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## **Seven strategies for enabling student success in the first-year music theory sequence**

**Melissa Hoag, Oakland University**

Music departments are continually plagued by the problem of trying to fit more and more material into a limited number of semesters. This problem is exemplified nowhere better than in music theory curricula, which must thoroughly cover the basics, including music reading and the full range of music theory fundamentals. However, because students are being educated to become professionals in their fields, music theory curricula must also elevate student comprehension to a level that far exceeds the elementary; an understanding that goes well beyond the basics must be secured, including, at minimum, a nuanced grasp of harmony, counterpoint, rhythm and meter, and form. In addition, there is also increasing need to include recent music and other genres, such as jazz, popular music, and musical theater. At many institutions, including my own, all of this learning must occur within four semesters of study.

In addition to incorporating such widely varying levels and types of materials into the music theory curriculum, music theory instructors functioning within the strictures of a four-semester music theory sequence face a related challenge: the cumulative nature of the subject. That is, in order to understand a new concept, students must have mastered previous concepts. Because students come to understand concepts in music theory at different rates of speed, frustration often sets in when it is time to move on to a new topic before every single student has mastered the current topic. The need for balance is paramount: how can we keep the curriculum moving forward so that necessary content is not sacrificed, without leaving behind students for whom music theory poses a real challenge? This is a crucial question for all teachers of music theory, but especially those teaching groups of widely varying abilities, which is the reality at many institutions. Certainly the end result must be the

same for all students: a level of competency that will prepare our students for the future must be achieved.

What has caused me to think about the rigor and pacing of music theory curricula (and the durability of knowledge attained therein) is my reaction, which I can only describe as shock, each time I grade graduate placement exams in music theory. I am amazed by the high percentage of students with music degrees (including recent graduates from accredited universities) who cannot confidently spell scales, intervals, or chords, or perform other seemingly basic tasks.<sup>1</sup> As coordinator of theory at my institution, I feel an immense responsibility to make sure that our students have the skills and confidence required to be well-prepared for any musical avenue they might choose: graduate school, teaching, performing, or some other musical pursuit. It is important that we, as theory instructors, focus on strategies for balancing efficiency and rigor in all of our teaching, but especially in the first year, which I view as the most crucial in determining the strength of a student's foundation.

Before describing seven strategies for increasing the effectiveness of the first-year music theory sequence, I will provide a brief summary of the undergraduate core music theory curriculum at my institution. A placement exam that tests note reading in bass and

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<sup>1</sup> One might argue that students perform poorly on graduate placement exams because they are not concerned with their performance, perhaps assuming that they will not pass no matter what they do, and are sloppy as a result; however, I believe that a lackadaisical attitude should have nothing to do with whether a student can spell a c-sharp harmonic minor scale or a major-minor seventh chord on any given note. These skills should simply be part of the fabric of any musician's musical understanding, and the best assessment for whether they have in fact internalized such fundamental concepts—to say nothing of more advanced concepts!—is not necessarily a final exam given at the end of the semester in which the student has learned these concepts, but something like a graduate placement exam that tests the longevity of these skills.

treble clefs, major and minor key signatures, scales, and simple major, minor, and perfect intervals is given on audition days to prospective first-year students; based on the results of this exam, students may be placed into a seven-week-long fundamentals course that is offered during the summer immediately before the start of the first-year music theory sequence. This fundamentals course is intended for students who have either nonexistent or very weak music-reading skills, and its location in the second summer session serves an important purpose: to feed these students directly into the first-year theory sequence so that as little knowledge as possible is lost between fundamentals and the first semester of theory.<sup>2</sup>

The curriculum proper includes four semesters of required theory and aural skills. The first semester includes a six-week fundamentals introduction, beginning with major and minor scales and key signatures and concluding with seventh-chord spelling and recognition and an introduction to instrumental transposition. (Students who placed into the summer fundamentals class will experience this material for a second time, but at a much faster pace; in our experience, this repetition is a good thing.) The six-week fundamentals unit is followed by a seven-week introduction to figured bass, part writing, and diatonic roman-numeral analysis. The second semester includes harmonic sequences, embellishing tones, period and sentence structure, continuation of diatonic part writing, and part writing and analysis of applied dominant and leading-tone chords.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of a more compressed summer fundamentals option, see Jeffery Gillespie, “Welcome to Theory Camp! More Than Simple Remediation,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, vol. 14 (2000), 47-62. Because most of our students are from the area (and therefore don’t need to worry about moving into dorms early), and because most have full-time jobs in the summer (so it is harder for them to commit to full days of a theory camp-style schedule), the longer session with more frequent short class meetings works better for our students.

<sup>3</sup> Based on my description, it may not sound as though our first-year sequence moves quickly, especially compared to some programs. However, the pacing can pose significant challenges for students who enter our program with a limited background, many of whom are also struggling with general college-preparedness issues—a separate matter that is beyond

The third semester and the beginning of the fourth semester introduce analysis and part writing of more advanced chromatic harmony (review of secondary functions, introduction to modulation, mode mixture, augmented sixths, the Neapolitan, and other chromatic techniques), as well as form beyond the level of phrase and period (binary, ternary, rondo, sonata, and song forms). As there is no currently required semester-long post-1900 analysis course, my colleagues and I felt it was absolutely non-negotiable that we spend at least six weeks on techniques of impressionism, set theory, serialism, and other approaches; consequently, the fourth semester reserves about six weeks for an introduction to music composed after 1900. Reserving nearly half of the fourth semester for analysis of music composed after 1900 means that we cannot extend fundamentals for the whole first semester; this is one reason we feel immense pressure to ensure that students truly attain and retain the fundamental skills introduced within the first six weeks of collegiate music theory.<sup>4</sup>

Below are some of the ways in which I have tried to integrate a wealth of material into our first-year music theory curriculum without compromising student understanding and knowledge retention.

### **1. Reinforce, but don't re-teach.**

Keep students on their toes by requiring them to review through continual assessment.

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the scope of this essay. Additionally, most students on our campus commute from home and hold substantial part-time or full-time jobs outside of school; these factors pose considerable additional challenges for academic success.

<sup>4</sup> Following these four required semesters, three upper-level electives are available: Counterpoint; Post-1900 Analysis; and Form and Analysis, in which we cover large works like the Eroica symphony and a number of songs from *Die Winterreise*, among other significant literature. Students are not currently required to take an upper-level theory elective, so the first four semesters may be all the theory to which our students are exposed during their undergraduate studies.

However, do not coddle students by using class time to continually re-teach concepts that they should be expected to know. I often make the case to my students that, like learning an instrument, learning music theory is not an instant-gratification enterprise: one must practice regularly and exhibit discipline in order to be successful. To this end, we build in reinforcement and extra practice throughout the first year.

The most important example of this is fundamentals, which must be reinforced throughout the music theory sequence, especially if fundamentals are given less than a full semester of study. It is quite easy for students to become lackadaisical with basic skills, like interval recognition and spelling, if they are not continually challenged to sharpen and maintain these skills. This is particularly an issue with intervals of the more challenging variety. To combat students' tendencies to backslide on such skills, we ask students to complete a section of fundamentals on every homework assignment, quiz, midterm and final throughout the first year. Students don't know exactly which skill is going to be featured on the next assessment, but they know they need to brush up on whatever is most challenging for them. Because fundamentals are assumed knowledge after the first half of the first semester (that is, we will not re-teach them during class), these questions go beyond the most basic fundamentals questions. For example, students are likely to be asked to spell seventh chords featuring double flats or sharps on alto or tenor clef, or to spell a series of augmented intervals in alto clef. Such advanced application of fundamental skills ensures that they understand how to figure out these more challenging applications of fundamental knowledge. They must understand the method, as it is unlikely that they will just "know"

intervals that present more advanced problems.<sup>5</sup>

Students must especially be encouraged to retain their skills in the area of chord spelling; once they begin to think within keys for roman-numeral analysis, weaker students can forget how to recognize or spell various triads and seventh chords outside of a key unless they are continually asked to do so. The problem becomes especially evident when chromatic harmony is introduced; if students have not been required to spell chords outside the context of a key while learning diatonic voice-leading and analysis, they are often completely befuddled by applied dominant and leading tone harmonies, to say nothing of more advanced chromatic harmonies. While chord spelling is covered in the fundamentals unit of the first semester of theory, we make a special effort to continue emphasizing isolated chord spelling throughout the second semester of theory specifically so that students are more likely to survive the onslaught of chromaticism. We also craft exercises that ask students to identify and spell V or V7 in various keys without writing in a key signature prior to introducing applied chords.

## **2. Coalesce prior knowledge.**

Craft assignments and projects that focus on newer topics, but also bring together a variety of skills for review and cohesion. One example is our first-semester composition assignment, which is essentially a harmonic progression written in four parts. This is a fairly tame and protracted assignment—it is really only a composition in that students determine the progression, but even that is quite limited at this point. However, the added trick is that the final draft must be arranged for four transposing instruments, and while harmonic

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<sup>5</sup> For a particularly insightful discussion of the pedagogy of teaching intervals, see Leigh VanHandel, “What can Music Theory Pedagogy Learn from Mathematics Pedagogy?” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, Vol. 26, 2012.

progressions and four-part writing are relatively new for students at the end of the first semester, rudimentary instrumental transposition was introduced a few weeks earlier, in the fundamentals unit. Such a project thus requires students to apply instrumental-transposition skills they learned in the fundamentals unit within the context of their composition projects. As expected, these composition projects become more challenging, and have different requirements, as students advance in the curriculum.

In addition to composition projects, short contextual listening projects are regularly assigned in aural skills. Students first complete a guided transcription during class, which they hand in before taking home a written assignment (including the score of the piece they have just transcribed). This take-home assignment asks them to discuss instrumentation, harmonic/melodic features, text painting (if applicable), form, genre, likely composer, and other details pertinent to the piece. Such an assignment encourages students not only to apply their theory knowledge to aural skills, but also to apply the knowledge they are gaining in their history classes. (Incidentally, some time ago, we would post a recording online and send students away to transcribe on their own time, but the advent of music-recognition software like Shazam has curtailed that practice for now, since it enables students to just look up the score.)

### **3. Allow for percolation time.**

Assign homework on a new topic that is lower-stakes in terms of point values; allow for feedback and “percolation time” for a new topic before including it on higher-stakes assessments like quizzes and exams (on our 1000-point grading scale, homework assignments are 25 points, and quizzes are 55 points). We typically introduce new topics at the beginning of the week, assign homework on the new topic due at the beginning of the



following week, and then during the following week students take a timed quiz that features the new skill, along with other topics that need review. At this point students have been living with the new concept for several weeks, and have received feedback on their understanding through a graded homework. Meanwhile, we move on to new topics in intervening weeks, which are treated to the same sort of overlapping percolation time: a low-stakes homework is assigned about a week after a topic is introduced, and then a higher-stakes quiz is given a week or so after students have seen their graded homework and (ideally) worked through any problems related to that topic. Ultimately, all topics will be assessed on the midterm and final, which are much heftier in terms of point values, but percolation time is built in with these assessments as well: a week is reserved for cohesion and review before the midterm and final exams. This allows students to experience even more repetition and “percolation time” on these topics.

#### **4. Implement consistency and rigor.**

Although the point totals for an assignment are fairly low when a skill is new for students, consistency and rigor are paramount in our grading strategies. By “consistency,” I mean that the same assignments and grading rubrics are used across all sections, so that there is no sense that some students have an easy out if they happen to be in one instructor’s section over another. Such consistency also ensures that students have similar knowledge and competencies when they arrive at the next course in the sequence. While this may sound like an obvious point, this type of consistency is far from the norm at many institutions, and what constitutes a passing grade in one section may mean something entirely different for another section of the same course, to say nothing of the actual content covered in each section. Inconsistency of this sort can lead to wildly varying knowledge and skill levels in

subsequent courses, and an overall weakening of what instructors can reasonably ask of students in later courses. I argue that at least a moderate level of consistency is of utmost importance for the benefit of the students and the program as a whole.

By “rigor,” I mean that we are what some might consider to be inflexible on these lower-stakes homework assignments, especially during the earliest stages of study; there is no partial credit, for instance, for a key signature where a sharp is only approximately located where it should be, even if key signatures are brand new for the student. It must be accurate, or it is wrong. This may seem harsh to other faculty and administrators who have never taught music theory, or to newer teachers of music theory (and often seems harsh to entering first-year students), but there is no question as to whether or not a key signature is correct, and particularly in the beginning of their first semester of study, students must understand that they need to be precise in their work.<sup>6</sup> If the instructor allows students to slide on such matters at the beginning of their studies, they will never be able to demand precision. Finally, although we have no graduate assistants, every attempt is made to grade and return work by the next class session so that students can benefit from feedback while they still recall completing the assignment.

##### **5. Use the pre-emptive strike for potentially difficult or intimidating topics.**

For topics that the instructor knows in advance will be difficult or intimidating for students, we implement what I like to call the “pre-emptive strike.” In our first-year theory sequence, for instance, we do not shy away from examples that feature some chromaticism

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<sup>6</sup> Disclaimer: there are, of course, many times, after the fundamentals portion of the curriculum, where gray-area issues are discussed, but introducing grayness into the fundamentals unit is needless, inefficient, and distracting; after all, these are skills that students should have when they *enter* college as music majors!

before chromaticism is officially introduced. Instead, we use these moments to breezily introduce these more advanced concepts. While this might seem a counterintuitive strategy, if handled with care, this practice greatly reduces the pressure and anxiety that weaker students in can feel when confronted with what they see as an intimidating new topic.

Intimidation is frequently problematic when introducing applied chords, for instance, which are the first chromatic harmonies students learn in our theory sequence.<sup>7</sup> In our curriculum, applied chords are introduced at the end of the first year of study, which is something of a pre-emptive strike in itself, as we find that it is imperative to introduce chromatic harmony before the second-year sequence to reduce the perceived intimidating nature of the larger topic of chromaticism. Also, we find that students benefit from repetition of this important topic: while applied chords are introduced at the end of the first year, they are also reviewed at the beginning of the second year.

Here is our method for using the pre-emptive strike for applied chords within the first year: before they are officially introduced, we purposefully create situations where applied chords are encountered starting at the beginning of the second semester. When confronted with an applied chord in a passage we are analyzing in class, we briefly explain what it is and how it works, express enthusiasm for how interesting such chords are, sing or play through the line, and then move on. Each time we engage in one of these breezy explanations, a few more students get it, and the actual introduction of applied chords is less daunting. One can easily apply this technique to topics beyond the first year (for instance, I also gradually introduce the mindset behind basic set theory before it is officially taught).

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<sup>7</sup> Students have, at this point, already composed (and, to a lesser extent, sung) chromatic passing and neighbor tones, so the concept of decorative chromaticism is not new.

Building the pre-emptive strike into graded assessments is simple. For the topic of applied chords, the first step is to make the lead-sheet symbols for applied chords worth one or two bonus points on homework and quizzes, so that students get used to identifying an unknown chromatic chord using the evidence that they have before them instead of doing what many do automatically—which is, of course, to panic. (These opportunities arise during passages where students will otherwise be labeling roman numerals and embellishing tones; we will simply mark the applied chord with an asterisk so that they know that only a lead-sheet symbol is required.) Eventually, the real applied chord label will be worth one or two bonus points. Then, when applied chords are officially introduced in the tenth week of the second semester, they are not as intimidating; by this point, students are generally excited to officially learn about these harmonies, and most importantly, we lose fewer students.

#### **6. Make it relevant.**

Throughout our theory curriculum, instructors regularly incorporate study of works that are currently being performed in band, choral, or orchestral ensembles, so that students can directly apply what they are learning in music theory to music they or their colleagues are currently performing. (We also occasionally require attendance at these performances for students who are not in the ensemble performing the work in question.) While such an enterprise is obviously appropriate for advanced levels of music theory, I would argue that it is even more crucial to incorporate repertoire students are currently performing in ensembles into first-year theory, when students are perhaps at greatest risk of not seeing the bigger picture—of not understanding how the concepts they are learning in music theory apply to music performance. This need not take a great deal of class time; even if all we can manage is to sing some thematic material, identify the intervals in the melody, or complete some

harmonic analysis, incorporating repertoire that has immediate relevance to students' musical experiences greatly helps the importance and applicability of theory and aural skills come alive for students. Where appropriate, we have also incorporated repertoire currently being performed in ensembles into graded aural skills and written theory projects.

A similar approach involves the use of popular music, jazz, and musical theater; but first, a disclaimer on the use of popular music: I would never claim to be attuned to what our students think is hip at any given moment, nor would it occur to me to assume that all of my students have the same tastes when it comes to popular music, because I know from talking to them that this is not the case. Therefore, my rule is simple: if an example is a good representation of what I am trying to teach, I will use it. Students will occasionally groan, as they certainly do when I play Britney Spears's well-worn "Oops, I Did It Again" to demonstrate tonicization of the relative major, but it remains an effective technique nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> Rather than limit my resources by making assumptions about students, I am often surprised by the music that students do or do not know, and they are usually excited to see what I'll use next—even if they occasionally groan or laugh. Here are just a few popular, jazz, and musical-theater examples I use in first-year theory and aural skills, in no particular order:

1. Billy Joel, "Piano Man" (hearing isolated minor seventh chords [note the first chord in the introduction]; the first phrase is also a modified descending 5-6 sequence expanding I-I6, but the actual harmonies are more complex than the standard 5-6 sequence. It works if you focus only on the outer-voice counterpoint [if you do this, it makes an excellent comparison with Beethoven op. 109, I])

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<sup>8</sup> For an extremely practical resource on using popular music in the classroom (along with many more examples), see Ken Stephenson, "Popular Music in the Theory Classroom," *AP Central Teaching Resources*, an online publication of The College Board (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/homepage/36106.html>).

2. The Beatles, “Hey Jude” (contrasting period; V7/IV)
3. Peter Paul and Mary, “Puff the Magic Dragon” (example of I-iii-IV progression harmonizing a descending stepwise line from  $\hat{8}$  [makes an excellent comparison with Brahms’s Symphony no. 4, iii]; it’s also a parallel period, and uses a V/V)
4. Elton John, “Levon” (pedal six-four prolonging tonic)
5. Aretha Franklin, “You Make Me Feel [Like a Natural Woman]” (modified descending 5-6 sequence [compare with the opening of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in C, op. 53, “Waldstein”])
6. Jerome Kern, “All the Things You Are”; Joseph Kosma, “Autumn Leaves”; Bart Howard, “Fly Me to the Moon” (descending-fifths sequences [compare with numerous Vivaldi concerti, but see especially the first episode of *L’Estro Armonico*, Concerto no. 8 in A minor, RV 522])
7. Simon and Garfunkel, “Bridge over Troubled Water,” (cadential six-four; pedal six-four prolonging tonic)
8. Garth Brooks, “Friends in Low Places” (the introduction features an applied leading-tone chord to the supertonic [makes an excellent comparison with Harold Arlen, “Stormy Weather”])
9. The Police, “Every Breath You Take” (deceptive motion)
10. Henry Mancini, “Moon River” (appoggiaturas)
11. Harold Arlen, “Somewhere over the Rainbow” (escape tones)
12. The Beatles, “Oh! Darling,” The Animals, “House of the Rising Sun,” and Aretha Franklin, “I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Loved You)” (compound meter)

Aside from drawing more students in, the use of such examples also demonstrates an extremely important truth that is sometimes lost amid the details of music theory study: that the concepts taught in music theory give students the knowledge and confidence to approach *all* genres of tonal music with confidence—not just the common practice period of tonal composition. Instructors of music theory should go out of their way to make the applicability of theory skills clear to students, especially in the earliest levels of study, as it helps remind students that what they are learning is relevant outside the music theory classroom. And while one can *tell* students that what they are learning is relevant during

every single class meeting, it is most effective to prove this point by demonstration.

## **7. Provide opportunities for extra help.**

Aside from standard office hours, there are often innovative ways to provide extra help for struggling students. For instance, for several years, the music theory area has arranged for one hour of free tutoring per course per week through our campus's Academic Skills Center, so that students enrolled in both theory and aural skills are entitled to two free hours of tutoring per week. Recently, thanks to further assistance from the Academic Skills Center, we have implemented a Supplemental Instruction (SI for short) program for our first-year music theory and aural skills sequence. The SI program, usually reserved for entry-level math and science courses with high fail rates, consists of three hours of out-of-class extra practice sessions taught by an advanced undergraduate student. The advanced undergraduate attends all sessions of the course for which he or she is an SI, and is given detailed lesson plans by the instructor of the course. SI sessions not only offer extra practice and reinforcement of recently covered topics, but also provide continuous drill on fundamentals and other topics introduced earlier in the sequence. These sessions are intended for students with the weakest backgrounds. Thirteen weeks into our first semester of implementation with this program, it is clear that this endeavor is indeed helping our weakest students. (The SI program also provides invaluable experience for advanced theory

students who may be interested in graduate teaching assistantships, as it provides a level of teaching experience that is quite rare at the undergraduate level.)<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite our best efforts, our theory curriculum is a work in progress. Here are several issues that concern me the most:

1. Because the fundamentals portion of the sequence is so compressed, we simply cannot spend a great deal of time on notation—each notational issue is introduced once, but after that we can really only correct it and (if necessary) deduct points for it as we go. We also have made the decision to require students to hand-write most part-writing exercises and compositions, which helps reinforce notational skills. (Occasionally, we will require use of music notation software, so that they also gain some proficiency in that realm.)
2. While I personally would vastly prefer to begin study with species counterpoint instead of four-part writing, we cannot spend enough time on species for it to be meaningful with the number of semesters we currently have. Although four-part writing greatly limits some aspects of counterpoint, like development of melodic writing, for our purposes it functions like a crash course in counterpoint. Species is taught in the upper-level counterpoint class, which can be taken as an elective. Hopefully, in the future, this will be changed.
3. Integrating theory teaching with keyboard instruction is probably the best way to help students understand various concepts in music theory, and we are interested in doing that

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<sup>9</sup>For a detailed discussion of how to go about establishing a full-fledged tutoring center on your campus, and for more on the benefits of peer tutoring, see Jennifer Sterling Snodgrass, “Undergraduate Learning and Teaching ‘In The Trenches’: The Development of a Peer Run Music Tutoring Center” (*Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy Online*, August 2012).



with many of the topics that we teach—for fundamentals, of course, but also for figured bass, sequences, and other topics that are simply made much clearer when a keyboard is in front of the student. Our department does have a separate keyboard curriculum in which students study progressions, idiomatic patterns, and scales, but we long to be able to integrate theory concepts with keyboard concepts in a more immediate fashion. Unfortunately, aside from scheduling issues, our 20-student theory sections cannot effectively utilize the 12-keyboard lab as part of the regular theory curriculum.

It is unrealistic to believe that our students will retain everything that we try to instill in them over a single year of study, but I know that these techniques have helped to improve our success rate. Certainly, students who have progressed to higher levels of music theory, as well as the few graduates from my institution who have taken our graduate placement exam since we changed our curriculum almost five years ago, have shown that our strategies have had a positive effect on our students' knowledge retention. There is another major difference in students who have gone through our curriculum; they share a strong belief that understanding the music is paramount if they are to be able to perform and teach it well. It is my hope that these techniques will help other music theory instructors increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which their theory curricula are structured.

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