass scales and sonorities, including those normally reserved for contemporary music classes (modes, symmetrical scales, extended tertian chords, and sonorities based on intervals other than thirds). In this unit, we will explicitly teach jazz and lead-sheet notation alongside the five-line staff. Finally, the third unit of the first semester will engage with topics specific to tonal Western Classical music, including species counterpoint, part writing, harmonization, and figured bass realization.

In this way, students will immediately be exposed to theories that are applicable to all musics. They ideally will gain a strong academic foundation of practical musical skills applicable in a variety of contexts, learning about the basic elements of sound in a way that will allow them to consider their own sound production as a part of music theory and to understand the tools in a typical digital audio workstation. Their knowledge will immediately be grounded in both listening and notation.

In recognizing that most of our students intend to perform or compose on or alongside orchestral instruments, the next two semesters of the shared core will focus on elements of tonal Western Classical theory. The second semester will cover diatonic harmony utilizing melody harmonization, figured bass realization, composition, and score analysis. The third semester will move into chromatic harmony alongside formal structures of tonal Western Classical music, and will include further exploration of topics in post-tonal analysis. These courses align with our mission of helping students advocate for their artistry within the Western canon, while providing them with a robust set of tools towards the comprehension, creation, and performance of that music.

We believe that this three-semester common core will build upon our foundation of teaching the materials of Western Classical music, while broadening the focus of study to develop tools applicable to a wide variety of musical styles.

Case Study Part 2: Topics Courses

In line with our vision statement, which asks us to broaden our course offerings and empower students with more agency towards pursuing their own interests, each student will follow the three-semester shared core by choosing any two topics courses, as the fourth and fifth semesters of the six-semester undergraduate music theory curriculum.

We wanted the topics courses to reflect the variety of backgrounds and diversity of professional goals across our student body. We also wanted to ensure that students will choose topics courses based on their interests rather than scheduling convenience. Therefore, we will have a set list of classes offered as a rotating, consistent, and predictable cycle, so that each of the following topics will be available at least once every two years. These main topics include several of the classes that were formerly the basis for required classes within our curriculum, including: Baroque Styles, Classical Styles, Romantic Styles, and Twentieth-Century Styles. Additionally, we intend to offer new classes that formerly were not available to our undergraduates, including Renaissance Counterpoint, Twenty-First-Century Styles, Jazz Harmony, Popular Music, Music of the World, and Tonal Improvisation. Over time, additional courses may be developed and added to these initial options. Although our hope is that students will choose their own path through these topics classes, we are aware that individual departments may require their students to take specific courses.

This component of the curriculum will give students the freedom to decide for themselves what aspects of music they would like to explore, and students will be able to engage more deeply with the subject matter in each course. For example, more traditionally-minded students might find themselves replicating the first four semesters of our former curriculum by taking the Baroque Styles and Classical Styles topics courses. A Baroque Styles class filled with these sorts of students should be able to delve more deeply into music of that era than a Baroque Counterpoint class that is required of all students. Similarly, a Classical Styles class taught as an elective will be able to consider elements of performance and creation that were previously neglected in the class that was required of every student regardless of their background or interest level. In a required class, teachers must navigate between the Scylla and

Charybdis of creating a syllabus designed to inspire those students who enter the class with a deep well of knowledge about the topic while simultaneously allowing those who have no interest in the subject matter to succeed. Additionally, students with less background in the material will be more likely to excel in a class they have chosen to take that focuses on a topic in which they are deeply invested.

Another advantage of the topics classes is that they will allow us to think of music theory more broadly in the undergraduate curriculum. Students will have the opportunity to engage with many different types of music, including several styles and genres that were absent from or barely discussed in our former curriculum.¹⁹

Case Study Part 3: Theory 6 Capstone Seminar

Our informal conversations with studio faculty members at Peabody about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the former undergraduate music theory curriculum revealed a consistent and common theme: nearly every faculty member we spoke with was hopeful that we might find a way to create a curriculum that would help students more firmly grasp the critical connection between theory and practice. These conversations not only significantly influenced the scope of our mission, vision, and values statements, but they also assisted us with crafting the sixth and final semester of the undergraduate music theory sequence. During this capstone seminar, each student will directly apply the skills they have developed throughout the rest of the curriculum to complete a detailed analysis of a piece they are performing or a piece that has inspired their own compositions and creative output. Students will work to develop basic research skills, and each student will present their work to their classmates in various stages across the semester. The capstone culminates with each student writing an analytical paper and delivering a twenty-minute presentation of their analysis.

In addition to being reflective of our commitment to facilitating students’ grasp of the connection between theory and practice, this capstone seminar also demonstrates our vision of empowering students with the agency to pursue their own interests

¹⁹ We anticipate several challenges with the implementation of the topics classes (and surely unexpected issues will arise as well!). At least two of the proposed topics are in genres that none of our faculty—as of this writing—feel qualified to teach. Student enrollment is also a concern, especially since even full-time contracts at Peabody are largely sustained by having nearly all of our classes within three students more or less of the maximum enrollment (which is capped at fifteen students). This means that if any single topic is exceedingly popular or less desired, it will create repercussions felt throughout the Department until we are better able to predict student interest and plan accordingly.

and our value of amplifying intellectual curiosity. Furthermore, it is our hope that students in the class will be able to learn from each other by sharing their work with their classmates. It is our intent that students will choose topics courses in their fourth and fifth semesters that align with their interests and the repertoire that they are studying in the studio, thereby preparing them for this course. With an enrollment of approximately fifteen students in each section, there is the potential for students to engage with an array of repertoire from multiple time periods, locations, and styles. Perhaps in a single section a baroque flutist will analyze a sonata by Anna Bon, a composer might study George Lewis' *Mnemosis*, a cellist could evaluate a movement of Antonín Dvořák's Cello Concerto, a soprano might examine *Songs of the Seasons* by Margaret Bonds, a computer music major might focus on recent albums by Beyoncé, and a music for new media major could discuss Koji Kondo's music for *The Legend of Zelda*. The repertoire possibilities for this course are as endless as the imaginations of our student body. By providing students with the opportunity to deeply examine a work that they care about and are engaged with in the studio, we are endeavoring to mentor the next generation of professional musicians to be critical, thoughtful, and as musically and intellectually sophisticated as possible.

Conclusion

We are excited to begin implementing this curriculum in Fall 2024, as it will create an entirely new experience for both our undergraduate students and our faculty. The process we engaged in engendered a working environment that was collaborative and constructive and resulted in a structure that we could not have predicted beforehand. By framing our discussions through newly crafted mission, vision, and values statements, we were able to approach our work in a more creative fashion, tethered to ideals of what our department and curriculum could be, rather than anchored to the traditions of prior generations.

While we understand that our reimagined curriculum, as with any curriculum, is not perfect and will not be ideal for every student, we are hopeful that it will be an improvement on the prior course of study. Most importantly, we are dedicated to evaluating and reconsidering our work on a regular basis, and we have departmental mission, vision, and values statements that will help us navigate the changing world of music education in the twenty-first century.

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“Duet Me”: Music Theory Pedagogy in the Age of Social Media

BY ALYSSA BARNA

In this article, I outline a possible use of social media platforms in the music theory and ear-training classroom using a model assignment on (but not exclusive to) TikTok. I show how students can work collaboratively and musically in a platform they may use in everyday life to promote collaboration and engagement with musics and people outside the walls of the university. From this study, I extrapolate themes that illustrate both the benefits and pitfalls of social media use (pedagogically and otherwise). The first section situates social media platforms among the variety of technologies used in theory classrooms in the last seven years (2017–2024). I then present the assignment called “Duet Me” that I designed and implemented in theory courses that asks students to engage with creators on TikTok in a creative and collaborative setting. With the extensive number of examples I have collected over two years, I interpret the results into three large categories—parody, improvisation, and new composition—and discuss the learning outcomes, musical choices, and student feedback. I conclude with a discussion of the role of social media broadly as it relates to student engagement and online music-making, to show how technology and media can play a role in carefully crafting public and/or community-minded musical experiences for our students and bring forth opportunities for conversations and collaborations concerning identity and race.



Introduction

In this article, I outline a use of social media platforms in the music theory and ear-training classroom using a model assignment designed for (but not exclusive to) TikTok. I show how students can work collaboratively and musically in a platform they might use in everyday life to promote collaboration and engagement with musics and people outside the walls of the university. From this study, I extrapolate themes that illustrate both the benefits and pitfalls of social media use (pedagogically and otherwise). The first section situates social media platforms among the variety of technologies used in theory classrooms in the last seven years (2017–24). I then present an assignment called “Duet Me” that was designed and implemented in theory courses and asks students to engage with creators on TikTok (or another social platform) in a creative and collaborative setting. After reviewing the many examples I have collected over two years, I interpret the results into three large, often intersecting categories—parody, improvisation, and new composition—and discuss learning outcomes, musical choices, and student feedback. I conclude with a broad discussion of the role of social

media as it relates to student engagement and online music-making, to show how technology and media can play a role in carefully crafting public and/or community-minded musical experiences for our students and bring forth opportunities for conversations and collaborations concerning identity and race.

I argue that engaging with social media in this way provides a controlled opportunity to discuss the significant issues of 21st-century music-making in the classroom.¹ Our current students will never live in a world without these forms of technology; if they are not using TikTok, another platform will emerge. Thus, it is relevant to their work, careers, and daily lives to critically observe how musicians utilize, create, and in some cases, make a living using these platforms, and how the work we do in the theory classroom can relate in small ways. Should the relevance and use of TikTok wane, for reasons legal or cultural, another technology will take its place, and I strive to show the broader implications and applications of social media and technology in our pedagogy in what follows.

Technology in the Music Theory Classroom: Creativity, Connection, and Surveillance²

The use of technology in the music theory classroom grew steadily across decades, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic swiftly brought about challenges and changes to the technology used in (virtual) classrooms. At first, most material was generated by instructors to accommodate online learning as quickly as possible, curated to the needs of their individual courses and students. As online coursework became a new normal, formalized and commercial technologies became widely available for pedagogical purposes. In music theory, we have seen new applications and online programs (such as [Artusi](#) or the [Eartrainer](#) app), open-source, online textbooks such as [Open Music Theory](#), and a renewed focus on online learning materials from music theory and ear-training textbook publishers like W.W. Norton or Oxford University Press. These resources are now well-integrated into in-person learning environments, as their benefits were made clear throughout virtual learning. One benefit lies in

1 To preface questions regarding the media involved in this study, specifically TikTok, I acknowledge the recent actions at the US federal level to control and regulate the platform. The potential that TikTok is soon banned or no longer functional for US-based users is entirely plausible, as already seen in January 2025 when the platform went offline for a day. This article will address some of these concerns in the conclusion but strives to show the applicability of media in pedagogy beyond a single platform.

2 Throughout this section, bolded keywords in the discussion suggest themes that are later used to explore conference and journal output.

improved **access** for students; this means financial access (in the case of open-source texts and technologies), as well as access for students with disabilities or learning divergences.

My philosophy of using social media in the classroom (and the use of the “Duet Me” assignment) centers on two themes: **creativity** and **connection**. These relate to the standards outlined by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME)³ and the National Core Arts Standards.⁴ The National Core Arts Standards add “connecting” as a fourth standard (in addition to creating, performing, and responding used by NAfME) which asks students to “synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art; and relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.” They also emphasize “artistic literacy,” broadly defined as “philosophical foundations and lifelong goals, artistic processes and creative practices, anchor and performance standards that students should attain” (2). The broader and more inclusive practices of the National Core Arts Standards align with the goals of using social media in the classroom, insofar that they create connections between students and artists outside higher education (both professional and amateur) and inherently require musical creativity. Further, “artistic literacy” (more inclusive than “music literacy”) is furthered using technology and performing music in public spaces.

Beyond the pragmatism of content delivery, using **technology** and **media** in music theory can be a direct outlet for creativity and connection. TikTok and social media creation is an art form, and musical participation on the platform articulates the standard of creativity. The scope of creativity in an assignment like this can be boundless if the students are given an open-ended assignment. Many students will be pushed to exercise their creativity and musicianship in ways they never have before, while others may be accustomed to making music in this fashion. The standard of connection articulates the need for students to relate knowledge and personal experience to the creation of art and connect art to society and culture. Using social media in the classroom connects students to the community beyond the university classroom and facilitates their participation in the vast global networks available on platforms like TikTok. In an era that is, paradoxically, more connected but more distanced than ever, making music with others is a cherished opportunity.

As fundamentally creative endeavors, the concepts of **composition** and

3 <https://nafme.org/publications-resources/standards/>

4 <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>; https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/sites/default/files/Conceptual%20Framework%20-%20EDITED_4.pdf

improvisation are common in music pedagogy (including music theory pedagogy). This article suggests a symbiotic relationship of technology and composition and/or improvisation using online media and a digitally collaborative creative effort. Professionally speaking, the broad ideas of collaborative creativity and composition through digital means arise in professional music careers. Whether that be virtual music teaching, collaborating with performance or compositional peers despite geographical distance, fieldwork or ethnography, or many other musical careers and endeavors, the spirit of this assignment has implications beyond the use of social media in a single course or assignment.

A review of four years of programs from Pedagogy into Practice (2017–24)—the largest biannual conference meeting focused specifically on Music Theory Pedagogy research and practice—shows interest in the aforementioned bolded themes, but does not specifically show linear growth in the interest of these areas.⁵ This examination, of course, is not a foolproof means of measuring interest in these topics, but as the premiere stage for new innovations in music theory pedagogy, is an up-to-date resource and draws from work done at all levels, by undergraduate students through full professors. I searched the program for each conference using the broad set of keywords identified above: access (2 appearances), creativity (2), connection (2), composition (7), improvisation (9), technology (13), and media (0, including “social media”).⁶ These keywords address broad topics, but essentialize the spirit of my argument—that the integration of technology and media in the theory classroom can create creative and compositional opportunities that make connections between students and have far-reaching opportunities for outside engagement. Some of these keywords appeared in overarching session topics. For example, technology sessions in 2017 and 2019 featured papers and posters that explored topics like apps for ear training, Smart Music, online resources from textbook publishers, and productivity apps. Composition and improvisation appeared primarily in the context of research in aural skills and improvisational activities focused on common practice music.⁷ Work

5 The conference originally scheduled for 2021 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus resetting the dates biannually to 2022.

6 I do not use the term surveillance in this survey. It happens to not appear in a search of the programs, but moreover it is not typically (and should not be) a priority for instructors, thus its omission in music theory pedagogy scholarship. A focus on best practices in music theory pedagogy within the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* and other journals and conferences likely contributes to a focus less on critique of surveillance culture but a more positive approach to pedagogical practice.

7 An interesting lacuna in the scholarship on improvisation is that of improvising in popular music and jazz in the classroom, given that improvisation is equally (if not more) essential to these

on access typically concerned open-source educational materials, which decidedly broadens access for students, especially those without financial resources. This brief insight into ongoing trends in music theory pedagogy research demonstrates that there is a keen interest in these topics, but there is no singular trend of increasing the role of technology in the classroom. Further, there is no evidence that social media or other everyday technologies have played a role in pedagogy scholarship.

Focusing specifically on technology and media as the most relevant themes of this study, recent issues of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* from the same date range (2017–23, vols. 31–37), just one single resource (and no articles) report a focus on these themes. In the resource, Sean Atkinson demonstrates an example of how to create effective video examples—a prescient idea before the onset of virtual learning in 2020.⁸ There may be several reasons for this gap in scholarship: the format of a written article, even in an online journal, may not be the ideal venue to discuss a hands-on or instructive approach to technology, and presentations may be more well-suited to conveying ideas. Publishing timelines are sometimes incompatible with the pace of technology growth—as soon as a new technology arises, another is already waiting in the wings. This notion is why I choose a specific and general lens—a specific assignment on TikTok, and a general call for the acceptance of productive media use in the music theory classroom.

Beyond music theory pedagogy, scholarship in music studies more generally has paid increasingly close attention to the developing role of media and music-making. Galloway, Goldschmitt and Harper note in their introduction to a special journal issue on Musical Digital Communities that:

Intersections of music, digital media technologies, and modes of sociality in the twenty-first century—considering how music and musical practices shape—and are shaped by—novel digital modalities and media formats that foreground innovative forms of intimacy and public exposure. These modalities enable the formation of new types of musical communities, around sounds that push at the boundaries of what is considered music and how we listen.⁹

As teachers increasingly further removed from the generations to which our students belong, we need to accept—better, *embrace*—that students musicking online is an inevitable part of their daily lives, both personally and often professionally.

genres as common practice music. As the time spent studying popular musics in the undergraduate theory classroom grows, pedagogues should consider this focus alongside or in addition to classical improvisation.

8 Atkinson (2019).

9 Galloway, Goldschmitt, and Harper (2022, 364).

Piilonen explores the digital landscape of “social media music theory” through examples of memes and clickbait that challenge the visual and sonic communication of music theory. Pedagogically, she notes that:

On social media, communicating skillfully about music theory often involves charming, tempting, or frightening people into paying attention. Creating attention-getting content is an ordinary aspect of social media life because these apps are designed to ‘drive engagement.’ Teachers of academic courses in music theory may find themselves ‘charming, tempting, and frightening people into paying attention’ to differing degrees as well, so what is different about communicating via YouTube video or Twitch stream, and teaching a university or youth music theory lesson?¹⁰

Piilonen also describes how social media music theory intersects with “surveillance capitalism,” wherein content is subjected to algorithmic control, and privacy is compromised by data archivization. If instructors implement assignments rooted in the use of social media in the music theory classroom, we must initiate a frank conversation with students about the implications of student work as it relates to privacy and the “economic and political processes with which [social media music theory] is entangled.”¹¹

The surveillance of student work in the use of applications for testing and coursework monitoring in higher education has grown substantially in the era of virtual instruction. Programs like [Proctorio](#), [LockDown Browser](#), or [Honorlock](#) that monitor students remotely through facial recognition, gaze detection, web traffic tracking, screen locking, or audio monitoring. Most of these applications require an institutional subscription and are integrated directly into Learning Management Systems. Primarily used for testing and timed assessments, these programs are indicative of the erosion of trust and academic integrity perceived by some professors when administering virtual work, therefore some utilize these programs as a means of surveillance. A recent and related issue is the increasingly common use by students of artificial intelligence (AI) resources, such as [ChatGPT](#) or [Gemini](#). A complete discussion of the use and prevention of AI in the classroom is beyond the scope of this article, but the management approaches have often been similar and are sometimes grounded in a desire to surveil students.

In response, I suggest that our charge as professors and teachers is not to be intellectual law enforcement: we cannot outsmart the technology coming our way and predict and diagnose all instances of academic dishonesty. Instead, we must

¹⁰ Piilonen (2022, 1).

¹¹ Piilonen (2022, 12).

reconfigure our activities and assessment to keep the focus on student-centered content that renders the temptation of online cheating and AI moot. Embracing technology and social media—in this case, TikTok—is one way to measure musical skills. Attempts to regulate online platforms on college and university campuses have come and gone throughout the years. The use of TikTok is already compromised for students and faculty in some states where the platform is banned on campuses of public universities and could effectively be banned by the federal government in 2025.¹² In this case, the lawmakers’ concerns of outside surveillance have, in another way, imposed the theme of surveillance onto their own constituents. Officials that support a ban have concerns about user data collection by the Chinese government, as well as the spread of misinformation. Proponents of TikTok note that the US traditionally has had an open internet, free of censorship, and the forced sale is seen as overreach. I view these themes of surveillance and censorship as pitfalls of classroom technology but believe that benefits outweigh the drawbacks. For those wary of or unable to use TikTok, I emphasize that the spirit of creativity and connection suggested by this article supersedes the platform type: the assignments and ideas are not specific to TikTok, but rather of media in the classroom broadly construed.

With these caveats in mind, why TikTok? Both students and colleagues have asked me this question. Using this platform for the specific assignment I outline could be decidedly simple to implement for many instructors. Yet the point I hope to impress is that our students are living and growing in a reality that is much different than the analog days in which many instructors were trained. TikTok launched in 2018 but gained traction in US culture in 2020; its success was due in large part to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and bored Gen-Z students living at home, and the app has since become an indelible part of most young people’s lives. When you open TikTok, you are presented with the “For You Page,” a practically endless stream of algorithmically selected, short-form videos created by strangers across the world that use sonic and visual cues of music clips, captions, filters, and/or dance and movement to communicate. TikTok videos—like Instagram posts and reels or YouTube videos and shorts, to name a few—fall under a broad category of *user generated content*, defined by Santos as “any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital

12 At the time of writing, 43 universities (and university systems) have enacted a ban on TikTok on campus Wi-Fi (primarily in the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wisconsin). Anecdotally, colleagues and students from affected states simply state that they frequently “turn off” their phone’s Wi-Fi on campus and use data to access the platform without restriction. I acknowledge this issue of access (and the importance and relevance of access as a general topic) and offer alternatives throughout the article.

systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, *that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources.*"¹³ By understanding and embracing the everyday technology in our students' lives, we can, in one way, make our academic work relevant to music-making outside the walls of the university. To summarize the general benefits to students of this work: there are learning benefits of meeting students where they are, community-building benefits of public-facing work that extends beyond the walls of the university, media fluency benefits, and entrepreneurial benefits (how to build an audience through music).

“Duet Me”

I implemented the “Duet Me” project in three blended undergraduate and graduate courses on the theory and analysis of popular music across two academic years. Assigned and completed in weeks 5–6 of the semester (out of 15 total weeks), students had previously studied form, timbre, and harmonic principles of popular music and implemented skills into analyzing music from a wide variety of popular musics from 1960 to the present. In the project, students are asked to create a specific style of TikTok called a “duet me.” This genre of video uses content premade by another creator, wherein they request the viewer to “duet this”/“duet me.” Students were to create a new musical contribution to an existing video posted by a TikTok creator. This could range from adding a new layer to a looped progression, to creating an entirely new formal section (sometimes called an “open verse challenge” on the platform). The only constraint is that students should not sing or perform an existing popular song (à la karaoke or a cover song), thus ensuring they would create novel material in some way. The complete assignment is shown in Figure 1. The collaborative videos (both the instructor suggestions and many videos chosen by students) involved popular music styles and genres, as fitting for the nature of the courses. It would still be possible, however, to create videos less rooted in popular styles for a class with broader study of classical and popular genres, especially when curated by the instructor.

The learning outcomes for this assignment encompass different levels of Bloom's taxonomy, especially emphasizing understanding, analysis, and creativity. Students will *identify* and *interpret* genres and musical content in the given (or chosen) video. They will demonstrate this *understanding* through two means: (1) the *development* of musical work that fits within the extant material and *creates* complementary musical

¹³ Santos (2022, 108, emphasis mine).

1. Create a duet with an artist from TikTok. Creators sometimes call these videos “open verse challenge.” You’ll want to make sure that you’re creating or improvising new material—not performing a cover of an existing song.

- [Here are examples I suggest](#), but if you find a promising example on your own, I encourage you to explore different options that fit the guidelines of an open verse or duet of new music.
- Pay attention to the genre implied by the original video and *all* musical parameters present (or absent, as the case may be).
- Choose one aspect to duet with the video: this might be a vocal line (with or without lyrics), a melody performed on an instrument, a beat or percussive line, a bass line,
- Ideally, upload it to TikTok and share the link with me. If you object to using the platform, you can send me a video recording in a common video format (.mp4, .wav). You can also upload your video to Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook as a reel if you prefer these platforms.

2. Write a short response (~300 words) describing your approach to the duet and answer the following questions.

Why did you pick the particular example? Did you strive to replicate specific aspects of the style or intentionally go against them—cite what and why. If you added another layer, what would it be? What was the most challenging aspect of this task, technologically *and* musically?

“Duet Me” Assignment Grading Rubric

Category	Scoring Criteria	Total Points	Score
Performance (10 pts)	Vocal/Instrumental considers intonation, style, and timbre	5	
	Audio quality allows for a clean performance	5	
Content (15 points)	Harmony is stylistically appropriate	5	
	Melody is smooth, leaping when necessary and appropriate	5	
	Timbre, dynamics, and texture are considered in relation to the original video	5	
Narrative Summary (15 points)	Summary discusses challenges faced in the assignment and how they were overcome	5	
	Narrative connects the material to either the social/cultural context of the song or lyrics	5	
	Musical choices (harmonic, rhythmic, textural, timbral, etc.) are explained as necessary	5	
Score	Total Points	40	

Holistic Rubric:

- 5: Above average, nearly flawless
 4: Present with good effort
 3: Idea is sufficiently present but underexplored
 2: Needs development
 1: Barely detectable, needs considerable change
 0: Missing

Example 1
“Duet Me” Assignment.

layers and, (2) Subsequent written *analysis* of synthesis between the creator's work and their own music-making. Instructors should share these learning outcomes with students, not only to model good educational practice (especially for students in pre-service teaching degree programs), but also to emphasize the purpose and meaning behind the assignment.

What can students learn about music composition, songwriting, and analysis from this assignment? To properly craft a musical contribution to the clip, students must analyze the clip itself: What is the harmonic progression? What layers already exist, and what instruments and timbres articulate those layers? In what genre(s) is the artist performing, and how can the duet reflect that genre? How can you refer to the given material, but create something new?

Though the assignment and rubric outline expectations for the assignment, it is important to use class time to discuss the background and details of the assignment for the most effective implementation. First, we review the examples I have suggested, and if time allows, search terms on TikTok that bring up additional examples (e.g. searching "open verse challenge" or "please duet this.") so that students have an idea of how to proceed if they would like to find their own duet partner. I address challenges they might face in recording (outlined below), and stress that we are not looking for perfection, just a creative musical experience. Most importantly, this introductory session invites a discussion of "what" and "why": why might using social media be productive musical experience (or not), what musical skills are they developing through the assignment, and why I am assigning something of this nature. With student permission, you can share examples of past work (or your own contributions), which often makes the assignment feel less intimidating. Depending on the scope and level of the course, conversations might focus, for example, on developing ear-training and musicianship skills in a first-year course, or in a higher-level course (or one focused specifically on popular music genres), could encompass broader themes of media and its impact on post-millennial popular music.

A few basic steps to creating the duet on TikTok: locate the video you would like to duet and hit the "share" arrow in the bottom right (arrow pointing right). Scroll and select "duet" (note that some creators can turn off this feature for privacy). Using headphones, perform the duet. The initial recording page is where students can mute audio or change playback speed. After recording the duet, you will click through to the second editing page. Relevant tools on this page include volume adjustment (for both videos), visual effects and trimming, adding captions, and privacy settings. Logistically, TikTok videos are best recorded on a mobile device—all my students

recorded on a phone using the app. A browser-based version of the website is available for watching videos, but the upload feature does not provide all the detailed video editing features available on the app (this is true for Instagram Reels, too). Editing in the browser-based version of TikTok will bring users to an outside platform, CapCut, to create edits. Then, a fully edited video can be uploaded through the browser. If the student's preference is to create and edit the video using different technology or software and then simply upload the video, then this will work.

Using TikTok to perform and record a video is not without technological challenges and limitations. First and foremost, many students noticed a delay or lag between their audio and the existing video/audio. This is a commonly reported issue on the platform, most likely attributed to the use of Bluetooth technology that often creates audio latency. I recommend that students use wired headphones when possible to resolve some of the latency issues, or they can trim and realign the front of the audio clip to align the layers (through the “adjust clip” panel). Some students simply performed ahead of the beat, which proved to be an unexpected yet masterful lesson in microtiming. Additionally, students should ensure the microphone is unmuted and use (wired) headphones for the assignment; otherwise, the microphone picks up the audio playing through the phone and produces an undesirable doubled effect. If students are hesitant to upload to TikTok as a platform, there are several workarounds. It is simple to save TikTok videos to your phone (“send” arrow, then “save video”), which allows the instructor to provide video files via LMS or other file sharing platforms. I have encouraged students to use Instagram or the app Acapella if they prefer. I do not require students to share videos publicly (though it is encouraged), so they can save the video and send it to me if they prefer. I will note that this option, while good for protecting student privacy, diminishes the effects of public music theory and collaborative digital music-making that I discuss later.

Results and Synthesis

Compositionally, students gravitated towards a set of techniques to create their duets as indicated in the instructions and pre-assignment discussion. Most analyzed the chord progression and stayed generally within the articulated key and harmonies. Students often contributed to the duet by changing the textural density of the track. This occurred in two ways: the double-timing of texture, and playing faster over the given track. Or, students layered their track with multiple voices, either on the

same or different instruments and voices.¹⁴ Several students utilized spoken layers, either through rap or spoken word verses—which I encouraged them to do, as these popular music genres are generally underrepresented in theory curricula. These spoken contributions, in addition to other musical layers, were sometimes enhanced through layering, timbral variation, and sound spatialization. Many students performed on their primary instrument, while others used their singing voice, piano, or another secondary instrument as an additional challenge. Some students noted in their responses that they embarked on the project through vocal improvisation and later translated their improvisational content to their instrument. This vocal-to-instrumental network serves as a potential ear-training tool for students working on singing, improvisation, and the connection between the voice and their instrument.

To generalize broader themes of student submissions and contributions, I offer three categories of interpretation: parody, improvisation, and new composition. These categories are *my* interpretation of my students' submissions, and not directly correlated to *their* interpretation of the video duets. These interpretive categories are not distinct, but students often touch upon aspects of one or more of these themes within a single 30–60-second video. I suggest these categories as primary organizing principle(s) for the work, based on written responses and the duet's interaction with the original creator's content. I have devised a sample duet submission in [Example 2](#), recorded on TikTok.¹⁵

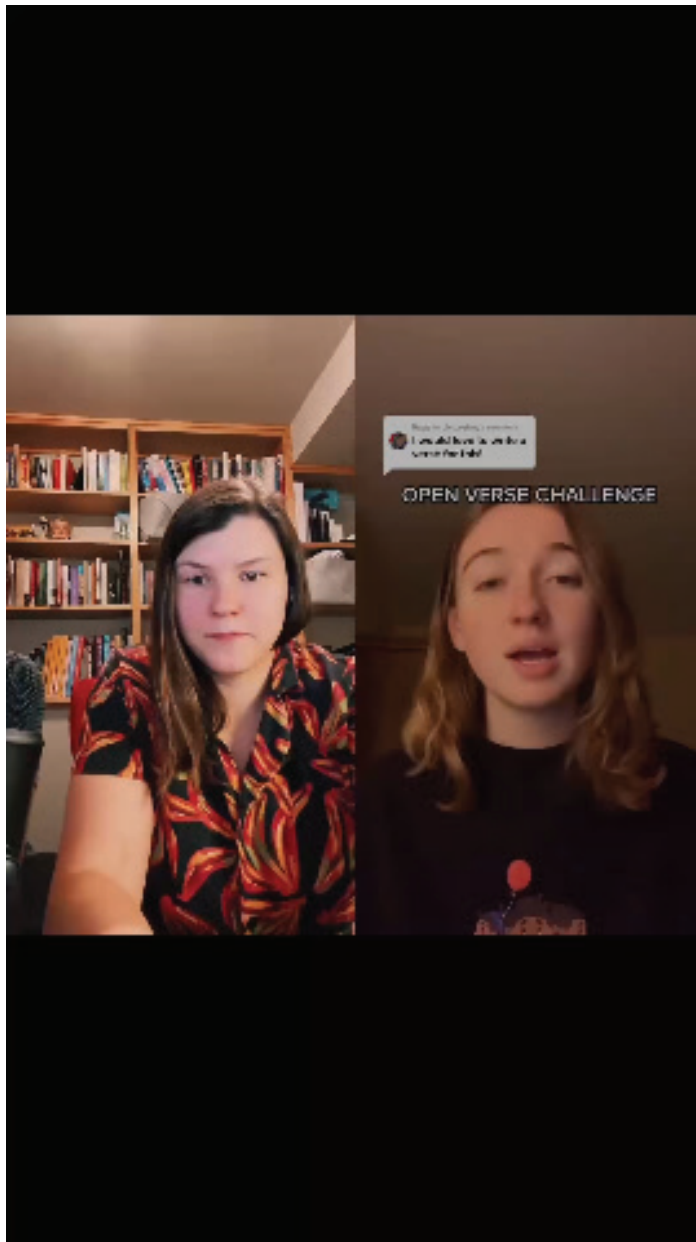
An in-depth study of parody is beyond the scope of this article, as there are many terms and definitions that apply and relate to the word “parody” across various art forms.¹⁶ A broad definition of what I categorize as parody in these assignments include ideas like Dentith's notion that a parody can be “any cultural practice which makes a polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice,” or Hutcheon's observation that parody is “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity.”¹⁷ Videos that prioritized parody were characterized

14 This technique is much like the videos created in apps like Acapella, where it is the default to multitrack recordings and present a composite track of several voices.

15 My rationale for posting my own duets for the purposes of this article is to preserve student privacy. While sharing my student's work would be possible pending approval from the IRB, I did not want to affect the outcomes of the project because students were intimidated by possible sharing outside the classroom.

16 For a detailed historical study of parody across ancient, modern, and post-modern eras, see Rose (1993).

17 Dentith (2000, 20); Hutcheon (2000, xii).



Example 2
Sample Duet Me Submission.

by critique, polemic, and the practice of difference and irony. Many students, skeptical of the project or social media in general, wrote in a parodic style because it allowed freedom of expression through ironic or humorous means. Parody also allowed students who experienced nerves, fear, and discomfort because of the new skills and public-facing nature of the assignment a measure of “critical distance,” or established difference as a means of assuaging these feelings. The means by which students used parody included videos that incorporated found sound: for example, a student makes breakfast and aligns the sounds of chopping vegetables and cracking eggs with the percussive elements of the duetted video. Another includes a student starkly playing the trumpet excerpt from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* over a decidedly funky bassline—juxtaposing the different genres and forcing together unusual layers of melody. Some students, in response to political action regulating TikTok, performed spoken and sung duets with original texts that overtly and humorously critiqued these actions in various ways.

Improvisation, while not a requirement or specific goal of the project, ended up being a common thread throughout many submissions. The preponderance of improvised musical contributions in student submissions also convinced me to seek out improvisational research in music theory pedagogy, as previously discussed. Many of these papers and articles discussed improvising in common practice contexts, but none explicitly asked students to freely improvise in a popular music context (as typically demanded by duets on TikTok). Given the nervous energy often incited by improvisation in the classroom, I was surprised to see many students opt to improvise—it seems that the option to erase and restart the clip allows students to rehearse and increase comfort and familiarity with the excerpt and its style. Improvising in this assignment lacks the boundaries (sometimes perceived as “rules”) that improvising in jazz or classical genres seem to impose—some students report in their written responses that this is liberating. Harmonic progression, meter, melodic range, and texture are all relevant parameters the student must engage to adeptly improvise along with the TikTok creator.

New composition encompasses the largest swath of submitted material and indicates a predetermined text and/or music that is rehearsed and performed for an intentional and seamless musical result. Students who engage with parody often use planned novel composition (as represented in Video Example 1), but in cases where parody is not present, general new composition is the guiding principle. Like improvisation, students must analyze the harmonic progression, melodic contour and range, texture and timbre, and metrical structure of the collaborator. Additionally,

creating a new composition often involved writing a text or lyrics as well as musical content—a skill not often highlighted in a traditional theory course—requiring them to utilize ideas from class discussions and activities on text setting. Many students wrote intensely personal texts to accompany their musical content, which allowed for beautiful vulnerability uncommon in theory or ear-training class. Having an accompanying written submission for this assignment is useful for both student and instructor, as it is insightful for both parties to detail the process by which they created their duet, and especially outline challenges they encountered, either in musicianship or in the use of technology.

I previously noted that I used this assignment primarily in courses dedicated to the study of popular music. I acknowledge the privilege of this situation: I have the opportunity to teach courses that focus on these genres at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and it reflects my expertise as a scholar of popular music. One of the benefits of TikTok, however, is that it requires no musical expertise in specific genres. This activity could be implemented into a first-year ear-training course, where student expectations are even more rigorously outlined and guide rails for content are created and supplemented by the instructor (e.g. “create a duet by adding a beat layer to this video” or “improvise a melody vocally over this open verse”). If an instructor is looking to target a specific topic, they could go in and create their own video to be duetted, thus creating a collaborative classroom experience through social media. This assignment also serves as a primer to a larger project on songwriting, if larger compositional works are a part of the instructor’s curriculum.

Through discussions launched by this assignment, students began to realize that music production in recent popular music is intensely driven towards viewer engagement on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Even well-established popular musicians are forced to cater their works towards seeking virality and success on the platform, often at the behest of their label and/or management.¹⁸ Students can learn how recent trends and evolutions in popular song composition are due, in part, to this push towards social media engagement. One of the musical implications of this shift, for example, is an increased focus on a song’s hook. Instead of only a memorable and participatory chorus section, a song now needs to have an approximately twenty-second section that immediately engages the audience—whether that be an opening hook, a shortened chorus or post-chorus, or occurs elsewhere in the form. The efficacy of the hook can come from a unique instrumental or vocal timbre, an electronic

¹⁸ Halsey, FKA Twigs, and Florence and the Machine have spoken out about the practice and pressure of TikTok virality (Chow 2022).

manipulation of the sound (e.g., the trend of “chipmunking,” where the tempo is sped up and pitch is raised in a given song), or the catchiness of a melodic layer or lyrical content. Students are not required to create a hook, but it is a common technique studied during the semester in the analysis of popular songs, and thus using a hook in the “Duet Me” context is another opportunity to revisit the topic. Another recent trend in song composition is a shift toward significantly shorter songs, sometimes barely surpassing two minutes. The truncation of hooks and the time-sensitive nature of social media scrolling has had an undeniable impact on song length.¹⁹ Because TikTok, social media, and mobile technology are native to many Gen-Z artists, they are not bound by the conventions of popular song composition of the past. The evolution of musical ideas due to social media and internet platforms also account for music’s impact on social change. It is imperative that our students, many of whom study primarily classical composition, understand the fullest range of conventions possible, from the 20th century to the present, where their peers are generating musical change online.

Broader Implications of Social Media, Technology, and Student Engagement

The “Duet Me” assignment reveals just a microcosm of the musical activity of the social media landscape, but as I have shown, brings about robust points of discussion for students that center on technology, music-making and collaboration. In the section that follows, I step back from the assignment itself and examine how the use of social media in a music theory or ear-training classroom draws upon broader cultural implications of access, ownership, and musicking in the 21st century.

Returning to considerations of access as discussed in the review of conference and journal topics, an assignment like “Duet Me” creates a fundamentally public-facing assignment, with all the benefits and drawbacks of using technology in the classroom. Boffone states that “TikTok is public pedagogy. Especially considering TikTok’s accessibility, it teaches us how to act, what to listen to, what to buy, how to

¹⁹ In an interview with ABCNews, Pink Pantheress discusses her incredibly short songs: “A song doesn’t need to be longer than 2:30, in my opinion. We don’t need to repeat a verse, we don’t need to have a bridge, we don’t need it, we don’t need a long outro” (Singh 2024). Musician Dionne Warwick responded to her interview on X (formerly known as Twitter), stating “Artists are allowed to create their art in any way they choose. However, I do believe a bridge is important,” revealing an interesting and explicit generational divide between artists and songwriters. Though this example shows the contrasting opinions of just two artists, it can become part of a larger conversation with students about the evolution of songwriting.

speak, how to interact with one another, and more. We learn how to be ourselves on TikTok.”²⁰ Acknowledging and embracing digital musical communities—whether our students are currently participants or not—demonstrates priorities of a community-engaged mindset. Though the content is freely accessible in theory, TikTok and other social platforms are not without downsides. Belcher, Kim, and Reese warn of the neoliberal push for technology and public-facing work, while potentially neglecting student access:

The physical needs of such an assignment may be an issue—technology access is taken for granted, and not all students will have reliable or stable internet access or smartphones. Less tangibly, social media requires yet another form of cultural competency—in addition to those that are required by more traditional U.S. college classrooms and performance spaces—that is not shared by all students in the U.S., much less across the globe.²¹

The technological fluency and cultural competency demanded by social media can be interpreted as both a benefit or a drawback, depending on the individual student’s situation and needs.

Engaging with music on TikTok (or other social media platforms) also brings up the question of ownership of music and art. The notion of ownership is common to the themes of parody, new composition, and improvisation, especially in the ever-changing and litigious landscape of music copyright law. Hutcheon describes the concepts of repetition and possession as it relates to parody, that parody can sometimes be perceived as “too direct a threat, either through its formal collusion with satire or because it is seen as a menace to the ownership of intellectual or creative property.”²² New composition and improvisation in the context of a TikTok duet inherently involve reshaping and repetition to some degree, but equally challenge the notion of ownership. However, in this context the creators (i.e., owners of the work) are specifically inviting collaboration and partnership in music-making, with the expectation that boundaries of ownership will be blurred. I believe that the discussion of balance between repetition and ownership is a worthwhile topic for students in music courses, regardless of their personal or professional background and goals.

In this assignment, the thrust of what I propose is pervaded by the idea that students participate in *musicking*. Adapting Christopher Small’s original concept of musicking, Paula Harper proposes a 21st-century digital update for the term,

²⁰ Boffone (2022, 5).

²¹ Belcher, Kim, and Reese (2023, [2.18]).

²² Hutcheon (2000, xiv).

defining *viral musicking* “to take part in a performance of viral music in any capacity, whether by performing and/or providing material, by viewing/listening, by remixing or remediating, or by sharing that material—giving it the potential to pass on and ‘infect’ new ‘hosts.’”²³ Sharing musical content online is what creates a meaningful act viral musicking: “the act of sharing a piece of viral content, whether through direct or (eventually, quite reified) digital means, is primarily about the transmission of common affective, emotional, and sensory experience—rather than simply the audiovisual content or information” (8–9). There is no expectation that the student’s duets will “go viral,” of course, but meaning-making through public transmission is an extremely culturally relevant classroom conversation to have in the present day. A slight dissonance may arise in this discussion, that some students’ desire to complete the assignment privately does not allow the opportunity for online musicking. This incongruence could be a beneficial point of conversation, as it centers on the balance of online privacy and public-facing work. As young scholars and musicians, students likely have or will encounter this in their professional and/or personal lives, and this assignment and resource present an opportunity to touch upon this discussion in the theory classroom.

A related idea, wherein musical content is collaboratively reshaped online, bringing forth new meaning is Braxton Shelley’s concept of “digital antiphony,” which he defines as the “emphatically intertextual and intermusical product and process of meme culture. Digital Antiphony is a rich, emergent conversation that simultaneously materializes and refigures social categories and concepts like race and gender, belief, and authorship. As antiphony’s animating form, the meme reveals a digital preoccupation with form. The meme, then, offers one sense of what it might mean to be musical in the 21st century.”²⁴ Shelley’s work focuses on memes, but the concept applies to musical experiences on social media as well. In asking students to engage with music in this way, we are asking them to contribute to an existing musical discourse and inevitably reshape the conversation through their collaboration. Music-making never happens in a vacuum or in isolation, and this is especially true on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.²⁵

23 Harper (2019, 8, citing Small 1998).

24 Shelley (2020, 8:42).

25 These conversations may move away from the nuts-and-bolts of ear-training and practice, they invite rich and important conversation about musical collaboration and online media, and move towards divestment from music theory’s “white racial frame” (Ewell 2020). It is our responsibility to have these classroom conversations about the music we study and in which we participate; and

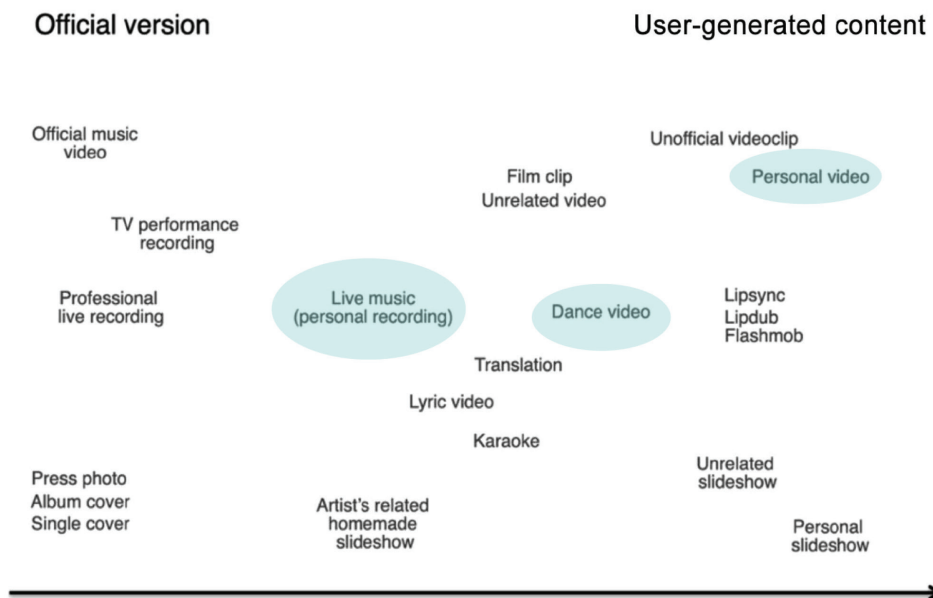
Corpus-based research on the evolution of “user-appropriated content” on YouTube (Martet 2023), supports similar ideas on how interventions by users reshape and evolve original musical content on the platform. Martet’s study is broad due to the corpus (including the number of years YouTube has been online—nearly twenty), and the many types and purposes of videos that users post to the platform. What is useful for the present study is their notion that users of the platform are reframing and reshaping musical material online in a very public way. Examples of these evolutionary changes are found in Example 3 (from Martet 8.3). This is a departure from the typical models students encounter in music programs in universities (and professional settings), wherein the work and development is done in private, then presented in a concert or performance setting. Making (and re-making) music online creates an inherently participatory framework, akin to Turino’s concept of participatory music making. Turino’s framework describes how it departs from presentational performance (e.g., rehearsed concert music) in that it is intensely varied, repetitive, often features dense textures and a constant groove.²⁶ Types of participatory musicking for Turino include genres as diverse as karaoke (especially in Japanese culture), Peruvian Aymara sikuri (panpipe), or Midwestern contradance.²⁷ For musicking on TikTok, the biggest departure from Turino’s model is that the participation crosses digital boundaries, with musicians never collaborating explicitly in person. TikTok, and platforms like it have demanded and created a completely new form of participatory music making, defying the physical and musical boundaries of in-person performance (or presentational performance). This is not to say that presentation or in-person activities are or should be diminished—quite the opposite, as we have learned the value of in-person musical experiences when faced with virtual experiences only during the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital communities of TikTok

how our contributions may be positive or negative. As Ewell notes, “Who gets to decide what music theory is? Since the beginnings of American music theory, it has been white (and male) persons” [7.5]. The privilege of teaching music theory without considerations of race, gender, and culture is a notion of the past, and this project precisely exists to bring these conversations to the fore in tandem with collaborative music-making. Consider Ewell’s suggestion, too, that theoretically inclined people of color have moved away from the field to other areas of music studies [6.6] and consider along with students how we may be able to invite their scholarship back into the classroom through these conversations.

²⁶ Turino (2008, 28–32).

²⁷ Karaoke as a participatory music making genre relates to TikTok’s roots as a lip-sync app, Musical.ly, which predates and was merged with TikTok in 2018. Even in its infancy, the app encouraged exploration between the lines of the official musical version and user-generated content, as seen on Martet’s figure.

and other social platforms create a new opportunity for musicians of all stripes to come together to create musical experiences.



Example 3

Types of user-generated content from Martet 2023 (Figure 8.3, 184).
(annotation mine to emphasize creative music activities)

It is vital to share the concepts of (viral) musicking and (digital) antiphony with students in the discussion of this work. Realistically, the chances of a student's work going viral are slim, but in a pedagogical setting I do not see virality as a measure of success. Regardless of their relationship with media and technology professionally or personally, they will encounter various modes of musicking throughout their careers, and it is worthwhile to explore the concept and empower them to interpret meaning and discover their agency as artists.

The "Duet Me" project is just one activity that engages with social media in the music theory classroom, but the implications are much further reaching than any isolated class assignment. It will always be impossible to rigorously and swiftly implement technological innovations into the academic classroom in the timeliest of ways, but the assignment provides the opportunity to have timely classroom

conversations and responses to ongoing cultural and musical discourses. By opening this discussion, we allow our students to connect student-led musical activity that stimulates musicianship and compositional growth with potential benefits of technological fluency, community-based music-making, and the possibility for cultural critique. If nothing else, the clearest takeaway is that the “Duet Me” project is a single assignment: a low-stakes way of “trying out” something new in your classroom without significant repercussions for semester-long schedules and outcomes that can be modified for a variety of courses. At best, you will open the door for meaningful conversations that reach beyond a single assignment; at worst, your students will still have an engaging and creative musical experience that they likely would have never encountered outside your class.

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Ungrading in the Music Theory Classroom: A One-Year Case Study

BY DAVID ORVEK

In this paper, I present a summary of and critical reflection upon an alternative assessment practice known as “ungrading” that I used during the 2023–24 academic year. My version of the practice involved providing students with feedback without grades and letting students determine their own final grades through a process of guided self-assessment. Many students’ reactions to ungrading were positive. Some reported being able to focus on learning rather than grades, and even skeptical students admitted some benefits.

Ungrading benefited me in various ways as a teacher, but there were challenges as well. Some students struggled with the lack of external accountability that grades provide. I also had issues with attendance and students not submitting work. I do believe that aspects of ungrading can improve students’ attitudes toward school, their learning, and their relationships with their instructors, but there are challenges with the implementation of this idea within education as it is currently practiced in the United States.



Introduction

This paper describes and evaluates an alternative assessment model I used in all my courses during the 2023–24 academic year. Before discussing the model, though, I want to explain the motivation behind it. And toward this end, I begin with a story that illustrates some of the ways in which traditional grades-based assessment fails.

I took a required computer course in college where most of the course grade was determined by a series of quizzes and exams. The quizzes were offered online, used only multiple-choice and true/false questions, and could be taken as many times as one wanted. The questions did not change at all from attempt to attempt, and after each attempt one was told which answers were incorrect. The in-person exams consisted entirely of questions from these online quizzes.

With this knowledge, I developed a strategy to ensure I would get an A in this course. The first time I took each quiz, I would give my best guess on each question. As I went along, I would record the question number and my answer in a notebook. Once I received my score on my first attempt, I would make a note of which questions

I presented an earlier version of this paper at Pedagogy into Practice 2024 at the University of Oklahoma. Special thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions that substantially improved this article.

I had gotten wrong. Then I would take the quiz again, making sure to give the same answers for each question except those I had gotten wrong. After a few iterations of this, I could without fail achieve 100% on each quiz. And then all I had to do to prepare for the exams was memorize these quiz questions. I did not even have to actually understand the concepts covered in these assessments; all I needed to know was that the answer to Question X was C, and so on. My method worked, and I earned an A in the course, but I learned pretty much nothing in the process. Several years later I actually did develop an interest in computers, but nothing I “learned” in that course had stuck.

This story illustrates two problems with traditional grading models. First, grades determined by points-based systems do not assess learning. I got an A in that computer course, but my grade had nothing to do with my knowledge of the course content. Second, grades cause students to focus on the wrong things. If I had cared about learning anything in that computer course, I would have tried to understand concepts rather than just memorizing answers. The issue was partly that I did not care about the course content at the time, but more importantly, I cared more about my grade than learning. Another contributing factor was the pressure of school. I seem to remember not being particularly happy about how I was getting through the course, but I did not feel that studying to actually learn was something I had the bandwidth for that semester.

The failure of grades to measure learning is something I am sure all teachers have experienced. If you are a teacher, just think of the students you have had in your courses that have ostensibly passed the prerequisites but seem to be completely unprepared. Or think of students you have had in your courses that you know learned a lot but who were not able to pass because of some reason not related to their learning. Part of the reason this happens is because, as mathematicians David Clark and Robert Talbert point out, the way final grades are usually calculated in traditional points-based models is not statistically meaningful. Specifically, they explain that data can either be numerical (the result of a measurement or count) or categorical (names, labels, etc.). Grades are categorical data. And while averages of numerical data are meaningful, averages of categorical data are not. As they put it, “Computing averages of the categorical data called *grades* makes no more sense than averaging ZIP codes.”¹

My story about how grades negatively impacted my motivation to learn is not unique either. Surely many instructors can relate to my anecdote, either from experience as students or interactions with students. This is not to say that students

¹ Clark and Talbert (2023, 20).

do not care about learning. Some probably do not, but I would bet that most are just spread so thin that they feel they cannot care about learning as much as they have to care about their grades. And who can blame them with all the pressure that our society puts on grades? I remember hearing a biology professor at my undergraduate institution tell the pre-med majors in the class something like: “If you don’t get As in all your science classes, you can forget about going to medical school.”

There is also an enormous body of research regarding the effects of grades on learning that supports the conclusions from my story. Here is Alfie Kohn’s concise summary of this literature:

[W]hen students from elementary school to college who are led to focus on grades are compared with those who aren’t, the results support three robust conclusions: Grades tend to diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning. . . . Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task. . . . Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking.²

All of this was exactly true for me in that computer course.

I hope it is clear at this point that assessment is not a neutral practice. If we as teachers are concerned with helping students learn, it is time to stop taking the way we assess students for granted.

I began my journey into alternative assessment in the summer of 2023. By August, I decided that I was going to move as far away from traditional grading practices as I could. In the remainder of this paper, I will explain the alternative assessment model I used during the 2023–24 academic year, share some results about how it went, and discuss my thoughts about what I will do in the future.

The Alternative Assessment Model

Teaching Context

Before explaining the alternative assessment model I used, let me share some information about my teaching context. I teach at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. Butler is a small, private, liberal arts university with about 5,500 students, of which about 150 are music majors. Most music students are undergraduates majoring in music education or performance. We also have a small graduate program that offers master’s degrees. I am one of two full-time music theory faculty, and I have total control over the content and policies of my courses. My courses generally range in size from about 10 to 25 students, and I do not have any teaching assistants to help with grading.

² Kohn (2013, 144).

Example 1 lists the courses I taught during the 2023–24 academic year. Note that these are all exclusively written-theory courses; none had any aural skills or keyboard components.³ For simplicity, I used essentially the same assessment model in each course, though I did make some small changes between the Fall and Spring semesters discussed below.

Term	Title	Level	# of Students
Fall 2023	Music Theory 3	Undergraduate core theory	34 total (2 sections)
Fall 2023	Form and Analysis	Upper-level undergraduate	14
Fall 2023	Graduate Theory Review	Remedial graduate	5
Spring 2024	Music Theory 2	Undergraduate core theory	44 total (2 sections)
Spring 2024	Music Theory 4	Undergraduate core theory	13
Spring 2024	Analysis of Tonal Music	Graduate	14

Example 1

List of courses I taught during the 2023–24 academic year.

The Core Components of the Assessment Model

I had two goals for my new assessment model: (1) for students to be able to assess their learning, and (2) for students to forget about grades and focus on learning for its own sake. That is, I wanted students and myself to be able to know whether learning was in fact taking place, and, if not, to understand what sort of steps we might take to see that it did. And I wanted students to be doing the work of learning out of a true desire to learn something that they wanted to learn. I *did not* want students to come to class and submit assignments because they were being forced to or in order to earn a grade. But, because my institution requires final grades for all courses, I still needed a way of determining those grades.

³ I did not teach any aural skills courses during the academic year discussed in this paper, nor have I used anything like the assessment model described in this paper in an aural skills course. I do believe that feedback without grades and self-assessment can be beneficial in any context, but I imagine some careful thought would be needed to integrate these practices into an aural skills or other skills-based course. One way that one could implement these ideas into an aural skills course would be to limit the grade categories on assessments to “pass” and “retry” and ask students to write short self-assessments on how they think they did on dictation exams and/or hearings. See Alegant (2018) for an example of minimal grade categories. I am currently (Fall 2024) experimenting with an alternative assessment model in an aural skills course based on the principles of standards-based grading. But since this is an entirely different assessment model, it is beyond the scope of this article to report any information on this course here. I hope to publish an article in the future that reports on my experience with this course.

Based on my research into alternative assessment practices, I decided to build my assessment model around gradeless feedback and self-assessment. Models like this have been called “ungrading.”⁴ What I came up with is heavily indebted to practices outside the field of music theory described in Sackstein (2015), Blum (2020), and Stommel (2023). While there has been discussion of non-traditional grading practices like standards-based grading and mastery learning in music theory pedagogy, to my knowledge the work of Brian Alegant and Barbara Sawhill is the only published discussion of an assessment model using minimal grading and self-assessment in the context of music theory, and a very brief one at that.⁵

As Stommel and others note, ungrading is not a single unified practice. In Stommel’s words, ungrading is the act of “raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply ‘not grading.’”⁶ Sean Michael Morris adds:

- Ungrading is a humanizing approach to education.
- Ungrading is not about grades, but about people.
- Ungrading is more than not-grading, it’s an approach that informs and is informed by our whole pedagogical practice. It is an “if this, then what else” *modus operandi*, and something we must inhabit fully when we teach or prepare to teach.
- Ungrading does not play at being objective, but rather acknowledges the utter subjectivity of learning.
- Ungrading asks us to question the notions of teaching content, of expertise, of the location of knowledge in the room, which means that ungrading is inherently more equitable than grading.⁷

Day to day, my courses ran similarly to courses I have taught with traditional grading models. I still asked students to complete assignments, projects, and occasional quizzes. But instead of grading these assessments with numbers or letters, I provided detailed written feedback only. I set deadlines for assignments and projects, but there was no penalty for submitting them late. I also encouraged students to revise and resubmit assignments. Finally, I did not grade attendance or participation. There were

4 Terminology for alternative assessment models is not consistent and is constantly evolving. In some cases, people use the same term to describe different models and different terms to describe essentially the same models. Recently, some have begun arguing that “ungrading” is not a useful term. See discussion in Clark (2023).

5 See Alegant and Sawhill (2013), Duker et al. (2015); Johnson (2015); and Michaelsen (2019).

6 Stommel (2023).

7 Morris (2021).

thus no points or letter grades attached to anything in my courses. The gradebook in Canvas, my institution's learning management system, had assignments and projects in it, but the only markings were complete and incomplete. To determine final grades at the end of the semester, students chose the grades that they felt best represented their learning through a process of self-assessment.

Feedback

The kind and amount of feedback I gave on assignments and projects depended on the nature of the submission. The way that I gave feedback was not fundamentally different from how I gave feedback in traditional assessment models, but I did find myself giving much more feedback since there were no grades to communicate my sense of the quality of the work. Generally, I would make note of mistakes or issues to address in annotations on assignments and then provide a broader summative comment in which I would make detailed suggestions as to how the submission could be improved in a subsequent revision. Sometimes these comments would be as simple as "look at this chord again." Sometimes I might give a hint about a different way of looking at something. At other times, I might leave a more detailed comment explaining why something was not right or why something different would work better. Then in longer comments, I would provide a broader summary of the kinds of issues I was seeing in the submission and what the student ought to address in a revision of the assignment.

I emphasize the importance of feedback in my assessment model because I hope to dispel two impressions about ungrading: first, that ungrading means the teacher does not provide students with feedback (i.e., "ungrading" means "no grading"); and second, that students in an ungraded course have no idea whether they are learning. As I mentioned above, I spent much more time reviewing students' work in my ungraded courses than I did in previous courses.⁸ With larger projects—especially projects students designed themselves—I could easily spend half an hour or more writing up

8 I do not intend to suggest that most instructors do not give detailed feedback (although I have certainly received my fair share of grades without feedback on papers I have submitted as final projects, especially in graduate seminars). However, my experience as a student and a graduate assistant suggests that most instructors do not give undergraduate students the opportunity to revise and resubmit most assessments. In the absence of such an opportunity, students rarely internalize the feedback they receive, even when later work builds directly on the current assignment. I am sure most instructors have had the experience of leaving detailed comments on students' work, only to find the same issues in subsequent assessments. Or, even worse, passing back assessments and watching students quickly glance at their grade and then toss the assessment in the trash on their way out the door. For a discussion of the complex relationship between grades and feedback, see Guskey (2019).

my thoughts on a submission. While this work is hard and incredibly time consuming, it is work that feels worthwhile to me because it is directed at meaningful learning. And students' work almost always improves when they take the time to complete the recommended revisions.

Syllabus Statements

I explained my alternative assessment model to students in the syllabus and on the first day of class. The statement on assessment and grades I used in my syllabi in Fall 2023 appears in Example 2 and the statement for Spring 2024 appears in Example 3.

Research shows that students who focus on grades are less interested in their work, tend to choose whatever task is easiest, and overall do not learn as well as students who are intrinsically motivated to learn (see Alfie Kohn, "The Case against Grades"). In order to minimize the negative impact of grades on your learning in this course, I will not be assigning grades to any of your work, and you will choose your own final grade through a process of self-assessment. However, I do reserve the right to change your final grade if your self-assessment obviously wasn't done in good faith. Your colleagues and I will be providing you with feedback on your work, but this feedback will be qualitative rather than quantitative. My goal is for this grading policy to take grades and all stress associated with them off your mind. If this proves not to be the case for you, please let me know so that we can discuss alternative assessment options for you.

Example 2

Syllabus statement on assessment and grades for Fall 2023.⁹

There is a substantial body of research that shows that grades harm learning. Specifically, grades "tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning," "create a preference for the easiest possible task," and "tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking." Additionally, grades do not actually do a good job of measuring learning, nor are they particularly objective. While it is necessary for you and me to be able to assess your learning in this course, my goal is to do so without negatively impacting your learning in the process.

Here is the system I propose we use this semester: rather than assigning grades to your work, I'll provide you with qualitative feedback. Then, at the end of the semester, you'll compile a portfolio of your best work that shows you've achieved the course learning outcomes and choose the final grade (see below) that best represents your learning through a process of guided self-assessment. My goal is for this assessment practice to take grades off your mind and to allow you to focus on *learning* rather than achievement. If this proves not to be the case for you, please let me know so that we can discuss alternative assessment options for you.

Example 3

Syllabus statement on assessment and grades for Spring 2024.¹⁰

⁹ The source cited in the example is Kohn (2013).

¹⁰ The quote in the example comes from Kohn (2013).

Example 4 reproduces the self-assessment I had students complete at the end of the Spring 2024 semester.¹¹

1. Student Learning Outcome X for this course states that, by the end of the course, students will be able to: "... **Explain in detail how you have achieved this outcome, ideally by citing specific assignments/projects/in-class work, etc.**
2. What are the highlights of your learning in this course? That is, what are things you've learned that have stuck out to you or that are particularly meaningful to you? Think about skills as well as knowledge.
3. Are there any areas in which your learning and/or work for this course didn't meet your personal goals? What could you have done differently to have met those goals, and how can you continue to work toward improving in the future?
4. Based on your answers to the previous prompts, **use the grade guidelines in the syllabus to choose the letter grade on the A-F scale that best represents your learning in this course and explain why.** This will be your official final grade for the course.
5. **Optional:** Do you have any thoughts about this course, the grading system, or anything else that you'd like to share?

Example 4

The final self-assessment students completed in my courses in Spring 2024.

Changes from Fall to Spring

Self-assessment is the area where I made the most changes between Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters. In the fall, students began the semester by filling out a "Learning Goals Questionnaire" that asked them to think about what they wanted to get out of the course based on their personal goals related to music. My goal was to get students thinking about the relevance of the course for them and to provide them with a means of assessing their progress over the course of the semester. I do think this assignment initially provided a bit more buy-in, but I found that students tended to set learning goals that were either too vague, too specific, or not directly related to the course. Choosing ineffective learning goals made it difficult for some students to assess their progress toward their goals at the end of the semester.

In the spring, I opted to drop the learning goals questionnaire for my undergraduate courses and instead tried to foster buy-in by having frequent discussions in class about the relevance of what we were learning. This seemed to make students more engaged in they're learning and still left space for students to think about how things were meaningful for them without having to navigate the complexities of having students set and assess realistic goals.

¹¹ This self-assessment was largely the same as the one I used in Fall 2023, with only a few tweaks in phrasing and the order of the questions. Question 1 in this assessment was actually a series of questions, each directed at one of the course learning outcomes.

In my graduate-level course in the spring semester (Analysis of Tonal Music), I used a modified version of the idea behind the learning goals questionnaire, where I set vague learning outcomes for the class as a whole and then asked each student to either personalize those outcomes or add additional outcomes. This worked better because the goals students came up with were more specific. I also intentionally left the content of this particular course somewhat vague at the beginning of the semester and then chose topics that aligned with student goals. Still, though, by the end of the semester we had not addressed some goals. Ultimately, I like the idea of having students set their own goals when the nature of the course allows it, but I need to do a lot more thinking and careful planning to make this work as well as it ought to.

The other change I made from fall to spring was offering more guidance on how to choose final grades. In the fall, I did not provide any guidance on how to choose a grade. I simply asked students to reflect on the progress they had made toward the course learning outcomes and their own personal learning goals, and then asked them to choose the letter grade that they felt best represented their learning in the course. Some students understandably found this difficult. In the spring semester, I tried a few adjustments to address this difficulty. My institution does not publish official criteria or descriptions of each letter grade, so I wrote up a generic set of criteria for each letter grade that focused on learning. These criteria are reproduced in Example 5. These guidelines are not particularly profound, but students seemed to find them helpful. Only a few students had a hard time choosing a grade at the end of the spring semester.

Butler University does not publish official descriptions of each letter grade. Here are some general guidelines you can use in determining your grade:

- D–F: Unsatisfactory; you have not achieved one or more of the course learning outcomes and/or you do not have a passable understanding of and facility with all the course material and relevant skills.
- C: Satisfactory; you have achieved all the course learning outcomes and have a passable understanding of and facility with all the course material and relevant skills.
- B: Good; you have achieved all the course learning outcomes and have a solid understanding of and facility with all the course material and relevant skills.
- A: Excellent; you have achieved all the course learning outcomes and have mastered all the course material and relevant skills.

Example 5
Grade guidelines for my courses in Spring 2024.¹²

¹² In the future, I would avoid the word “mastered” because of its negative connotations. For a discussion of reasons to avoid this word, see Talbert (2021).

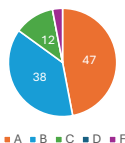
Results: Grades, Attendance, and Submissions

In this section I report on the outcomes of my experiment with ungrading. I begin with some rough data about final grades, attendance, and submissions, and then turn to thoughts from students and my own experience.

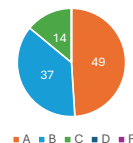
Grades

Teachers using self-assessment for final grades are often asked something like: “If students choose their final grades, will they all give themselves As?” In short, no. Example 6 provides data about grade distributions from my courses to support this. These charts show the grade distributions for all my courses during the 2023–24 academic year. Note that I have aggregated all varieties of grades with the same letter. For example, the top-left corner of the chart shows that 47% of final grades in Theory 3 were some kind of A, 38% were some kind of B, 12% were some kind of C, and about 3% were Fs. While it is true that As are the majority of the grades in all courses, some students did give themselves Bs and Cs. All of the Fs were given to students who submitted no work and had stopped attending class by the end of the semester.

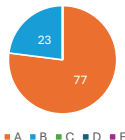
% of Grades | Theory 3 | Fall 2023



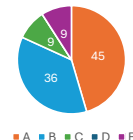
% of Grades | Theory 2 | Spring 2024



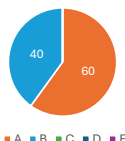
% of Grades | Form | Fall 2023



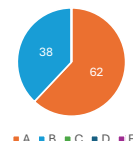
% of Grades | Theory 4 | Spring 2024



% of Grades | Grad Review | Fall 2023



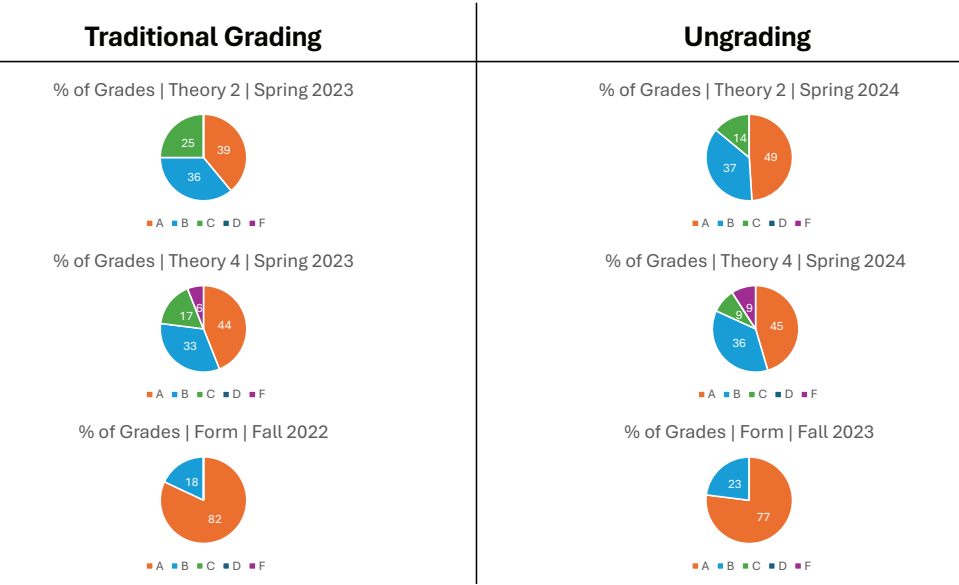
% of Grades | Tonal Analysis | Spring 2024



Example 6

Final grade distributions for all my courses during the 2023–2024 academic year when I used an alternative assessment model. +/- grades are lumped in with whole letter grades.

Even if every student did not give themselves an A, one might still think that the grade distribution seems a bit high. I initially thought so too. For context, Example 7 compares the grade distributions for three courses using my alternative assessment model from the 2023–24 academic year with the distributions from the year before when I used a traditional points-based grading model. Although the distributions are not identical, I am struck by just how similar they are. In my own courses at least, it seems that student-chosen grades were not significantly higher than grades calculated from points-based grading models. I do not know of any rigorous studies that have explored such comparisons with larger sample sizes, but ultimately, I am not sure the comparison is important, because I do not think that traditionally assessed grades measure learning.



Example 7
A comparison of final grade distributions for courses using a traditional points-based grading model (left column) and those same courses using my alternative assessment model (right column).

Attendance

I do not have any attendance records from previous years to compare with 2023–24, and I have not usually implemented formal attendance policies in my courses even when I used point-based grading systems. My intuitive sense is that attendance in 2023–24 was not much worse than previous years. There were definitely some

exceptions, however. Most of my courses had a few students who missed a significant number of classes. Theory 4 (post-tonal theory) had the most attendance issues. Only about half of the students attended consistently, and there was one day where *no one* showed up until 5 minutes after the start of class. I will say, though, that I heard from several colleagues that attendance was a problem in their courses too.

Submissions

Example 8 compares the number of missing submissions in courses where I used a traditional points-based grading model versus those same courses where I used my alternative assessment model. Courses where I used my alternative assessment model had more missing submissions, with Theory 4 being the most striking.

Traditional Grading	Ungrading
Theory 2: 13%	Theory 2: 19%
Theory 4: 14%	Theory 4: 38%
Form and Analysis: 5%	Form and Analysis: 10%

Example 8

Percentage of possible submissions not submitted for courses using a traditional points-based grading model (left column) and those same courses using my alternative assessment model (right column).

While I do not have any data on the timeliness of submissions from 2023–24 versus previous years, my sense is that there were *far* more late submissions during the 2023–24 academic year. For example, some students did not turn in midterm projects until the end of the semester. Theory 4 was particularly bad in this regard as well: *none* of the 13 students submitted their final projects on time.

I now turn to some qualitative commentary derived from student comments and my own experience. My sense of students' thoughts about the assessment model comes from comments in their final self-assessments and my course evaluations.

Student Comments

Of those students who made comments about assessment, most thought the assessment model had positive aspects. The most common positives students cited were that it helped them focus on learning, fostered a growth mindset, caused them to learn more deeply, and created a less stressful environment that was more conducive to learning; they also appreciated the flexibility it allowed.

Some students definitely did not like the assessment model. Some felt that it simply did not work for them; others thought it had potential but needed some adjustment. By far the most common complaint was that students felt that the lack of grades made it difficult to complete the assigned work. Students cited a few reasons for why they thought this was the case. Some students said that they really needed the extrinsic motivation to get themselves started and to get things in on time. That is, without any kind of penalty for not doing the work, they found it hard to find the motivation to do it. Others felt similarly, but specifically cited their busy schedules as a problem. That is, because their schedules were absolutely full and all their other courses had strict deadlines that were enforced with grades, they opted, consciously or not, to put work for my course on the back burner. Sometimes this only meant a delay of a few days until they had a gap in their schedule; at other times this meant they never did the work for my course because they never had time to do it, or it had been so long they forgot about it. A few students also mentioned that the assessment model made them anxious. I did not get the sense that they did not trust me to give them the grade they chose, but rather that they did not have a strong sense of how they were doing in the course day-to-day. On a related note, a few students also mentioned that they found it difficult to assess themselves, specifically when it came to choosing a grade for themselves at the end of the semester. Some students mentioned initially feeling anxious about the assessment model, but then feeling better about it as the semester went on.

My Thoughts

From my perspective, my assessment model was a mixed success. I was delighted to hear that it made some students less stressed and helped them learn. I also saw positive changes in my relationships with students, my own feelings toward the work of teaching, and the way I thought about running courses.

I felt more like a coach to students than the adversary I had often felt like before. In the past, I often felt distant from students because of the amount of power I held in the form of grades. When students were involved in determining their final grade, I felt that this dynamic changed. I of course still had a role to play in whether they learned, but ultimately the responsibility was theirs. I was there to help them, not judge them.

I also felt that my work as a teacher had more meaning for me. By the end of the 2022–23 academic year, I was burned out and had enough doubts about the value of my work that I was seriously thinking of leaving academia. While there were hard

days in the 2023–24 academic year and I continue to have ethical concerns about academia, I did not feel that I was actively harming my students when I was using my alternative assessment model.

I also felt I could be much more flexible in how I designed and implemented my courses. I did not have to have rubrics for every assessment, so I could let students design their own projects and have options for how they completed assignments. While my courses had learning objectives, I did not have to always think in terms of how I would assess them. I also found that ungrading made it easy to accommodate all the complexities of real life during the semester. I did not have to make any accommodations for students with documented disabilities because almost every aspect of my courses was inherently flexible.

Finally, there were students who were able to pass my courses who likely would have failed a course that used a traditional assessment model. Attendance and/or assignment submission was an issue for all of these students. But in each case, I was confident that they had met the learning outcomes based on the work they were able to submit and their self-assessments. Could these students have learned more from attending more classes and completing more assignments? Certainly. But ultimately, the whole point of assessment is to see whether learning is happening, and it did in these cases.

Now for some things that were challenging for me. First, there were the issues with attendance. I am not worried about students missing a day here or there, but when students miss several classes, their learning is obviously impacted. Moreover, absences impact those who do attend class because it makes discussions harder and there are fewer perspectives to learn from. It is also demoralizing for me and other students when half of the class is absent.

Another issue was the number of late or missing submissions. Personally, I do not think it is a problem if students submit assignments or projects a few days late. If anything, it is less overwhelming for me when submissions are somewhat spread out rather than arriving all at once. I also do not think it is necessarily a problem if some students do not submit every assignment. But I do need to address students' self-identified issue of wanting to do the work but not having the bandwidth and/or motivation to do it without a grade.

Lastly, particularly at the end of the spring semester, there were some students who I was not sure had met the course learning outcomes, which led to some tricky situations and self-doubt on my part. In particular, some students did not submit much work, and what they had done was not particularly good; however, they gave

themselves passing grades in their final self-assessments. This presented me with a challenge: do I trust the students and give them the grade they chose, or is it my job to intervene? I was in a lot of turmoil over this. In cases like this, Sackstein and others recommend having frank conversations with students.¹³ So, I met briefly with each of these students, expressed my concerns, and asked honestly whether they felt they had enough of a handle on the material to pass the course. Each student said they felt conversant with the material and committed to doing some work over the summer to review, so I gave them all the passing grades they had chosen.

Some readers might be thinking: “Of course those students said they were ready to move on! Who is going to hold themselves back?” I am worried about this too. But I believe that kind of mistrust is a byproduct of the grading mindset. An ungraded course is different. In my experience, ungrading creates an environment where students are honest about their shortcomings. I have been amazed by students’ frankness and honesty in their self-assessments. And so maybe I am naïve, but I would like to think that a student in an ungraded course would give themselves a failing grade if they were not ready to move on.

Conclusions and Future Directions

After finishing this one-year experiment with ungrading, I spent the summer of 2024 reflecting on what I learned and thinking about what I would do differently in the future. Writing this article was a big part of that reflection process. I wish I could say that I had arrived at a definite conclusion as to whether ungrading “works,” or that I discovered the perfect way to tweak my model in order to fix all the problems I encountered. Alas, by the final weeks of summer, I still had no idea what I would do for the Fall 2024 semester. Even now, as I make the final round of revisions to this article in the last weeks of the Fall 2024 semester, I remain ambivalent about ungrading. On the one hand, I still believe that traditional points-based grading models fundamentally do not assess learning and can actively harm it. Every time I read the work of progressive educators like Kohn, Stommel, and Morris, I am reminded of the harms of grading, and remain inspired to keep trying different things. On the other hand, if I trust students to assess themselves, then I ought to trust the students who said that my assessment model did not work for them. And, of course, there were the many other issues I described above.

¹³ Sackstein (2015, 109–19).

Ultimately, for the Fall 2024 semester I decided to continue using an alternative assessment model based on gradeless feedback and self-assessment but made some changes that I hoped would address some of the challenges I faced during the 2023–24 academic year. I had not yet finished the Fall 2024 semester when I submitted the final version of this article, and so I cannot provide a comprehensive report on how it went. However, in the interest of sparking ideas for those interested in alternative assessment models, I provide a brief summary of the changes I made and my thoughts about their success in the section that follows.

Changes in Fall 2024

The syllabus statement on assessment and grades I used in Fall 2024 appear in Example 9, and the grade criteria for one of my courses during the Fall 2024 semester appear in Example 10. In order to address the problem of borderline cases at the end of the semester, I added a list of essential tasks that students had to complete in order to earn a C (the minimum passing grade for music majors) and one-on-one conferences with me at the end of the semester to collaboratively decide on final grades. The essential tasks for passing included things like completing all self-assessments in good faith and submitting a final project that meets a minimum set of requirements. In all my courses, the final project is designed to address all the course learning outcomes. Theoretically, a student who completed their final project and submitted the self-assessment assignments should have met the course learning outcomes.

My thinking behind the end-of-semester conferences is that they will allow me to dialogue with students about their grades, which I hope will help students and me feel better about their final grades. In order to prepare for these conferences, I am asking students explicitly to make a case for the final grade that they choose for themselves in their final self-assessment. The prompt for this self-assessment is shown in Example 11. The conferences will give me an opportunity to follow up on students' self-assessments, ask for more details about their learning and why they chose the grade they did, and/or to raise concerns if I feel that their chosen grade is unfair for some reason. By the end of the conference, students and I will have collaboratively chosen the final grade that we both think is fair.

Feedback is an essential part of the learning process. You need some way of knowing if you're making progress and what you still need to work on. This is the point of assessment. You don't need letter grades, points, or percentages to do this. Moreover, studies show that grades harm learning in several ways. As much as possible, I'd like to separate assessment and learning from grades. My goal is for you to forget about grades entirely and focus on learning.

For the time being, though, our entire educational apparatus is built around grades, so we need an equitable way for you to earn a final grade in this course that won't hinder your learning. Below is the system I propose we use for assessment and grades this semester. I'm happy to discuss any concerns you have about this system and to figure out ways we could tweak it to work better for you.

You and I will assess your learning primarily in two ways:

1. Gradeless feedback. I'll give you qualitative feedback on all major assignments. There won't be any points or grades attached to this feedback. In some cases, we'll collaboratively come up with a set of "specifications" for what a successful submission looks like. In these cases, I'll also mark each submission "complete" or "incomplete" according to whether it has met all the specifications. You are encouraged to revise and resubmit all work.
2. Self-assessment. You'll list some goals at the beginning of the semester and complete guided self-assessments at three points in the semester (weeks 5, 10, and 17) focusing on your personal growth and progress toward the learning outcomes. These will help you know if you're on track and identify changes you can make moving forward.

You and I will determine your final grade collaboratively in a short conference during finals week. The point of the conference is not for you to convince me to give you a particular grade. Rather, these conferences are intended to be a conversation about your learning that will help you determine the grade that best represents your learning in the course.

To earn a C, you simply need to complete a list of tasks. By completing those tasks successfully, you will have achieved the course learning outcomes at a passable level. Grades higher than C depend on your self-assessment of your learning. You can make a case for a grade higher than C in your final self-assessment, which you and I will discuss in your conference. If you've met the requirements for a C and can present evidence of learning that you think warrants a higher grade, you'll receive that grade. I reserve the right to suggest a different grade, but you will ultimately receive the grade that we both agree on during your conference.

Example 9

Syllabus statement on assessment and grades I used in Fall 2024.

Grade	Requirements
A	1. All the requirements for C 2. Evidence of deep learning and excellent work
B	1. All the requirements for C 2. Evidence that you went beyond the bare minimum
C	1. Provide feedback to a classmate on <i>each</i> stage of the Exhibition Project 2. Submit a final draft of your poster that meets the specifications 3. Present your poster 4. Submit goals and 3 self-assessments in good faith
D	Evidence of some progress toward the requirements for C
F	No evidence of progress toward the requirements for C

Example 10

Grade criteria for one of my courses in Fall 2024.

Write me a letter in a word document in which you do the following:

1. Tell me about your learning and growth related to music theory and music analysis this semester and how this has been and/or will be relevant to you
2. Explain how you have met each of the course learning outcomes listed below with concrete examples
3. Choose your final letter grade for the course and make a compelling case for why you believe this grade is appropriate based on the quality of your learning and work in the course (see the criteria for final grades in the syllabus)

Example 11

Prompts for the final self-assessment in Fall 2024.

To address the issues that I encountered with missing and late submissions, I added more frequent check-in points for projects that involved peer-assessment. On the due date for each project check-in, students were required to come to class to meet with assigned peer-review groups and give each other feedback on their drafts. If they were not able to attend class on these days, students were required to track down each of their group members and give them feedback outside of class. My hope was that these peer-review days would add a sense of accountability for getting work done on time. As an added bonus, these peer-review sessions should help students develop the valuable skill of providing helpful feedback and also give them an opportunity to see their peers' projects.

Submission rates for project drafts seemed better, although I cannot say for sure that the peer-review sessions were the cause. One piece of evidence that suggests that peer reviews helped is that submissions remained low for smaller assignments without a required peer-review component. Even with the pressure of the peer

reviews, though, some students still never submitted any project drafts, but this also happened with a few students when I used point-based grading systems. I will say that attendance at the peer-review sessions dwindled over the course of the semester; I imagine that many students simply opted to stay home and give their peers feedback asynchronously. Not allowing asynchronous feedback as an option might have helped with attendance at these peer-review sessions.

I still did not grade attendance or participation in any of my courses in Fall 2024, and I continued to have issues with attendance. This was most pronounced in my 8 a.m. course; courses that met later in the day generally had good attendance. In all of my courses, though, a few students missed a significant number of class periods. While attendance is not specifically one of the criteria for a final grade, I will address attendance issues in the final grade conferences.

At the beginning of the semester, I also asked students to decide as a group whether they wanted to include things like attendance and assignment submissions as a part of the final grade criteria. I dedicated one class period at the beginning of the semester to collaboratively creating some course policies. One such policy had to do with late or missing work. I specifically asked students if they wanted missing or late work to impact final grades in some way. Some students did, while others did not. Ultimately, most of my classes decided that assignment submission *could* be a factor for grades higher than C but did not specify a minimum number of submissions for a C. That is, students must discuss the number of assignments they completed and whether they submitted them on time in order to make a case for a grade higher than a C, but there are no specific numerical requirements for the number of assignments that must be submitted on time for each letter grade.

While the adjustments to the assessment model I made in Fall 2024 have helped in some respects, I continued to have many of the same issues that I did during the 2023–24 academic year, and I am still not happy with the model. Attendance and submission rates for smaller assignments in particular became a problem in my course that met at 8 a.m. At one point in the semester, I shared my frustrations with students and asked them for their thoughts on what I could do to address these issues. A common suggestion was to grade attendance in some way. While I value students' suggestions, it is important to keep in mind that this suggestion came from the students who *were* in class that day and attended class consistently. I would thus also need to gather input from students who *did not* attend regularly. For those students for whom attendance was an issue, I will ask them what would have helped them attend class consistently during their grade conference.

Closing Thoughts

As of this writing, I have not yet decided what kind of assessment model I will use in the Spring 2025 semester. In this section, I outline some ideas I am considering.

One option is to continue to tweak the current model—for example, to continue to use gradeless feedback and self-assessment, but add more specific requirements for final grades. One of the reviewers for this article had helpful suggestions in this regard. For instance, to address missing work, I could impose hard deadlines for assigned work, after which students cannot receive feedback and/or count this work toward their final grade. Or, alternatively, I could continue to add more specific requirements for each grade, specifying the maximum number of assignments and/or class periods students can miss and still earn each grade.

Adding more specific requirements for grades in an ungrading model is something I have considered before, but I have at least one concern: the limits one chooses for missing assignments and/or absences will necessarily be arbitrary. Say, for example, that I allow no more than three absences for an A. Is the amount of learning lost by a student that misses four classes significant enough that they ought to earn a lower grade than someone who missed three classes? Put differently, is one class period worth one third of a letter grade? And what if the student who missed four classes did great work? What if their work was better than that of the student who only missed three classes? Part of the benefit of an ungrading model without criteria for final grades is that it allows flexibility for these kinds of nuances. It seems to me that the more specific the requirements for grades become, the more likely it becomes that grades will measure things that are *proxies* for learning. That is, grades stand for the number of classes students attended or the amount of work they did, rather than how much they have learned or grown. This is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, at some point a model like this essentially becomes a form of contract grading.¹⁴ But this shift from assessing learning to assessing tasks completed is something that ought to be articulated clearly to students and decided upon intentionally.

Other alternative assessment models include (among others) standards-based grading and specifications grading.¹⁵ While it is beyond the scope of this article to

¹⁴ As with most forms of alternative assessment, contract grading is a difficult thing to define precisely. It generally involves some sort of list of tasks that students must complete in order to earn a specific final grade. For more on contract grading, see Inoue (2022, 2023) and Melzer et al. (n.d.).

¹⁵ Again, both of these practices vary substantially from person to person. Specifications grading usually involves paring grades with bundles of projects/assignments/etc. that must be completed to a

provide a full consideration of the merits of these and other alternative assessment models, I do think that contract grading, specifications grading, and standards-based models improve upon traditional assessment models in various ways. These models are good compromises and are probably the most realistic options for alternative assessment within the current educational establishment. But, it seems to me that none of these models addresses the deeper concerns raised by Kohn, Stommel, Morris, and many others about the effects that grading can have on motivation, learning, students' ability to assess themselves and be self-directed learners, and so on. Students in a course using contract grading might do a lot of work, but not learn anything. Students in a course using standards-based grading can still lose sight of learning in pursuit of meeting minimum standards for a particular grade. If we are truly concerned about helping students learn and if we believe that the reasons people do things matter, then these are ideas we ought to be concerned about.

All of this leads me, in conclusion, to the possibility of a more radical path forward. As I have reflected on the 2023–24 academic year, I have begun to wonder if some of the issues I encountered were a result of trying to implement ungrading within the educational status quo. Stommel makes a striking claim on this point:

There is nothing ideologically neutral about grades, and there is nothing ideologically neutral about the idea that we can neatly and tidily do away with grades. We can't simply take away grades without re-examining all of our pedagogical approaches.¹⁶

Stommel's "all" is what I want to focus on. I often felt like I was rethinking everything during the 2023–24 academic year, but I have begun to realize how little actually changed about my courses. A visitor to my classroom likely would not have noticed anything particularly different. I removed grades, but almost everything else was the same. Perhaps more importantly, though, I was only one person within a large system. No matter how radically I might rethink assessment in my courses, students will still be taking courses that use traditional assessment models at the same time. As students themselves identified, when only one course makes these kinds of changes, that is the course where corners will be cut. And beyond this, by the time students are in college, they will likely have spent twelve or more years in an educational system steeped in standardized testing, ranking, and grades.

specified minimum standard. In standards-based grading, final grades are tied to the completion of a specific set of standards that specify particular skills and/or knowledge. More information about both of these assessment models is available in Clark and Talbert (2023).

¹⁶ Stommel (2023).

So yes, perhaps ungrading *is* impractical. Perhaps one could even say that it does not work within the current educational system. If this is true, it is because ungrading is fundamentally at odds with the ways that we think about and practice education in the United States. Perhaps the best thing for my students would be to transition to a more practical alternative assessment model. But this does not mean that I am giving up on ungrading.

According to Clark and Talbert, grades as we know them are products of the American university during the nineteenth century.¹⁷ And the timing is no accident. This is when education was becoming industrialized, and we continue to operate on that industrial model today. As Clark and Talbert put it:

[Traditional grading practices] have remained, not because they have stood the test of time and are the logical endpoints of centuries of mindful refinement, but primarily because they are useful—efficient, scalable, and interoperable—particularly so for the large bureaucracies that educational systems have become.¹⁸

Grades are thus tied up with the idea that education can be standardized and mass produced. With the idea that education is a commodity that can be sold for profit. With the idea that knowledge is something that can be deposited neatly from the mind of the teacher into the minds of the students, to borrow Paulo Freire's banking metaphor.¹⁹ And even more troubling, grades are associated with the idea that a college education is only meant for certain types of people. As Cathy Davidson and Christina Katopodis point out, many men who were instrumental in shaping the American university were card-carrying eugenicists.²⁰

Assessment is only one aspect of a much larger conception of education, and there are limits to what a single person can realistically change on their own. But I believe real change can happen if teachers everywhere began interrogating their assessment practices and *all* the other pedagogical practices that are wrapped up in them. Ungrading is not a silver bullet that will fix all that is wrong with education in the United States, but perhaps the end of grading could be the start of something truly transformational. As Morris writes:

17 Clark and Talbert (2023, 13–16); Smallwood (1935).

18 Clark and Talbert (2023, 16).

19 Freire (1970, 58).

20 Davidson and Katopodis (2022, 21–24).

At the foundation of ungrading lies something that should change school entirely: a suggestion that ranking and evaluation, and the concomitant expertise of the ranker or evaluator, is entirely an optional way of viewing things. Ungrading should, when it's done, rearrange the room, placing the teacher in amongst students, dismantling the podium, rewriting textbooks such that the class itself becomes the text, and the rubric for comprehension of that text no less than a steady engagement with one another.²¹

While I am not going to continue using the assessment model described in this article, I hope that my experience will be productive for readers. I am not suggesting that everyone needs to come around to my way of thinking so that I can do what I want. What I *am* suggesting is that the issues I encountered with ungrading might be indicative of something wrong with the educational system, rather than the assessment model. My goal for this article is not to persuade readers to adopt my assessment model, but rather to inspire others to ask questions about how we assess learning and to think about how we could do it differently.

21 Morris (2021).

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Engaging Aural Skills Students with Model-Eliciting Activities

2024 Performance into Practice Student Award Winner

BY AARON GALLIHER

This mixed-methods study explores how using Model-Eliciting Activities (MEAs) in an aural skills classroom can promote student motivation and engagement. MEAs require students to create models to solve progressively complex problems. As students develop and refine their models, they engage in a testing and iteration process that prioritizes learning over final outcomes, which fosters student empowerment. The specific MEA implemented was focused on music transcription skills and used the *MUSIC Inventory of Motivation* survey to assess student motivation and engagement, complemented by follow-up interviews that explain the results of the survey. Many students scored high on this survey and expressed similar results in qualitative follow-up. Additional findings included students expressing excitement for collaboration and benefits to their perceived transcription skills. Overall, the findings suggest that MEAs foster high levels of student motivation and engagement within the aural skills curriculum.



The classroom is buzzing with excitement. Groups are scattered throughout, huddled at desks and listening to different audio files. As audio plays, they talk over each other and crack jokes, seemingly oblivious to the world around them as the teacher walks by. The teacher is available only as a guide to enable students to make their own progress. One group seems particularly talkative, as they argue back and forth.

“We need to start with the rhythm,” Brennan says, staring directly across the table.

“No, we need to find if the melody starts on the first scale degree,” Micah quips back. They are at odds about their first step, as they scribble and erase music notation from the papers in front of them.

These students are transcribing a short musical excerpt written and provided by the teacher, while also documenting and refining their process, a process termed a “Model-Eliciting Activity” (MEA).

Introduction

This article will introduce MEAs, provide guidance on implementing them in an aural skills context, and present preliminary evidence of their effectiveness with student engagement. Robinson and Hullinger explain that engagement means students are motivated to expend effort, time, and energy on academic activities to provide

quality work within a learning environment.¹ In the above scenario, students engage with an MEA designed around transcribing music for an Aural Skills 2 course while writing down their process. Once they complete the transcription and write their guide for doing so, they apply their guide to a second piece of music. While applying their guide to the new piece of music, errors in their transcription process become apparent. They then apply their guide to a third piece and edit their guide as needed. Their teacher is a facilitator, acting as a “guide on the side.”² Because students engage in the content and construct knowledge themselves, they are more likely to remember what they have learned and apply it in the future. MEAs shift student focus from a polished end point to the process required to get to the end point, thereby allowing students to hone their skills while making space for enhanced engagement with both the content and their peers around them.

Model-Eliciting Activities

MEAs, which originated in mathematics education and have been implemented primarily in the STEM disciplines, are a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach designed to foster interest and motivation.³ Rather than following a pre-determined process leading to a pre-determined solution, MEAs allow students to work in collaborative groups in which the process becomes the product itself.⁴ In contrast with instructional approaches wherein students aim for a single correct answer (such as Problem-Based Learning), MEAs prioritize defining an effective process, which often results in no singular correct answer because the focus is on creating a model and outlining the method for arriving at a solution.

MEAs are structured around a realistic scenario in which a “client” provides a problem for the student to solve with their model. A “client” could be any hypothetical person or organization asking the students to accomplish the task given in the activity—for example, a family member, restaurant owner, or local band looking for help with their shows. Students work in groups to explore how to best solve the problem.

Students typically go through an iterative process: discussing approaches, adapting their ideas into a model, refining the model to fit the given problem, and

1 Robinson and Hullinger (2008).

2 King (1993).

3 Diefes-Dux et al. (2008); Lesh and Doerr (2003).

4 Lesh and Doerr (2003); Moore (2008).

then repeating the process by incorporating new input. As a model is created, it will be tested to answer the problem. If it does not solve the problem, groups will evaluate why and refine their model further. If it does work, they will apply their model to a more complex problem to see if it works with a structurally similar scenario, repeating the iterative process throughout the activity.

Designing Model-Eliciting Activities

MEAs are designed and implemented using six guiding principles; Model-Construction, Reality, Self-Assessment, Model Documentation, Model Generalization, and Simple Prototype.⁵ Each principle guides instructors in creating an MEA to help students focus on a process rather than on a product.

According to the Model-Construction principle, the end result of an MEA should rely on students constructing a conceptual model to fully solve the problem. A model is a system of relationships among elements that are then used to describe another system. An MEA may ask for a simple model comprising a set of rules or procedures for students to determine and explain. In music theory, some examples of models may be designing effective ways to use protonotation, a set of instructions for transcription, or a guide for categorizing different styles of music. A model provides a procedure that can answer the problem and be extrapolated to different and more complex problems.

The Reality principle means that a problem in an MEA should be rooted in reality rather than an abstraction or surface-level reality. This is not to say that a student will have experienced the problem, but rather that a student could realistically expect to come across such a problem at some point. In mathematics, this is known as the “watermelon problem.” Students would be unlikely to ever need to purchase 100 watermelons at a time, and therefore a problem asking students to abstractly determine the price of 100 watermelons is not rooted in reality. Students may, however, need to purchase various amounts and kinds of fruit to make drinks for a pool party. In an aural skills classroom, students may be asked to determine an interval to fill in a missing part for a jam session. Intervals may be presented in a textbook and illustrated with examples from a piece a student has performed, but without additional context, this approach makes the concept feel abstract rather than concrete, leaving students unsure of how to apply their understanding of intervals in practical situations.

The Self-Assessment principle means that MEAs typically involve iteration on the

5 Lesh et al. (2000).

model. Students must be able to detect errors in their thinking, compare different ways of thinking within their group, adapt ways of thinking, and assess whether those adaptations were beneficial. A well-designed MEA should provide ways for students to test their models and ideas against multiple similar questions. Often this is done by providing a simple question alongside a more complex version of the same question, in which a simple answer cannot answer both, but a completed model can. As students test their models, they reflect critically on whether the model is generally applicable or requires further refinement.

The fourth principle, Model Documentation, requires students to face a problem in which they refine and iterate their thought process so that the teacher can see the thought process develop, which is why MEAs are often referred to as “thought-revealing activities.”⁶ Learning at this stage is the crux of an MEA, where critical thinking and iteration meet, allowing students to engage in metacognitive practices. In a transcription-based MEA, for example, groups may realize that determining rhythm before meter is more difficult than determining meter first. Their group would then refine their process for transcription and articulate why the change occurred.

Documentation can occur at multiple stages. During the MEA, students can be tasked with planning their process, monitoring the group, or assessing whether the process works. At each stage, the group assesses their model, which reveals their thought processes, resulting in a form of Documentation. After the MEA, groups may present their findings, including why their process was chosen and pitfalls they encountered. Being explicit about their decisions will also reveal thought processes, thus providing another kind of Documentation. Depending on the MEA, different methods for Documentation will be appropriate.

The fifth principle, Generalizability, is important in any model. For a model to be considered generalizable, it should be reusable and work when new information is added. MEAs accomplish this by explicitly asking students to focus on the process they are using rather than the end product or answer. By focusing on process, students understand that the focus is not on getting the correct answer, but rather on understanding *how* to get to that answer. Students may be asked to explain why their answer works, revealing the process behind the answer.

Simple Prototype is the final design principle. For a model to be considered a prototype, it should be as simple as possible but still significant enough to work. If the model is as simple as possible, it will easily adapt to other scenarios, feeding back into the Generalizability principle. If students are given an MEA to create a guide for

6 Stillman et al. (2013).

transcription, that guide should outline the necessary steps so that students will be prepared to tackle similar tasks in the future. Although processes vary, a common framework should illustrate how these skills function. To facilitate this principle, teachers should make sure that an MEA enables students to comprehend overarching concepts. Students then will create models that are as simple as possible.

Motivation and Engagement

Whereas students are typically extrinsically motivated through external validation, such as grades, MEAs' focus on process over product makes them an ideal vehicle for intrinsic motivation.⁷ Just as process is the precursor to product, motivation is the precursor to engagement.⁸ Group work strengthens social bonds and decreases the likelihood of disengagement, while also encouraging creative problem-solving and deeper involvement in the activity. When the focus is on the learning process, extrinsic motivation becomes less significant, allowing intrinsic motivation to flourish.⁹ Chenette argues that aural skills texts focus on content goals rather than learning goals.¹⁰ When content goals are the only basis for assessing students, students are motivated only to fit within that end goal. For example, while students should utilize error detection during a dictation exam, they are graded on the end product, and may not prioritize the error-detection process during the exam in favor of completing the dictation.¹¹

Within the classroom, motivation can be measured through five constructs: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring (MUSIC).¹² eMpowerment is related to autonomy and measures whether a student is in control of their learning.¹³ Classrooms that provide freedom to explore foster eMpowerment, which has been shown to have positive effects not only on motivation but also on academic outcomes such as test scores.¹⁴ Kirk et al. identified benefits in group work where peers are

⁷ Clark et al. (2008).

⁸ Jones (2019).

⁹ Deci and Ryan (2014).

¹⁰ Chenette (2021).

¹¹ Davis (2010).

¹² Jones (2009).

¹³ Deci and Ryan (1991).

¹⁴ Jong (2017).

empowered in their work, as well as the importance of having a teacher dedicated to empowering students, leading to higher motivation.¹⁵

Usefulness means that a student perceives that what they are learning will have utility in their lives.¹⁶ Students are not likely to engage meaningfully in work that they feel has no bearing on their future lives. Instructors must ensure that students understand the Usefulness of the work they are doing, whether this references life after school or their education.

Success is defined by a student's perception that they can be successful, and expect to be successful, in their coursework if they put in the required amount of effort.¹⁷ If a student does not feel as though they can be successful in their work, they will treat it similarly to work not perceived to be useful. In the context of motivation, Success is defined as the *expectation* of success, rather than the actual *achievement* of success, where expectation is directly tied to academic performance.¹⁸ A feeling of Success in the classroom is fostered by demonstrating to students that they will be guided to success if they struggle.

There are two types of Interest, situational and individual.¹⁹ Situational interest is extrinsic, and occurs when a student experiences increased engagement at a specific moment. Engaging methods of structuring learning, such as MEAs, are likely to contribute to situational interest. By contrast, individual interest is intrinsic, and is defined as increased engagement and re-engagement over time. Individual interest occurs when subject matter is intrinsically interesting to the student, outside of factors like visual aids or instructor presentations.

The final aspect of student motivation is Caring, in which students perceive that the instructor cares about student success and well-being.²⁰ Elliot et al. have called for mutual Caring between teachers and students.²¹ As such, they argue that good teaching involves creating a caring community in the classroom, which has benefits

¹⁵ Kirk et al. (2016).

¹⁶ Wigfield and Eccles (2000).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Harackiewicz, Smith, and Priniski (2016).

²⁰ Noddings (1992).

²¹ Elliott et al. (2016).

such as student success and teacher dedication.²² Important factors in increasing a sense of Caring include teacher flexibility, encouraging students to explore and ask questions, and continuous communication.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to determine whether MEAs induce high levels of engagement in undergraduate aural skills students. Results from both quantitative and qualitative data address the question: How do students perceive classroom engagement when Model-Eliciting Activities are used in an aural skills classroom?

Research participants were chosen through non-probability convenience sampling, based on enrollment in an Aural Skills 2 course at a large public university in the United States. 18 students were enrolled in the course, and on the day that the MEA was implemented, 15 were present. The researcher was not the instructor of record for the class. Prior to the MEA, they conducted virtual curiosity journals. During the MEA, the researcher guided students through the activity.

Curiosity Journals

Before implementing a complete MEA, students were given a preparatory assignment called a “curiosity journal,” which asked students to practice transcription independently on three separate occasions using their own chosen music. These journals provided a safe space for students to work without fear of being “wrong,” because their answers were never shared with other students. These journals were also graded on completion rather than accuracy. Each student answered five questions about their chosen pieces:

1. What piece of music am I listening to?
2. Why did I choose this piece?
3. Can I tell the meter(s)? What about the key(s)? What are they? What chord progression do I hear? What are some characteristics of the harmony? Do I recognize any rhythmic segments?
4. Transcribe a short (2-8 measure) section from the piece.
5. How can this piece of music help me to understand pieces that I play in ensembles/applied lessons?

22 Ibarra (2022); Louis, Murphy, and Smylie (2016).

Questions 1 and 2 solicit the name of the piece and ask students to articulate any meaningful connections they may have to the piece, thus encouraging students to take ownership and pride in their work. This sense of ownership and pride fosters eMpowerment, Usefulness, and Interest in their learning. Question 3 asks students to explain some basic features of the piece. By approaching the piece as a musician, they distill basic building blocks through which they can create a process or model for how to do transcription. The model they develop is applied in Question 4. Question 5 attempts to bring the learning that took place during the journaling stage to the content students typically see in their coursework. Students were asked to explicitly draw connections between the journals and the music they play, such as recognizing difficult rhythms or hearing chord progressions. These journals were submitted through a learning management system and any errors made during Questions 3 and 4 were addressed by the researcher through the learning management system comment system.

Data Collection

After completing three curiosity journals over the course of two months and receiving feedback after each, students were given an in-class MEA focused on transcription. In groups of four to five students each, students were given a scenario in which the “client” was a hypothetical student struggling with transcription and looking for help. In this scenario, the hypothetical student explained that they had trouble with transcription, and asked students to create a guide to help them learn how to transcribe. Students were given three newly-composed musical excerpts of increasing complexity and were instructed to develop a guide to transcription along with a transcription of each example. The excerpts students transcribed are shown in Example 1.

Example 1a featured a single melody phrase in a major key, harmonized by a single triad. Students transcribed the phrase and wrote down their process. Once they developed a basic guide, they worked on Example 1b, which was of similar length to Example 1a, but in a minor key, and harmonized by a chord progression instead of a static chord. Groups needed to address the progression and ensure that their model included a way to determine the example’s modality by iterating on their previous guide. Example 1c used a 12-bar blues-like progression, which encouraged students to refine their model further by including a method for recognizing chord progressions and how progressions can provide clues to the melody. Not every group fully transcribed Example 1c due to time constraints. The groups then presented

their guides to the class. During the presentations, students acknowledged that there was not a “correct” order for transcription, emphasizing that it was largely a matter of personal preference. Each group developed their own guide, with only minor differences between them. As one group presented, the other groups observed these differences and used the insights from the presentations to refine and iterate on their own guides, continuing the MEA cycle past the initial activity.



Example 1a

First transcription: Short phrase in C major.



Example 1b

Second transcription: Short phrase in A minor.



Example 1c

Third transcription: Short phrase in a pseudo-12-bar blues.

Following the MEA, quantitative surveys were conducted. Each survey consisted of six-point Likert questions measuring motivation and engagement, selected from the *MUSIC Inventory of Motivation*.²³ The MUSIC model was chosen due to its multifaceted approach to motivation and engagement, and the fact that the survey has been validated by multiple studies in various disciplines, including music.²⁴ Additionally, allowing students to self-report their perceptions is inherently valid, because it does not require the researcher to intervene in the students' learning process (Greene 2015).

Focus Groups and Interviews

After implementing the MEA and gathering data, participants were invited to participate in semi-structured focus groups or interviews to discuss their survey results. Four students participated in one focus group and three students participated in individual interviews.²⁵ There was no overlap between groups, resulting in verbal feedback from seven different students. Questions were generated based on the results of the MUSIC Inventory, and further exploration of topics was encouraged. The semi-structured interview questions were:

1. How has transcription been taught to you in the past?
2. Before this activity, how did you feel about your ability to transcribe music?
3. Have you ever done transcription in a group setting where everyone is collaborating, and how was that different from solo transcription?
4. Did this activity seem useful to you? Why or why not?
5. What aspects of the activity made you feel in control of your learning?
6. What could have been changed in the activity to make you feel that you had more control over your learning?
7. What made you feel successful in the activity?
8. What parts of the group project worked well for you?
9. What parts did not work well for you?

23 Jones (2019). The *MUSIC Inventory of Motivation* is a survey designed to measure each of the five aspects in the MUSIC Model of Motivation.

24 Jones et al. (2022); Jones, Krost, and Jones (2021); Wilkins, Jones, and Rakes (2021); Parkes, Jones, and Wilkins (2017).

25 Five separate times for focus groups were offered based on the schedule for the school of music. Due to constraints on participant schedules, one focus group included four participants, and the subsequent four times had either none or only one sign up. After discussing rescheduling opportunities with participants, one-on-one interviews were conducted to include as many participants as possible.

10. Typically, how mentally engaged do you feel during your aural skills class, and was that different during the MEA?
11. What parts of the MEA made you feel more, less, or about the same level of focus as during a typical class?

Quantitative Findings

A *Shapiro-Wilk* test determined that each factor of motivation from the MUSIC framework was distributed normally except for Caring, which skewed heavily to the top. Further descriptive statistics showed high values for every measure. On a 6-point Likert scale, empowerment ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.76$), Usefulness ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.5$), Success ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 0.9$), Interest ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 0.58$), and Caring ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.35$) all showed levels of motivation nearing the upper limits of the MUSIC Inventory. These statistics are consistent with findings from follow-up interviews and the focus group, and support the hypothesis that aural skills students participating in MEAs experience high engagement and express high scores on the MUSIC Inventory. Within-group comparisons were not possible due to sample size for most distinctions, such as gender and age.

Qualitative Findings

Multiple themes emerged throughout the semi-structured focus group and interviews. Each theme was expressed by three or more students independently. All names are pseudonyms.

Motivation

Throughout the MEA, students felt empowered in their learning and believed that they could accomplish the task at hand. Multiple students mentioned that collaborating with others changed how they approached transcription, with Nina commenting: “Someone’s hearing something different, and we can kind of work it out together.” Jolene, on the other hand, felt more confident in finding the best way to transcribe, because she “didn’t have to turn in my own personal thing, it was other people too,” which reduced pressure and allowed her to explore transcription. Additionally, some students found that the MEA empowered them to focus on their strengths and weaknesses within a group setting. Megan, for example, struggled to hold on to *Do* during exams, but during the MEA reported that she could find *Do* and

“press it the entire time” on a provided electronic keyboard. This helped her identify scale degrees, and prevented her from transposing her transcription erroneously later in the process.

One of the stronger themes was that the MEA was useful to the participants. Students experienced the usefulness of the activity in diverse ways. Megan saw the purpose of the activity as centering “real-life artists who aren’t in college, how they break things down.” She likened the scenario to being outside college, where musicians may not have an expert to fall back on, and would not rely on textbooks. Students found that breaking down the music step-by-step in a manner tailored to their individual needs was more beneficial than following a predetermined process provided directly by their teacher. David remarked that breaking down the steps “helped me remind myself of what the process was.” Transcription had become an automatic activity for David, but during the MEA, he noted that he skipped certain steps in the process, and that he could not articulate what he was doing and why. Being able to articulate the process was important to David as a future educator, because it helped him “approach a student with fundamental music knowledge and help them be able to transcribe music.”

David, Jolene, Megan, and Nina indicated that collaboration facilitated transcription. Nina highlighted that she felt a stronger sense of belonging while working out the process together. David had been paired with the vocal major in the class, and upon noticing that she was able to determine the melody more quickly than others, he started to use the techniques she described. Using techniques learned from others in their group helped students feel that they could be successful and would likely be more successful at transcription in the future. Nina and Jolene commented that having a group made them successful. Jolene had a group that she got along with, “so I think our instructions came out pretty well,” while Nina felt that having a group made the activity more interactive, which “helped me learn concepts better.” In traditional, individual coursework, Jolene struggled to feel successful or interested: “I think if I don’t understand what we’re doing, then it’s easier to just tune out.” In this quote, Jolene highlights the importance of Success being within perceived reach for students to remain engaged. David expressed that being “able to recall the steps in real-time while I’m under evaluation in an exam” would be helpful. Designing a model that he would use in the future increased David’s feelings of Success.

During the MEA, students experienced small breakthroughs, and their model would advance quickly. In the focus group, Rebecca reported that transcription was a major weakness in her musicianship. However, during the MEA she found the opposite

to be true. “I don’t suck at dictation. I’m doing like three of these steps in like the span of a minute.” By breaking down the process, Rebecca was able to see that she was making progress in her transcription skills, instead of focusing on progress still to be made.

Students declared a high level of Interest in the entire activity. Coraline was particularly excited to use small keyboards: “We were still having fun while also trying to figure out what the music even was.” In addition to being, as David mentioned, “something we don’t do normally” to maintain Interest and engagement, Coraline highlighted that the activity was simply fun to do. Interest was also enhanced before the activity, when students transcribed music of their choosing and reflected in their curiosity journals. This activity resulted in high levels of Interest due to general enjoyment. Nina stated that the curiosity journals were where you “pick a song you actually like, and then you just kind of figure it out,” which helped keep her Interest. Nina was more engaged, noting that “it’s more enjoyable this semester ... it’s stuff we’re more familiar with.” This comment also highlighted her increased Interest and engagement with the activity.

The final facet of the MUSIC model, Caring, means that a student feels that their instructor cares about them academically and personally. This is not a theme unique to MEAs, though MEAs provide an ideal vehicle to demonstrate Caring. Group work in a low-stakes environment cultivated Caring in the classroom. Nina articulated the low stakes juxtaposed with what high stakes might cause: “I don’t feel like anyone is going to like, make fun of me.” Because of Caring, Nina felt comfortable exploring and asking questions, both behaviors associated with engagement.

The lack of pressure in the activity was also a contributing factor to Caring. Since students were graded only on participation, they could explore how they were able to transcribe in a way that worked best for them. Rebecca even mentioned that it was not negative to be wrong, that if the instructor “sees something wrong, [they’re] not going to nag me about it, [they’re] going to help me fix it.” Thus, Rebecca felt she could be successful in the activity and the class as a whole, because the instructor cared about their success.

Additionally, several students reported a high level of Caring from their peers. Megan, for example, recalled getting stuck on the instructions, but instead of shutting down, she opened up: “We’re in this class together, we can stick together, we are going to get through it.” The instructor’s level of Caring was less important to Megan than the Caring of their peers. The same was true for Coraline, who was previously afraid of asking questions: “I felt like [a question the student had in class] was kind of dumb,

then someone else would ask and I would feel supported in that way.” Students felt supported by their course instructor and perceived that the instructor wanted them to succeed beyond just getting a passing grade.

Other Noted Benefits

Beyond the individual parts of MUSIC, another common theme was that students simply noticed how others transcribe music. Rebecca, as well as others, recalled thinking, “I never thought of doing that!” when they noticed how other students approached transcription. Nina relied on collaborating; Jolene mentioned the value of working with other students; David used techniques from peers to speed his transcriptions. Each determined a method that worked for them and relied on that process, until they realized that other approaches could also be beneficial through collaboration. David was particularly struck by this, saying, “How they [the vocal student] were able to so quickly write it down was pretty eye-opening.” Collaboration helped students who previously may not have seen themselves as successful.

Students also expressed high levels of Interest in collaboration. Jolene relayed that transcription became easier, because she “got different points of view” through collaboration, which facilitated her understanding. Different perspectives provide a secure environment for students to focus on their learning; about working alone, Megan commented: “It’s like you are leading yourself, and if you don’t know where you are leading yourself, you are leading yourself down a hole.” Megan explained that a self-directed student who has not mastered a concept may reinforce it incorrectly, thus causing more harm than had they not practiced at all.

Collaboration also increases interactivity. Nina was excited about this: “I pick it up better, it’s easier and more interactive. The collaboration, I feel like that’s helped me learn certain concepts better.” She also noted that misunderstandings can arise if group members interpret information differently, so having space to apply their own thoughts and assess which was more correct was helpful. Beyond finding correct answers, these interactions foster critical thinking and enhance understanding.

Improving Transcription Skills

Students consistently reported that their perceived personal transcription abilities improved after engaging in the MEA. Before the MEA, Kristen felt that they could find the beat and could detect simple meters, but noted that the activity helped “on being more confident in it.” David explained that his skills may not have changed,

but that his approach was now more consistent after making the step-by-step guide. Nina benefited from the scenario of helping a student: “I think part of it is when you teach something you have to think about how you do it more... You have to think deeper about it.” She became more confident by creating her own model, instead of being told how others have done it. Finally, in a moment that all teachers look for, Rebecca expressed an epiphany mentioned earlier: “I don’t suck at dictation.” Rebecca previously felt confident in getting the grade, but still felt that she were not skilled in dictation. Creating a model for how to transcribe showed Rebecca that she does indeed have these skills. She also perceives herself to be much better at transcription now than before the activity.

Further Directions

This study is not intended to be an endpoint, but rather a demonstration of how to use MEAs to promote student engagement in music courses. Further pedagogical exploration of MEAs can extend beyond transcription. As Small explains, music is something that a person does rather than a finished musical work.²⁶ MEAs reveal students’ approach to a problem, and as such can be implemented in any unit where students would benefit from a focus on articulating a process, either explicitly or implicitly.

A different MEA might have students create a model to describe music rather than transcribe it. How would a student determine and describe the timbres or textures of a short piece? Further examples may focus on creation and performance. An instructor might have first-semester aural skills students build their own instruments, design a custom notation system for these instruments, compose music using this system, and finally perform compositions on these instruments. Through this project, students may model protonotation, determine intervals, and practice basic composition, all of which deepen their understanding of musical concepts. This hands-on experience not only fosters creativity but also reinforces aural skills, making theoretical concepts more tangible and relevant. Finally, an MEA could focus on categorizing music for a database like IMSLP. In this task, students would create a model to filter music by genre, composer, time period, or difficulty. This encourages students to consider questions such as, “How does one determine the genre of a piece?” Not only does this process foster critical thinking and a deeper understanding of music classification, but it also enhances students’ analytical skills, preparing them for real-world applications in music and beyond.

²⁶ Small (1998).

Conclusion

The findings of this research are important for educators hoping to increase student engagement in the aural skills curriculum. With the ever-increasing pursuit for high engagement in the classroom, MEAs are a useful tool that support motivation, personal and educational growth, and engagement. This study has shown high levels of engagement according to the MUSIC Inventory of motivation, alongside explanations for how MEAs contribute to each of the facets that make up the scale. The design of an MEA mimics reality, so students find usefulness in their work. MEAs create a safe and collaborative environment, enhancing students' perceptions of empathy and support among peers. Additionally, these activities engage students by presenting scenarios that allow them to envision themselves in future roles. This connection not only fosters a sense of belonging, but also sustains students' interest in the subject matter. Finally, although Caring is not inherent to MEAs, MEAs provide a vessel for Caring to occur. Students in this study perceived Caring from both the course instructor and the researcher. Students felt safe to explore and make mistakes, because their instructor and peers would support them in their growth instead of criticizing their errors. These factors combined to contribute to increased student motivation and engagement within the classroom.

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A New Approach to Sight Singing

by Sol Berkowitz; Gabriel Fontrier; Leo Kraft; Perry Goldstein; and Edward Smaldone
Seventh Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2024

Progressive Sight Singing

by Carol Krueger
Fourth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2024

Reviewed by KARIN BUER



A New Approach to Sight Singing, Seventh Edition

In its preface, the seventh edition of *A New Approach to Sight Singing* (hereafter *New Approach*) describes its ultimate learning outcomes as a greater ability to sing at sight and the ability to better imagine the sound of music when looking at its notated form. It is a collection of sight singing and rhythm reading materials meant for undergraduate music majors in the core aural skills sequence. Its 457 pages are spiral bound, and the contents within are sufficiently spaced to allow students to write notes in the margins or between exercises. No electronic version of the text exists. As of August 2024, the textbook costs \$116.25 if purchased directly from the publisher and \$93.00 on Amazon. Considering that the book is meant to be used for the entire aural skills sequence—typically four semesters—the price works out to roughly \$23–\$29 per semester. Students could also opt to purchase a used copy of the book or to use a rental program.¹

Overview and organization

New Approach consists of four main chapters, organized by activity type: Melodies, Rhythm, Duets, and Sing and Play. Each chapter is then divided into sections that progress in difficulty level. All of the chapters (except “Melodies” which has five sections) have four sections that are meant to map onto the four-semester sequence typical of many undergraduate aural skills curricula. The authors rate the difficulty level of the sections as Section I = elementary, Sections II and III = intermediate, and Section IV = advanced.² Therefore, the Section Is of each chapter are meant to be used

¹ For students considering a rental program, they should be made aware that they will need to rent for each semester of the aural skills sequence. Therefore, buying may be more cost-effective.

² Section V of the “Melodies” chapter contains post-tonal material. It can be used simultaneously with

concurrently, during the first semester of aural skills study. Section II of each chapter would be used during the second semester, and so on. This type of organization allows the instructor to easily vary the type of exercises done in class or given as homework.

Included at the end of the textbook is a short chapter entitled “Supplementary Exercises.” These drill-like exercises may be used for warm-ups during or outside of class. A brief preparatory chapter explains lead-sheet notation, provides some suggestions for voicing chords at the piano when reading lead-sheet symbols, and discusses the interpretation of rhythmic notation, particularly swung eighth notes. This newly added chapter reflects the seventh edition’s commitment to including more examples in jazz and popular styles.

Changes from the sixth edition

One of the main goals of the seventh edition of *New Approach* was to expand the musical examples from the sixth edition to reflect a more diverse and inclusive repertoire, beyond Western European art music. To this end, the authors added numerous examples by women and composers of color, new examples in jazz and popular styles, and additional examples in vernacular styles such as Creole and Portuguese fado.³ These newly added examples are interspersed throughout to match the appropriate level of difficulty.

Other changes in the seventh edition include the addition of lead-sheet symbols to many examples, both popular and classical, and an increase in the number of examples that include Roman numerals.⁴ While the harmonic analysis can be helpful for pedagogical purposes, its omission from numerous examples also gives students the opportunity to practice this skill on their own. The “Duets” chapter in particular does not contain any harmonic analysis.

Section IV of all the chapters, or it could be isolated and used for a separate advanced aural skills class.

3 Composers new to the seventh edition include Louise Reichardt, Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Charlotte Sainton Dolby, Edmond Dédé, Franziska Lebrun, Josephine Lang, Chiquinha Gonzaga, Bob Cole, Cy Coleman, Jerome Kern, Jean (“Toots”) Thieleman, Count Basie, Hortense de Beauharnais, Scott Joplin, Corona Schröter, Eubie Blake, Mélanie Bonis, Germaine Tailleferre, Clara Schumann, W. C. Handy, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Francis Johnson, Sydney Lambert, Miles Davis, Joe Garland, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Charlie Parker, Wayne Shorter, Ethel Smyth, Lili Boulanger, Leonard Cohen, Michel Mauléart Monton, Nat Simon, Joseph Kosma, Emilie Mayer, Luiz Bonfá, Consuelo Velázquez, Kenny Dorham, H. T. Burleigh, Bronislaw Kaper, Cole Porter, Alberta Nichols, Stevie Wonder, Nadia Boulanger, and Florence Price, among others.

4 Note: Roman numerals appear above the staves rather than below.

While the “Rhythm” and “Duets” chapters remain unchanged, the “Sing and Play” chapter has been revamped considerably since the last edition. In particular, the piano parts have been simplified. This welcome change will allow students to focus their efforts more specifically on the skills of pitch autonomy, intonation, and rhythmic alignment without getting overly discouraged by any keyboard technique deficiencies—deficiencies which would more appropriately be addressed in a keyboard musicianship class.

Content summary

The core chapters of *New Approach* contain very little prose.⁵ Instead, they consist almost exclusively of musical examples, some of which are author-composed and some of which are pulled from the literature. All examples gradually progress in level of difficulty. Examples from the literature, of which there are approximately 200, are occasionally altered or transposed for pedagogical purposes.⁶

Chapter 1 (“Melodies”) consists of unaccompanied melodies, and at 225 pages out of 432 total, it forms the core of the book. Unlike the other chapters, it includes a short introduction with some general suggestions for sight singing. The introduction echoes what most instructors would cover in class—how to establish the key and tempo, solfège versus scale-degree numbers, conducting patterns, practice tips, etc.—but would nonetheless be beneficial for students to read. The melodies in Section 1 of Chapter 1 are entirely diatonic and feature steps and skips that outline diatonic chords. Harmonies are introduced in a methodical manner (tonic in major, tonic in minor, then in both major and minor: IV, V, ii, V⁷, vii^o, and vi). Instructors may wish to reverse the order and introduce melodies outlining the V chord before those outlining the IV chord, and the textbook allows for that kind of flexibility. Students will get immediate practice in reading many different keys (both major and minor) and clefs (treble, alto, and bass). Rhythms remain fairly straightforward, but students will encounter both simple and compound meters. With the exception of a handful of melodies in cut time, beat values are limited to quarter notes and dotted quarter

5 The beginning of each section includes a brief description of the types of exercises that will be found in that section. Intermittent bullet-pointed statements will alert the reader to upcoming topics (e.g., “The next eight melodies contain skips in the ii chord, in both major and minor...”) or provide additional instructions (e.g., “The next three melodies should be sung as if notated in the treble, alto, and bass clefs in turn...”).

6 Whenever an excerpt is altered, it is indicated in the text.

notes. In Section 2, melodies contain larger leaps and more complex rhythms than in Section 1. Tenor clef is introduced as well as chromatic passing and neighbor tones. The level of difficulty increases quickly to include modulation to closely related keys, secondary dominants, Neapolitan and augmented sixth chords, and finally modal melodies. Section 3 features more chromaticism, more difficult modulations, and a wider variety of rhythmic complexities and phrase structures. Other challenges include leaps to chromatic notes, leaps of sevenths, syncopation, and some modal mixture. The melodies in Section 4 require advanced skills. Students will contend with a variety of complexities including large dissonant leaps, modulation to remote keys, complicated syncopations, irregular and changing meters, modal mixture, and extensive melodic and harmonic chromaticism. Section 5 features post-tonal melodies. It is organized systematically into seven sections, each of which focuses on a specific interval.

Chapter 2 (“Rhythm”) contains unpitched rhythmic exercises, and each of the four sections corresponds roughly with the difficulty levels encountered in the analogous sections of Chapter 1. Unlike the melodies of Chapter 1, however, the rhythms do not include tempo indications, dynamics, or articulations. The authors contend that isolated rhythm practice is not an end in itself, and therefore the lack of interpretive markings was a conscious decision to increase the usefulness of the exercises, e.g., students can perform the same exercise at a variety of tempi. However, the lack of markings may make it more likely that students’ performances will become mechanical, so they should be reminded of the importance of musicality and encouraged to add their own dynamics and phrasing.

Chapter 3 (“Duets”) comprises vocal duets, which can be assigned as homework or performed at sight as an in-class activity. The duets in this chapter allow students to develop important ensemble skills, such as focusing on their own part while listening to another, improved intonation, and rhythmic precision.

Chapter 4 (“Sing and Play”) gives students the chance to practice singing with their own piano accompaniment, thereby increasing their harmonic awareness and rhythmic coordination. These exercises are meant to be prepared in advance.

Discussion

New Approach offers great flexibility to instructors, allowing them to cater activities to individual classes and students. The sheer volume of exercises provides more than enough material to use for both classroom study and individual practice.

The exercises themselves are thoughtfully composed, selected, and arranged, resulting in a methodical and pedagogically sound collection of sight-singing repertoire. The mixture of keys, clefs, and time signatures ensures that students can apply sight singing skills to different contexts. It is also encouraging to see the expansion of styles and composers represented in this edition.

The structure of the textbook lends itself extremely well to a four-semester aural skills sequence. And because the sections are organized by difficulty level and work concurrently across the chapters, instructors have a wide selection of corresponding materials from which they can create a variety of in-class activities or design assignments. The topical index is an added resource for instructors who need to align with written theory classes. Instead of listing items alphabetically, the index is organized by topics (e.g., “skips to chromatic notes,” “syncopation,” “tenor clef,” etc.). It lists the first occurrence of a topic as well as significant occurrences thereafter. In future editions, an expanded topical index that identifies even more occurrences of a topic and also includes more topics (such as modulation) would be a welcome improvement.

New Approach at its essence is a collection of material for sight singing, and as such, its focus is primarily on the music. This characteristic offers both advantages and possible disadvantages. Written explanations are limited, which may keep students’ attention on the exercises themselves. On the other hand, some students may benefit from additional information, such as advice pertaining to the learning process, specific warm-up drills, or suggestions for practice. Instructors who adopt this text will have a lot of flexibility, but they will also need to provide additional context and incorporate scaffolded activities.

New Approach does not have an eBook option, nor does it come with any electronic resources. The publisher suggests their “InQuizitive for Aural Skills” online resource as a supplement, which includes activities, videos, tutorials, and quizzes. However, this resource requires an additional cost and is not directly linked to *New Approach*.



Progressive Sight Singing, Fourth Edition

Carol Krueger’s *Progressive Sight Singing* (4th edition) is designed for undergraduate music majors in the core aural skills sequence, particularly those who enter with very little formal training. In its description, it claims to “provide a step-by-step introduction to the underlying grammar and syntax of musical structure and

prepare students to perceive that structure with both the ear [i.e., dictation skills] and the eye [i.e., sight singing and audiation skills].” With its meticulously crafted organization, well-paced and methodical content, and extensive and accessible online resources, it is likely to achieve that goal. The textbook itself, which is also available as an eBook, is a staggering 790 pages long. In addition to its substantial length, individual pages are densely packed with text and musical exercises. Factor in the wealth of online resources that accompany the textbook, and the result is a mountain of aural skills material.⁷ The cost for the book and its online resources as of August 2024 is \$119.99, which works out to \$30 per semester for a four-semester aural skills sequence. If a student is considering buying a used copy, they should note that throughout the book, there are some workbook-type questions. Though none of the questions are likely to be graded, a used copy may have answers written in.

Overview and organization

Progressive Sight Singing is divided into two main parts, which are designed to be used concurrently throughout the four-semester aural skills sequence. Part I (Chapters 1–26) is devoted entirely to rhythm reading, while Part II (Chapters 1–24) deals with melodic reading. The substantial rhythm reading content found in Part I is one of the book’s many strengths, negating the need for a separate rhythm reading text. In addition, several short preface chapters and appendices contain a wealth of important information for both students and instructors.

The preface “An Introduction to the Music Literary Process” provides insight into Krueger’s pedagogical philosophy and explains the reasoning behind the sequencing of activities found in each chapter. In order to maintain emphasis on *the pattern* as the basic unit of musical meaning (rather than individual pitches or durations), Krueger points to the way we learn language. As such, she breaks down each new skill into three phases, each with its own distinct set of exercises: 1) preparation phase (learning activities center on imitation), 2) symbolic association phase (pitch and rhythm are represented visually with standard music notation), and 3) integration phase (tonal and rhythm patterns are integrated in order to read accurately and fluently).

Another preface, “Building Musicianship and Independence,” and Appendix D “Improvisation,” aside from being great resources for students, offer practical ideas to instructors for class activities that help with skills such as audiation, error

⁷ The book’s companion website (Oxford Learning Link) can be found at www.oup.com/he/krueger4e.

detection, musical memory, and improvisation. Appendix E, “Vertical Harmony/Chord Progressions,” contains a catalogue of 3- to 5-chord progressions (in major and minor modes, diatonic and chromatic) written out in music notation and shown with a variety of voice-leading options. Instructors may find this particularly useful for in-class drilling or when creating dictation exercises or quiz material.

Chapter design

The chapters in *Progressive Sight Singing* each follow the same sequence, which was thoughtfully and intentionally crafted in order to mirror the way we learn language. Krueger describes this sequence as the music literary process—learning sound before sight before theory. Each chapter introduces a single new skill or concept, first in isolation and then integrated with previously learned skills. In general, instructional material (including background information, music theory context, and suggestions for practice drills) precedes the musical exercises themselves. Chapters are further broken down into the following sub-chapters:

- “Building Aural-Oral Skills”: introduces a concept by imitating patterns (learned by ear/by rote), and by doing vocal exercises designed to hear intervals, scales, and chords in relation to a central tonic. Graphic representations of the vocal exercises are available on the Oxford Learning Link companion website and can be displayed for in-class drilling.
- “Symbolic Association”: sounds learned in the first section are translated into musical symbols (learned by sight). This sometimes involves some written exercises, solutions for which can be found on the companion website.⁸
- “Patterns”: these exercises focus on patterns that prepare the eye and ear for reading the new element or skill that is the topic of the chapter. The patterns are reinforced with recordings on the companion website.
- “Exercises”: the culmination of the chapter, these lengthier exercises are either author-composed or taken from classical and folk literature. The majority are solo exercises, but they also include some two-part exercises (for one person or for duet work), canons, and small ensemble exercises (some of which can be done as sing and play exercises).

8 However, in August of 2024, the solutions pages had a notice: “This resource is under construction and will appear here soon.”

- “Dictation and Improvisation Skills”: describes and illustrates dictation procedures and suggests activities for dictation and improvisation, many of which are available on the companion website.

Changes from the third edition

The fourth edition of *Progressive Sight Singing* introduces a few noteworthy changes from the previous edition. It places additional emphasis on dictation and improvisation. To that end, “Dictation and Improvisation Skills” sections (described above) have been added to each chapter, and a new appendix, “Improvisation,” appears near the end of the book. Some new repertoire has been added, and additional videos and recordings have been added to the companion website.

Content summary

Part I: Rhythmic Reading (Chapters 1–26)

In line with the intended audience of the book, the rhythm reading chapters progress at a pace suitable for students with little formal training. However, students who are more advanced at the start of their undergraduate degree will also be appropriately challenged as they incorporate a rhythm syllable system and physical gestures, and integrate rhythm skills with sight singing. Although the chapters do not divide equally among a four-semester sequence, I suggest this possible plan, which takes into account the topics of each chapter and their correspondence with Part II: Chapters 1–5 for semester 1, Chapters 6–12 for semester 2, Chapters 13–19 for semester 3, and Chapters 20–26 for semester 4.

The first three chapters focus on simple meter with a quarter-note beat, and only to the level of the eighth-note division, while Chapter 5 introduces compound meter with a dotted-quarter-note beat up to the eighth-note division. Rests are included from the start so that students learn to read durations and rests simultaneously. Chapter 4 momentarily pauses the introduction of new rhythmic skills, and instead discusses some important terms and symbols (such as dynamics, tempo, articulation, the fermata, etc.), while reinforcing the rhythms from Chapters 1–3. Chapter 4 serves as an important reminder for students to maintain musicality and consider all the markings in the score, not just pitches and rhythms, and its strategic placement near the beginning of Part I helps to set the expectation early.

Chapters 6–12 introduce less common beat values (eighth notes and half notes in simple meter, dotted eighth notes and dotted half notes in compound meter), triplets,

and syncopation. Sixteenth notes make their first appearance, first in Chapter 7 as the division of an eighth-note beat and later in Chapter 12 as the subdivision of a quarter-note beat. To some, this may seem atypical—sixteenth notes are often introduced in the context of a quarter-note beat long before they appear in the context of an eighth-note beat in less common meters. However, by building a strong foundational understanding of the beat and its division before moving on to the subdivision level, Krueger allows students to focus on the physical and aural perception of the metrical structures, without getting hung up on written values.

Chapters 13–19 build upon the skills developed in the previous twelve chapters (more complex syncopations, a wider variety of subdivision patterns in simple meter, triplet patterns with eighth or quarter rests, etc.), and they include another chapter devoted to terms and symbols (Chapter 13). The concepts of subdivision and borrowed divisions are expanded to simple meters with half-note and eighth-note beats, and subdivision in compound meter is finally addressed.

Chapters 20–26 round out the rhythmic reading section with additional subdivisions and borrowed divisions in compound meter. Advanced topics are addressed including irregular divisions of the beat, hemiola, cross-rhythms, asymmetrical meters, and mixed meters.

Part II: Melodic Reading (Chapters 1–24)

Because of their even number and their distribution of topics, the chapters in Part II divide logically among a four-semester sequence: Chapters 1–6 for semester 1, Chapters 7–12 for semester 2, Chapters 13–18 for semester 3, and Chapters 19–24 for semester 4.

The first six chapters build a foundation of diatonic patterns in major and natural minor. Melodies are based on stepwise motion, leaps within the tonic triad, and diatonic intervals that include tonic. The variety of key signatures ensures students learn to read in all keys. Straightforward rhythms (aligning with Chapters 1–3 of the rhythm section) allow students to focus more on the pitch elements as they begin their aural skills training.

Chapters 7–12 include melodic and harmonic minor scales and expand the harmonic implications of the melodies to include V and V⁷. Rhythms become slightly more complex (corresponding through Chapter 12 of the rhythm section).

Chapters 13–18 see the introduction of C clefs (soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone) as well as melodies that outline or imply the subdominant chord. Rhythms match the difficulty level found through Chapter 19 of the rhythm section.

The last six chapters progress in difficulty at a much faster rate than the previous eighteen, and as such, they are quite dense content-wise. For this reason, instructors may consider including Chapters 19 and 20 in semester 3. Chapter 19 covers all the other diatonic triads and seventh chords beyond I, IV, and V7. Chapter 20 sees the start of chromaticism in the form of nonharmonic tones. Chapters 21–23 focus on chromatic harmony, including secondary dominants, modulation to closely- and distantly-related keys, the Neapolitan chord, and mode mixture. The last chapter provides an introduction to diatonic modes. Notably missing from these final chapters are augmented sixth chords, although some progressions can be found at the end of Appendix E.

Electronic resources

One of *Progressive Sight Singing*'s greatest attributes is its electronic resources, available at the Oxford Learning Link: www.oup.com/he/krueger4e. The site contains a wealth of material for both students and instructors. Instructors may be particularly interested in the vocal-pitch exercises and chord progression graphs (which can be displayed for in-class instruction), the additional rhythmic and melodic exercises (which can be used for testing or further drill), and the flash cards and improvisation activities (which can guide class activities). The video tutorials can provide insights for instructors on pedagogical techniques, and they can also give students additional instruction in some important concepts. Recordings (audio and video) can be played directly on the website; all other materials must be downloaded and opened on your computer.

Discussion

Progressive Sight Singing stands out as a thoughtfully-paced and highly comprehensive aural skills text. Krueger draws on her many years of experience teaching musicianship skills and her expertise as a choral educator to curate abundant exercises that can guide students of all backgrounds. For students with no prior formal training, the learning curve in many aural skills classes can be discouragingly steep. *Progressive Sight Singing* offsets this tendency with its carefully managed presentation of new topics and its scaffolded approach to new skills. There is a high level of student support built directly into the text and the website—from the recordings to the tips for practicing to the extensive preparatory exercises—and this, in turn, supports and complements the work of the instructor.

The visual representation of aural concepts (e.g., graphics, charts, dictation shorthand) and the emphasis on physical gestures (see especially the “Rhythm

Demonstrations” and “Tonal Demonstrations” videos on the website) both contribute to the textbook’s student-centered ethos. Concepts are not presented in a singular way. Rather, they are approached from multiple angles in order to reach students who have a variety of learning styles. Likewise, the meticulous organization along with clear and frequent headings leave no doubt, for the student or the instructor, as to which skills are the focus of any given chapter or sub-chapter. One possible drawback of the detailed headings is that students do not get much practice determining on their own whether an excerpt is in simple or compound meter, or whether it is in a major or minor key. (It is not until Chapter 22 that melodies are given without an indication of their mode.)

In terms of flexibility, *Progressive Sight Singing* falls somewhere in the middle. For instance, the preface boasts that instructors can use whichever tonal and rhythm reading systems they prefer.⁹ And indeed, throughout the textbook, moveable-*do* solfège is presented along with scale-degree numbers. In minor modes, *la*-based minor, *do*-based minor, and scale-degree numbers are all provided.¹⁰ Instructors should note, however, that Part I (“Rhythmic Reading”) uses the Takadimi system, and the video demonstrations on the companion website use moveable-*do* solfège and Takadimi syllables. Also, while syllables appear in the preparatory material and some of the online resources, the sight singing and rhythm reading exercises themselves do not include any syllables. Less flexible is some of the other terminology used in the textbook and in the online videos, which demands that the instructor adopt specific pedagogical tools. For example, terms such as “heel tap” and “echo chant” appear in written directions and may be confusing to students unless the instructor also uses those terms and practices the techniques in class.

Though the graduated presentation of material remains one of *Progressive Sight Singing*’s chief strengths, two potential pacing issues may require some adjustments by the instructor. First, sixteenth-note subdivision in compound meter is not introduced until Chapter 19 of Part I (“Rhythmic Reading”), which would fall near the end of the third semester. Not only is this late, but the rhythms within Chapter 19 are quite complex, and so students do not get the incremental lead-up that they experience with other topics. Second, the last five chapters of Part II (“Melodic Reading”) move noticeably faster and contain a greater density of topics and skills than the previous chapters. Since these chapters feature the most advanced material (nonharmonic

9 Appendices A and B provide an overview of the different tonal and rhythm reading systems.

10 The simultaneous use of two and sometimes three tonal reading systems can look a bit clunky, and students will have to take extra care to follow the right part.

tones, chromatic harmonies, modulation, modes), they have the potential to overwhelm students. On the other hand, one might argue that the gradual learning and systematic reinforcement of earlier skills that occurs in Chapters 1–19 will build a strong foundation that allows students to tackle the faster pace of the final few chapters.

Conclusion

A New Approach to Sight Singing and *Progressive Sight Singing* both serve as excellent textbook options for instructors teaching the undergraduate core aural skills sequence, and the most recent editions expand and improve upon their earlier versions. Each offers an abundance of sight singing material which has been carefully selected, created, and arranged. In determining the best fit for a particular class, curriculum, or institution, one may wish to consider some of their fundamental differences.

While *New Approach*'s focus remains squarely on the music itself, *Progressive Sight Singing* combines the musical exercises with a substantial amount of pedagogical material, including electronic resources. Similarly, *New Approach* centers only on sight singing skills, whereas *Progressive Sight Singing*, with its inclusion of dictation exercises and improvisation activities, functions as a more wide-ranging aural skills textbook. As such, *New Approach* may be a more appropriate choice for experienced instructors who appreciate its flexibility and who are able to provide additional instructional support beyond the textbook itself.

Progressive Sight Singing stands out for its robust rhythm content, which rivals its pitch content in terms of organization, pacing, and sheer volume. *New Approach* does indeed include a substantial rhythm chapter, but instructors may still wish to supplement with additional rhythm material. The level of scaffolding also varies considerably between these two textbooks, with *Progressive Sight Singing* offering a highly scaffolded presentation of concepts and *New Approach* remaining more succinct.

Both textbooks, in their own distinct ways, offer many benefits. If you would like a comprehensive aural skills textbook that integrates sight singing and rhythm reading exercises with instructional content and that includes digital resources, *Progressive Sight Singing* fits the bill. If, on the other hand, you are looking for a well-paced, extensive, and varied collection of sight singing material that affords the instructor more flexibility, *A New Approach to Sight Singing* would be an excellent choice.

Improvising Fugue: A Method for Keyboard Artists

By John J. Mortensen

Oxford University Press, 2023, 356 pp., \$135. ISBN: 0197645240

Reviewed by BRYAN ESPINOSA



Introduction: Improvisation, Partimento, and Pedagogy

It is well known that Bach could improvise fugues on subjects given to him on the spot. To the typical modern musician, this may seem like magic and learning to do so is impossible, but this is precisely what John J. Mortensen aims to demystify in *Improvising Fugue: A Method for Keyboard Artists*. He states his big claim in his very first sentence: “This book will show you how to improvise fugues at the keyboard. Eventually.” (xi). While the “eventually” admittedly does a lot of work in that sentence, he lays out a clear path to the goal. First, one must master the recognition, realization, and stylization of partimento (no mean feat!). This includes the memorization of dozens of harmonic patterns (schemata), playable in all keys and hand positions, along with learning common figuration and diminution patterns.¹ Then, with the partimento rules as a guide, one must learn the art of imitation, bicinium, and invertible counterpoint. Only after this is the ability to improvise a fugue even in reach, and then only with a great deal more practice.

Partimento is central to Mortensen’s program, taking up the first five chapters of the book. Although difficult to define because of its broad nature, partimenti generally refer to bass lines used for pedagogical purposes, either extracted from preexisting compositions or made up, for students to learn how to play, figure, and embellish, or even improvise and compose over (Sanguinetti 2007). Partimento and eighteenth-century improvisation go hand in hand, and so it is not unsurprising that the rediscovery and proliferation of research into partimento has led to a renewed interest in eighteenth-century improvisation. Although partimento research began in the early 1990s,² it really

1 These harmonic patterns are called schemata and predate the rediscovery of partimento by nearly a decade (see Gjerdingen 1986). Although the term schema is the term commonly used in the partimento literature (see Sanguinetti 2012), Mortensen avoids this term and consistently refers to these schemata as merely bass motions. This technically conflates two ideas, since the same bass motion may serve more than one schema.

2 The earliest study on partimento may have been Cafiero (1993). For an excellent recent summary of the last thirty years of partimento research, see Cafiero (2020, vii–x).

took off as a research program in 2007 with the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Music Theory* (Vol. 51, No. 1, 2007) dedicated to partimenti and the subsequent publication of *Music in the Galant Style* (Gjerdingen 2007). The next decade saw an explosion of partimento research from the first major monograph on partimento, *The Art of Partimento* (Sanguinetti 2012), to its first doctoral dissertation, “Counterpoint and Partimento: Methods of Teaching Composition in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples” (van Tour 2015), to numerous smaller journal articles and book chapters.

Partimento as pedagogy is slowly permeating the field of music theory, with Peter Schubert calling this an “improvisatory moment” (2017). *Improvising Fugue* must be seen in the context of this moment. Perhaps most significantly, Job IJzerman’s *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento: A New Method Inspired by Old Masters* (2018) is at present the first and only attempt at an undergraduate textbook for the teaching of harmony and counterpoint through partimento practice. In just the past several years, however, there seems to have been a proliferation of scholarly discussion on using improvisation, and specifically partimento, for the teaching of music theory. Michael Callahan’s “Learning tonal counterpoint through keyboard improvisation in the twenty-first century” (2017) advocates for teaching counterpoint through partimento and improvisation. In this very journal, Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska’s “Teaching the Rule of the Octave” (2022) demonstrates how one of the most fundamental partimento rules—The Rule of the Octave—can be used in the aural skills classroom. The third and final part of *Figured bass accompaniment in Europe* (Ticli 2023), titled “Basso Continuo and Partimento as a Pedagogical Tool Then and Now,” has no fewer than six chapters on the topic. And finally, the Improvisation and Pedagogy Interest Groups held a joint session for the 2024 meeting of the Society for Music Theory with seven presentations on the use of improvisation in the undergraduate classroom, one of which explicitly engaged with the partimento tradition.³

Improvising Fugue is the second book by Mortensen, and it is in many ways a sequel to the first: *The Pianist’s Guide to Historic Improvisation* (2020). Still, the book is self-contained and can be understood without familiarity with his earlier work (although he recommends it if one has no prior experience improvising). It is aimed at “the level of an undergraduate conservatory student” (xii), and presumes adequate keyboard skills, knowledge of the basic workings of figured bass, music fundamentals (scales, key signatures, and the like), and the ability to transpose (xii-

3 The interest group meeting was held in Jacksonville, Florida, on November 8, 2024, under the title *Improvisation in/as Pedagogy*. Charles Weaver and Dani Zanuttini-Frank’s presentation, “Solfeggio for Teaching Historical Improvisation,” engaged with the partimento tradition with a focus on solfeggio.

xiii). The work may be thought of in three major sections. Chapters 1–5 cover all aspects of partimento realization. Chapters 6–8 cover various kinds of contrapuntal playing required to improvise a fugue. Chapters 9–16 cover each section of a fugue—exposition, episode, presentation, stretto, pedal point, cadenza, and ending—before a final chapter summing it all up titled “Improvising Fugue.”

Chapters 1–5: Partimento

Chapters 1 through 5 of *Improvising Fugue* form a primer on partimento. Mortensen begins his instruction on partimento with a chapter on the basics: consonances and dissonances, figured bass and chord inversion, and the Rule of the Octave. He eschews the use of Roman numerals, preferring figured bass only.⁴ To refer to scale degrees, he uses Gjerdingen’s notation of circled numbers. This is followed by a second chapter on ten partimenti by Giovanni Furno (1748–1835). One strength of this book is shown right away: following in the partimento tradition itself, it is typical that more of the space on the page is taken up by examples and exercises than by text. Therefore, Chapter 1, which is more explanatory than practical, is only ten pages long, but Chapter 2, which has more exercises than text, is thirty-six pages. Several pages are either exercises or solutions to exercises, and very few pages are more than half text.

Chapters 2 and 4 contain almost all the schemata needed to realize a partimento, and Chapter 3 (on bass diminutions) comes as a brief interlude between these two schema-heavy chapters. The first two of Furno’s ten partimenti only require the knowledge of the Rule of the Octave (covered in Chapter 1), and so Mortensen takes time to demonstrate how to realize and stylize such simple examples at sight. Thus, the first kind of improvised genre learned is the figuration prelude, and it is learned over the first two partimenti.⁵ New schemata are learned as Mortensen progresses through the rest of Furno’s ten partimenti: Cadences, Modulations (*terminazioni di tono*), the Cascade, Ascending 5–6, Descending 7–6, the Circle of Fifths, the Romanesca, the Monte, and the Tied Bass. While Chapter 2 limits itself to Furno’s ten partimenti, Chapter 4 introduces partimenti and other examples from a wide array of other composers to demonstrate the rest of the schemata (all various sequential or chromatic progressions) and provide more opportunities to practice.

4 Avoiding Roman numerals in favor of figured bass is common in both schema theory and partimento studies. In his first book, Mortensen does use Roman numerals, but states this to be a concession (Mortensen 2020, 2).

5 The figuration prelude is also the first type of improvisation in Mortensen (2020).

Reflecting the deeply practical and pedagogical nature of this book, Chapter 5 is merely called “Partimento Practice” and contains forty partimenti progressing in difficulty. They start out as figured basses without any bass diminution or style implications, and they progressively get more challenging. The exercises quickly introduce more diminution, requiring the reader to determine which notes to figure and how. Many of the later exercises feature stylized basses that resemble those of actual compositions. Although imitation is not introduced until the next chapter, there are clearly some partimenti which suggest it (the first is Example 5.7). About halfway through, the basses become unfigured, requiring the reader to fully realize the implications of the bass motions themselves. Mortensen warns: “The skills of partimento must be deeply internalized before going on to further, more difficult areas of study” (83). Once all the bass motions and schemata from the first four chapters are learned, it is the task of the reader to master the skill of recognizing, realizing, and stylizing them in real time.

Chapters 6–8: Partimento and Counterpoint

Once partimento and bass diminutions have been fully mastered, Mortensen progresses to the three types of counterpoint needed to improvise a fugue: imitative counterpoint (Chapter 6), *bicinium* (Chapter 7), and invertible counterpoint (Chapter 8). Many partimenti were written with imitation in mind, and recognizing when a subject can be imitated in the upper voice is an essential aspect of realizing a partimento. Chapter 6 is the first chapter in which one gets the feeling that improvising a fugue might be possible. It begins with simple imitation within a partimento and ends with three partimento fugues. A partimento fugue is a partimento that implies fugal entries at certain points, which must be recognized by the performer. Gratefully, Mortensen provides a worked-out version for each of the partimento fugues. Mostly, these are realized like any other partimento, but with imitation whenever possible. The voices not participating in the imitation simply follow other notes of the schema implied by the bass motion.

Chapter 7 introduces what Mortensen calls *bicinium*, a term that generally refers to two-voice composition in the context of Renaissance and Baroque music, but which he uses more specifically “to denote a brief transitional passage [in two voices]” (173). The idea is straightforward: take a motive or figure and use it over one of the (typically sequential) schemata learned in Chapters 2 and 4. This is relatively simpler than other skills—and ends up being quite fun as well. The same motive or figure can often be

used in a wide variety of schematic contexts, and playing around with ideas quite easily lends itself to short and nice sounding transitional passages in only two voices. There is perhaps one interesting omission, which is acknowledged by the author: he remarks that “passages in two parts are governed by the principles of species counterpoint” but “will not repeat the rules here.” In fact, a knowledge of the rules of species counterpoint is assumed in many passages in this book—such as diminutions in Chapter 3 and suspensions in Chapters 2 and 4. Therefore, one should already be familiar with the basics of consonance and dissonance, passing and neighbor tones, and suspensions and other common figures before attempting Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 rounds out his discussion of counterpoint by relating various schemata which are, in fact, inversions of each other (what he calls *bass motion pairings*). In this way, one can easily tell whether a harmonic progression will be able to be inverted or not—for example, the Cascade, Circle of Fifths, and Tied Bass progressions are all inversions of each other. This concludes the contrapuntal skills required to begin to learn to improvise a fugue.

Chapters 9–16: Improvising Fugue

Mortensen finally introduces the subject of improvising fugue in Chapter 9, “Introduction to Improvised Fugue.” Here, he defines what he means by fugue: it is a contrapuntal work based on a single subject that has most or all of the following: the exposition, episodes, presentations of the subject, the pedal point, the stretto, and the final cadence (206–07). He focuses his historical discussion of fugal improvisation particularly on the *Fugue d’école* (academic fugue) of the nineteenth-century Paris Conservatory, where organ students were expected to improvise a fugue of a subject given to them with only minutes to prepare. As these students were not expected to improvise a countersubject on the spot, Mortensen too waives this requirement for improvising fugue (while also noting that most written fugues, in fact, do not have countersubjects).

The plan of this part of the book is simple. As fugues essentially begin with an exposition and then alternate between episodes and presentations of the subject before concluding with a pedal point and final cadence, with a stretto passage sometimes present, he addresses each of these sections in its own chapter. Chapter 10 summarizes the fugal form and sections by way of providing instruction on improvising a first fugue on a subject by Handel, and then he has a series of chapters on the exposition (Chapter 11), episode (Chapter 12), presentation (Chapter 13), stretto (Chapter 14),

and pedal point, cadenza, and ending (Chapter 15), respectively. The final chapter, “Improvising Fugue,” puts it all together (and also covers a few more advanced topics) to take a subject and turn it into a fully improvised fugue.

Everything in Chapters 9–16 flows naturally from Chapters 1–8, and without mastering the initial skills of playing partimenti, adding diminutions, playing imitative counterpoint where appropriate, improvising appropriate motives over simple sequential schemata (bicinium), and being able to recognize and take advantage of the invertible bass motions, even improvising a simple exposition on a simple subject is impossible. One must also be able to keep the subject in mind and be able to play it in any key and in any voice.

Mortensen provides plenty of examples of worked-out fugues, and one very important point must be kept in mind: improvised fugues are not masterpieces and will (probably) never rise to the level of composed fugues (especially of those by Bach). Mortensen’s examples make excellent use of diminution, motives from the subject, imitation, and invertible counterpoint, but the voices not active in any of these techniques are clearly still just realized partimento. This is really true of any eighteenth-century fugue, but it is more transparent in these improvised fugues.

Conclusion

Mortensen’s *Improvising Fugue* is the first work in a revitalized partimento tradition that attempts to teach fugal improvisation. In fact, it is the first published monograph that provides instruction on how to proceed step-by-step from partimento to a fully improvised work. One delightful aspect of Mortensen’s writing, in keeping with his pedagogical aim, is his use of the second person throughout. His regular use of *you* (and *we*) evokes a sense of him directly providing instruction to his reader. This instructional tone, along with the copious amount of practical material in the book, frequently makes the work feel like a personal lesson rather than a dry theoretical text. A drawback of Mortensen’s book is that it seems to be for a fairly niche audience: those with adequate keyboard skills (at the level of an upper-level conservatory piano student) who wish to use them to learn to improvise a fugue and will moreover commit to the countless hours it takes to master the requisite skills to even begin to improvise fugal sections. This sounds more like piano pedagogy than theory pedagogy; however, I wish to conclude this review with some additional value it has beyond (or even before) learning to improvise fugue.

First, Partimento is a growing field of study at the intersection of music theory, musicology, performance practice, and composition, but given its pedagogical nature there are still surprisingly few modern pedagogical works that attempt to teach it.⁶ The sheer number of examples, clear explanations, and worked-out solutions make *Improvising Fugue* an excellent resource for hands-on learning of partimento, especially for those who already have a basic understanding and want additional practice. The first five chapters are accessible to anyone who wants to learn figured bass and partimento, or who wants additional instruction without having to track down primary sources.

Second, *Improvising Fugue* also provides a much-needed account of how invertible counterpoint and fugue might be approached from a more-historically-grounded perspective. Too often, courses on counterpoint focus too much on species counterpoint (following Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*), which while important for learning counterpoint, does not account for the harmonic structure and flow that the partimento tradition offers. It is difficult to imagine a course on counterpoint using this book, but anyone who teaches such a course should be well-acquainted with it.

Finally, this book demonstrates a deeply *practical* music theory. In a recent chapter in *Cognate Music Theories*, Robert Gjerdingen has argued that knowledge of partimento (“basses to which a performer supplied one or more upper voices to create an improvised keyboard composition”) represents practical—or “artisanal”—knowledge of “a largely unwritten tradition taught through demonstration and repetition of stock musical patterns.”⁷ This echoes Andrew Goldman's more general argument for improvisation as “a way of knowing.”⁸ Improvisation through partimento was indeed one of the key ways of knowing, and learning and being able to teach this artisanal knowledge in the twenty-first century is key to fully appreciating the music of the past. *Improvising Fugue* represents an important step in the advancement of this pedagogical goal.

6 Two notable previous examples include Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento* (2012) and Ijzerman's *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* (2018). *The Art of Partimento* includes over one hundred pages of instruction on how to realize partimento (Chapters 16–21) in addition to an earlier chapter on “The Rules” (Chapter 9). Sanguinetti even has an excellent chapter on the Fugue (Chapter 21), although it is more descriptive than instructive. *Harmony, Counterpoint, Partimento* provides instruction more appropriate for undergraduate music majors.

7 Gjerdingen (2024).

8 Goldman (2016).

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Conference Report

Pedagogy at the Society for Music Theory Annual Conference Jacksonville, Florida, November 7–10, 2024

BY WILLIAM M. MARVIN and JEREMY OROSZ



The 2024 annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory featured a large number of explicitly pedagogy-oriented presentations, in several formats. In addition to a session sponsored by the Pedagogy Interest Group (this year in collaboration with the Improvisation Interest Group), the program included a record number of pedagogy-related poster presentations, a corporate-sponsored session highlighting innovative work in computer-assisted instruction as related to curricular reform, and additional papers related to disability and accessibility.¹ This report summarizes what the co-authors were able to attend, and indicates the breadth and vibrancy of current pedagogical research within the Society.

Posters

At least eight posters presented at the public music theory poster exhibit expressly related to the topic of music theory pedagogy.² Authors focused upon topics ranging from curricular design to detailed outlines of in-class activities for a variety of learning environments. As a convenience to readers of the journal, any materials shared by the authors (via QR code) are included as links in the footnotes below.

Some poster presenters explored progressive approaches to curricular design and assessment that allow students more agency in determining which courses they take and/or what music they study. Wesley Bradford provided an overview of the modular music theory curriculum at his institution (University of Louisiana at Lafayette).³

1 Other sessions at the conference (not reviewed here) included some discussion of music theory pedagogy as well, including, but not limited to, the “Navigating Sensitive Topics” panel sponsored by the Professional Development Committee (chaired by Evan Jones).

2 Four of these papers were presented earlier on the same day at the standard poster session as well. The board of the journal commends the SMT program committee for providing two opportunities for these authors to present this important research.

3 Bradford’s materials are available [here](#).

While many programs have now embraced small core/elective-heavy curricula,⁴ the set of courses from which students may “mix and match” in this iteration stands out as a uniquely promising application of this model—even more so given the emphasis on open-source materials and adoption of standards-based grading. While Bradford’s poster outlined how students may have curricular flexibility *after* completing the first-year core, Jennifer Shafer England’s poster demonstrated how one might allow students choices *within* the first-year sequence. Her “choose your own adventure” approach empowers students to decide which assignments they complete and which types of music they study, even allowing students to complete fewer assignments with a lower maximum possible grade. Students are likewise afforded the opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments until they receive a mark of “satisfactory” (replacing an “unsatisfactory” designation on an earlier submission); though this may sound challenging to implement, Shafer England reported that these measures improve the overall quality of student work and increase student engagement while maintaining a manageable instructor workload.

Other poster authors instead provided a detailed overview of specific classroom activities. Megan Lyons, for one, presented a poster outlining her elaborate “escape room experience” that she creates for her students at the end of the first-year theory sequence.⁵ This activity is not only an enjoyable reward, but also reviews the topics covered throughout the year, demanding knowledge of course content to complete the tasks successfully. Students reportedly find the activity so compelling that sophomores and juniors sometimes return to first-year theory on “escape room day” to watch a new group of students solve the challenges. Meanwhile, Anna Stephan-Robinson’s poster provided the materials and rationale for two complete lesson plans united by a common goal: developing “active listening” skills without reliance upon a musical score.⁶ One lesson, using the “Structural Harmony Listening Worksheet,” emphasizes the importance of hearing the structural centrality of tonic and dominant harmonies. The other, “what do you hear,” uses excerpts without an explicit harmonic progression to focus on listening to other parameters—those that are often underexplored in theory classes.

4 Modular theory curricula have been a regular topic of discussion in theory pedagogy spaces for the past several years. See for example Sayrs’s report (2019, 287) on the second “Pedagogy into Practice” conference.

5 Lyons’s materials are available [here](#).

6 Stephan-Robinson’s materials are available [here](#).

Others still demonstrated through their posters that theory pedagogues can include topics and competencies *through* the classes we teach—even ones that do not clearly fall within the purview of music theory. Michael Buchler’s poster provided a valuable resource for those who teach in the arts or humanities at any public institution in a state with laws that limit the subjects that may be discussed in the classroom. He explained that in the case of Florida’s recent legislation, although instructors are limited in what topics they are permitted to discuss, students face no such limitations. Therefore, simply by asking students the right questions, students may discuss important “disallowed” topics that their professors may not be at liberty to bring up directly. Just as our students need to have the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics, Angela Ripley argued that it is likewise clear that today’s musicians need leadership and entrepreneurial skills to be successful in their careers.⁷ Although not all music students can “fit” a course devoted to honing these skills into an already crowded curriculum, her poster made clear that instructors can indeed incorporate the development of leadership skills into music theory and aural skills courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels, providing a range of activities that, in her words, “serve the dual purpose of engaging students in disciplinary thinking and equipping them with transferable skills.”⁸

Lastly, some presenters discussed experiences in teaching music theory (broadly defined) in settings outside of higher education: respectively, a senior center and a secondary school. J. Daniel Jenkins—a long-time advocate for the value of public music theory⁹—presented a poster about a songwriting course he taught for senior citizens.¹⁰ In this course, he succeeded in teaching a group with no previous musical experience about common formal shapes (12-bar blues, SRDC form, etc.) as scaffolding before collectively composing a song for the class to perform together. Robert Layton Wells introduced a new kinesthetic method for teaching written theory in high school through what he calls “moveable tile boards.”¹¹ His poster showed that a subject often reliant upon drilling and memorization can be enlivened with the added tactile component of movable tiles representing scale degrees, pitch classes, or other musical

7 Ripley provides a link to [this resource](#) on “Student Leadership Competencies.”

8 Ripley (2024).

9 See details in his faculty bio [here](#), and see also his publications, including most especially *The Oxford Handbook of Public Music Theory* (2021) that Jenkins edited.

10 Jenkins’s materials are available [here](#).

11 Wells’s materials are available [here](#).

elements. Such an approach can reinforce concepts including (but not limited to) scales, intervals, North Indian *rāga*, and complementary hexachords. Although both presenters outlined approaches designed for different populations, each is clearly applicable to collegiate/university settings as well. Further, these two posters collectively demonstrate the value of community engagement through pedagogy, making each a welcome contribution to the conference.

Lightning Talks

In a session co-sponsored by the Society's Improvisation and Music Theory Pedagogy Interest Groups, attendees were offered a series of lightning talks on "Improvisation in/as Pedagogy." Topics ranged from jazz pedagogy, through cognition of formal improvisational strategies, to historical improvisation in eighteenth-century pedagogical methodology. The lightning talk is a specialized genre that presents considerable challenges for presenters: given only ten minutes, what presentational strategies will guarantee memorable and usable takeaway materials? The scheduling of seven such talks within a 90-minute session, with introductions and technology transitions, further complicated matters during the session, which felt frantic and hurried throughout. Some of the logistical difficulties could have been alleviated had the organizers collected all audio-visual materials on a single computer rather than transferring laptops and tablets between presenters; additionally, not all presenters were successful in limiting their content or adjusting their presentational style to what could be successfully shared within the allotted time. While many presenters included QR codes on their slides for participants to access for later study, some were flashed so quickly as to render the gesture meaningless.

Stephanie Bilidas workshopped a demonstration of "Teaching the Process of Improvisation through Tap Dance Pedagogy." While it is somewhat risky to ask for audience volunteers within a constrained time slot, Bilidas was successful in bringing the main pedagogical points to the fore: emphasis on self-reflection and immediate repetition can transfer from tap-dance pedagogy to the domain of the aural skills classroom fairly seamlessly.

Nancy Rogers's discussion of "Improvisation, Metacognitive Analysis, and the Music Theory Classroom" provided one of the most successful talks in circumscribing the content to what could be adequately presented within ten minutes. Taking the familiar activity of improvisation within the Schoenbergian sentential paradigm as its basis, the demonstration scaffolded the procedure of constructing the second half of a

presentation, and then an appropriate continuation, while emphasizing discussions of predictability, self-awareness (or lack thereof), and “thinking about thinking” while teaching and enacting improvisation. As a final takeaway, Rogers suggested that we can be assured that we are presenting information and methodologies correctly when the vast majority of our students intuitively know what to do based on that information.

In “Improvisation in the Aural Skills Classroom: Applications of Conversational Solfège,” Ryan Galick presented the ideas of John Feierabend (a former student of Edwin Gordon), and elaborated on a carefully scaffolded methodology by which students can build their aural and music-literacy skills towards improvisation and compositional fluency. The topic clearly required a more expansive format to do full justice to the amount of material, but attendees were referred to the author’s personal website for additional supporting materials.¹² The twelve-step scaffolding offers a helpful framework for designing and introducing a variety of curricular materials, and in a modification of Feierabend’s work, Galick makes a valid claim that it is a mistake to insist on using solmization or rhythmic syllables for real-time improvisational creation.

Two talks emphasized jazz repertoire and pedagogy. In “Intro to Jazz Improv: Achieving Jazz Aesthetic Goals for the Non-Jazz Musician,” Collin Felter insisted that audience members scan the QR code before he began, giving participants enough time to save the code for future reference—well worth the loss of a minute in presentational time! Even so, the presentation moved far too quickly to be absorbed; this was unquestionably a full-length presentation shoehorned into an inadequate time slot. The topic is important, and it is hoped the author will be able to share these materials in more conducive contexts. Ben Geyer utilized jazz pedagogy in non-jazz contexts in his demonstration, “Improvisation Games in Aural Skills: Lessons from Jazz Pedagogy.” Here, he offered heavily scaffolded exercises based on harmonic function theory, but soliciting participants from the audience did not work well within the lightning talk format. Fortunately, his materials were made available to the audience on his personal website.¹³

Two talks presented contrasting approaches to historical improvisatory topics. Philip Duker’s “In Clara’s Footsteps: Scaffolded Exercises in Preluding and Interluding Inspired by Clara Wieck Schumann” resuscitated the historical practice of improvising

¹² <https://www.ryangalik.com/auralskills/#twelvesteps>.

¹³ <http://bengeyer.com/teacher>.

preludes and interludes, a common procedure in nineteenth-century recitals and salon performances. Duker emphasized the classroom implementation and scaffolding of exercises, discussions, demonstrations, and final performances for a module devoted to this activity. Again, this presentation would have benefitted from a longer time slot for fuller effectiveness, but it was clear that Duker's ideas offer useful strategies in helping students conquer initial hurdles of real-time creation. Charles Weaver and Dani Zanuttini-Frank presented on "Solfeggio for Teaching Historical Improvisation." Basing their approach on eighteenth-century solfeggio exercises and pedagogical materials, their contention is that historical pedagogy offers non-keyboard players a methodology for accessing the eighteenth-century partimento tradition. While this may be so, the presentation itself was focused on demonstrating a variety of historical exercises using the historical syllables, and the pedagogical methods employed were underarticulated.

Conventional Papers

Three papers were presented in a session sponsored by the Society's Committee on Disability and Accessibility. The topics are relevant to anyone involved in higher education today: challenges faced by transgender individuals in aural musicianship, the limits and shortcomings of accommodations as provided by ADA officers, and strategies for inclusion related to visually impaired students.

In "Toward Equitable Teaching Practices for Transgender and Genderqueer Aural Skills Students: Voice, Gender, & Belonging," Kellin Tasber and Michael Callahan shared the results of personal experiences as instructors and students, along with the results of a qualitative study of 24 students with Zoom follow-ups for eight of these. The authors' employment of clear slides (with one author who could not be present offering embedded voiced commentary) was effective, and the use of real-time closed-captioning along with the presentation was a model of best-practice inclusive pedagogy. The paper as presented (it was announced as work in progress towards a published version) was exceptionally strong in identifying the considerable challenges that transgender and genderqueer students face in aural curricula that emphasize vocalization, and offered concrete suggestions for accommodations and inclusive strategies. Perhaps the most helpful observations and suggestions were that 1) transgender and genderqueer students are not disabled, but accommodations are an appropriate way to address their needs in aural classes; 2) transgender and genderqueer students are not a monolith, and strategies should be individualized to

particular students' needs; 3) *all* aural skills instructors should be trained in basic vocal pedagogy to better serve students in curricula that have traditionally assessed students' ability to sing accurately and expressively; and finally, 4) voice faculty from one's institution may be able to offer valuable assistance and collaborative opportunities in furthering work with individual students and on curricular considerations.

Evan Ware's paper, "Accommodations' End: Toward Universal Design in Music Theory Assessment," was a wide-ranging and sometimes difficult to follow discussion of the author's attempts to manage the reality of recent increases in ADA-related accommodations for collegiate students. The solutions offered involved a variety of grading strategies derived from research on Universal Design, based on the premise that inclusive design benefits all students, not just those with disabilities. One question lingered after this presentation: how does one distinguish between grading requirements and grading standards within these flexible grading schemes?

In the final paper of this session, "Integrating Inclusive Strategies for Students with Visual Impairments: Examples and Shared Resources from NYU's Curriculum Project," Sarah Loudon reported on best practices implemented at her institution during a recent curricular redesign. Emphasis on how screen reader technology offers interfaces for visually impaired students resulted in concrete suggestions for posting materials using principles of Universal Design. The use of headers in posted slides and handouts, AltText for all visual images, and links to MuseScore files for all musical examples posted are among the suggestions that can be implemented across many institutions and curricula. The presentation also included some brief but informative comments on the translation differences between conventional musical notation and Braille musical notation.

Software-Sponsored Session

Two major software companies, Artusi and Auralia/Musition, were among the corporate sponsors for this year's conference. Their presence in the main conference registration area, along with publishers and booksellers (including W. W. Norton and Oxford University Press, two major publishers in the area of music theory pedagogy), was felt throughout the conference. Auralia/Musition additionally offered a dedicated session entitled "Integrating Global and Popular Music Into the Theory Curriculum." The topic is clearly relevant to the many institutions wrestling with ways to create a more inclusive curriculum that addresses our students' backgrounds and musical interests. The 90-minute session offered presentations by Adem Birson and Trevor

de Clercq, each of whom provided numerous examples of their own curricular materials created in collaboration with the Auralia/Musition software designers. Both presenters made strong cases for the platform, which included a wide variety of expository and assessment methodologies and quiz materials, including ear-training oriented exercises (both dictation and performance), and multiple-choice and short answer questions.

Adem Birson's presentation emphasized a broadly inclusive approach to curricular design: by organizing one's course around theoretical topics (Scales, Rhythm, Instrumentation, Form), it becomes possible to insert units on music from global cultures and to discuss meaningful theoretical concepts within and across those musical repertoires. Birson also discussed the benefits of collaborations with guest lecturers and performers that can be incorporated into one's instruction of these units.¹⁴ Among the many benefits of the curriculum described here is the repeated observation from students that they felt seen when music of their own cultures was included in the curriculum.

Trevor de Clercq's presentation doubled as an advertisement for his new textbook, *The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody, and Form in Commercial Songwriting* (New York: Routledge, 2024). The materials and curricular choices presented here clearly meet a market demand that has long been left out of traditional music theory curricula, and de Clercq defines learning goals with a strong emphasis on basic keyboard facility, rhythmic skills, and an understanding of musical form, with pitch organization placed in a supporting background position.

Workshop

Perhaps surprisingly, a pedagogical highlight of the conference for one of the co-authors of this review was his participation in Megan Long's Peer-Learning Workshop, "A Toolkit for Analyzing Late-Sixteenth Century Polyphony." In the three-hour session, participants went back to school, as it were, engaging with the material as students under a truly inspired and successful instructor. Beginning with hexachordal solmization (or movable-Ut), participants learned to assign syllables and recognize analytically cogent associations based on the hexachordal system and its relationship to musical range and to points of imitation at the fifth above or below, as well as to

¹⁴ Admittedly, this may be dependent on local availability, but Zoom and other live streaming platforms may also provide opportunities for such collaborations in locations where in-person presentations are not possible.

invertible counterpoint at the octave, tenth, or twelfth. Through a combination of expository presentation, group discussion of scores and readings, paired participant discussions followed by group reporting, and guided singing, the content was perfectly calibrated to the available time. Additionally, Prof. Long incorporated carefully placed commentary on how to implement these methods in a variety of pedagogical contexts, including undergraduate core aural skills, 16th- century counterpoint class, and advanced analytic seminars.

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