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Toward a Modular Theory Class

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I have been teaching college-level music theory since September 1998, at different types of institutions. While no two institutions are alike, there is a similar approach to the undergraduate theory curriculum at most colleges/universities. This proposal is for an alternate structure for music theory and aural skills classes; this may provide a different path for institutions where the traditional approach is not as successful.

At my current institution, a public liberal arts college, I had started grappling with the theory curriculum. Like most institutions, our classes had been designed around the traditional conservatory/college model of two years of basic undergraduate theory. Because of credit limits due to our status as a liberal arts institution, separate aural skills classes could not be created without a major overhaul of the curriculum. Thus, each semester had to somehow fit the two-year written theory model and incorporate aural skills. For a long time (at least 15 years, the time since our last curricular overhaul as the institution shifted from quarters to semesters), this had worked mostly as it does as other institutions, albeit with some large gaps in what could be covered in detail, primarily in the area of aural skills and post-tonal analysis. However, a large turnover in faculty coupled with the long shadow of the financial issues of the 2008 recession showed us that traditional ways of doing things may no longer be effective for an institution of our size, mission, and location. An increasing need for fairness and accountability factored into the

decision as well. Nancy Barry states, “Evaluating music performance in the college music setting has always presented challenges with respect to balancing the subjective, personal nature of artistic performance with the need to maintain some degree of consistency and objectivity in order to grade students fairly,”¹ and this can and should be applied to classroom music instruction as well. Finally, the above recession also made me worry that we were trying to force our students – many of which are first-generation students and from traditionally underserved communities – into a curriculum and way of thinking about music that did not properly address their skills and goals for both career and private music-making. The traditional curriculum, as effective as it is in certain institutions, is designed for students who have had certain advantages in terms of preparation and income. It assumes that the received canon and pedagogical approaches thereof are the only model. Paulo Freire refers to this as the “banking concept” of education, which he describes with the following:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge and processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.²

I wanted to make sure our students were receiving the best possible education for the greatest number of opportunities, and the traditional curriculum, in my estimation,

¹ Nancy H. Barry, “Evaluating Music Performance: Politics, Pitfalls, and Successful Practices.” *College Music Symposium*, vol. 49/50 (2009/2010), 249.

² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2005, 72.

lacked completeness and effectiveness in that regard. If we as a discipline believe in the agency of our students, we must constantly be re-evaluating what we are teaching.

A variety of circumstances (a family illness, a research trip) meant that I would lose preparation time before the semester began. This, coupled with the above concerns, inspired me to reorganize the class around the idea of three or four modules, with the final grade as the average of the module grades. This was a change from the cumulative grading system I had been using my entire academic career.

I broke the semester into four equal-length sessions (two before Spring Break, two after), and designed the modules. Since this was Theory II, the students had already experienced the fundamentals of notation and rhythm, intervals, triads and seventh chords, basic Roman numeral identification, and 1st, 2nd, and 4th species counterpoint. Each module was given a theme. Module One focused on placing the principles of counterpoint in a four-part, tonal context, with particular concentration on the dominant-tonic relationship. Module Two expanded the harmonic palette to include predominant chords (ii/IV), leading-tone chords, and second-inversion chords. Module Three shifted back to the horizontal, concentrating on phrase development, embellishing tones, and melodic sequences. Module Four introduced chromatic harmony, with a focus on secondary dominant and leading-tone chords and tonicization. The literature covered was from the era of the standard repertoire (1650 – 1900), with some inclusion of American popular music from Tin Pan Alley and the Jazz era. I then created lists of learning outcomes for each module (available in Appendix 1). Table 1 shows an outline of the semester.

Table 1. Semester Outline

Module	Theme	<i>Musician's Guide</i> (Clendinning/Marvin 2 nd ed.) Chapters
1	Modality to Tonality	11, 12
2	Expanding the Harmonic Palette	13, 14, 15, 17
3	Melodic Issues	16, 18, 19
4	Toward Chromaticism	20, 21

Given these four modules, assignments, appropriate lectures, scores and supporting materials, aural skills expectations (melodic and harmonic dictation requirements, melodies), and assessment became the focus of my energies. The key to organizing the assignments was to balance necessary rigor with the desire to not be too cumbersome, given that the students had other classes (and were likely double majors). I settled on eight assignments per module, with half from the workbook, two from volume two of *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills*, and two MacGamut assignments. Correspondences between assignments and skills/concepts for mastery are shown in Appendix 2. The goal was to keep the assignments relevant and reasonably short, as much for me as for the students; grading one page of thirty-plus seventh chords is tedious, and grading fifteen or thirty or more of them can induce a condition similar to highway hypnosis, where you see mistakes but do not recognize them as such out of fatigue. I also wanted to choose assignments that would reflect the outcomes selected (usually just one or two of the module outcomes) and reinforce the concepts under discussion. Students are encouraged to ask *why* we do what we do; this same question

was on my mind as I built the assignments. I finally wanted to choose assignments that could give the students the most “bang for the buck” – i.e., reinforce the skills that were most transferable to their ensembles and applied lessons. This meant less part-writing and more analysis, less high-pressure dictation and more transcription, and certainly more error detection.

Assessment proved to be the most interesting portion of the development. I had long thought that giving traditional letter grades obscured the amount of learning being done (or not being done), since students were targeting a number or letter and were thus less concerned about retention beyond the examination (as shown by the near-universal question “Is this going to be on the test?”). I decided that the shift in organization could also be used as a reason to shift away (at least partially) from traditional letter/percentage grading. The eight assignments in each unit were to be graded on a pass/fail basis, with passing here defined as getting 70% of the answers correct in situations where an answer was either correct or incorrect, or showing an understanding of the proper application of the concept under evaluation in other situations. To pass a module, the student had to turn in six of the eight assignments in the module; the final grade for the module was calculated by the following formula:

A: pass 7/8 assignments and score 45/50 on each quiz
OR

Pass 8/8 assignments and score 40/50 on each quiz

B: pass 6/8 assignments and score 40/50 on each quiz
OR

Pass 7/8 assignments and score 35/50 on each quiz

C: pass 5/8 assignments and score 35/50 on each quiz
OR

Pass 6/8 assignments and score 30/50 on each quiz

D: pass 4/8 assignments and score 30/50 on each quiz
OR

Pass 5/8 assignments and score 25/50 on each quiz

F: Failure to meet minimum requirements for D

Quizzes and aural skills quizzes were on a 50-point scale, and the final examination was a 200-point take-home exam. From a grading standpoint, the final examination took up the same numerical value as a fifth module, providing the glue that connected the four modules into a cohesive whole.

In keeping with this idea. I had hoped that the removal of numbers from the equation, when coupled with the new organizational system, would allow students to concentrate more on learning the concepts, but a mid-term evaluation showed that first-year students *missed* the numbers. Perhaps this is a holdover from their days in the K-12 classroom, where (sadly) non-stop quantitative assessment of materials is standard practice at most institutions. Perhaps it was a desire to see the grading rubrics fine-tuned so that the students could have a better understanding of exactly *what* they had missed and *why* it affected the grading as it did. For whatever reasons, the students themselves said that it was easier to keep track of grades with numbers instead of checkmarks. Regardless of the reason, after Spring Break I resumed grading each assignment on a ten-point scale.

Bernard Bull and Scott Warnock have shown that frequent *assessments* are vital for feedback and student learning³, but in my experience large examinations often work *against* student learning, as the focus shifts to retaining knowledge just long enough to pass the test, with no larger sense of connections or retention. I decided to make the final exam a take-home exam, since this approach to assessment encourages students to utilize

³ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/frequent-low-stakes-grading-assessment-for-communication-confidence/>

their knowledge and skills in a context similar to what they will do as music professionals. Professional musicians, whether teachers, performers, conductors, or composers, must learn to approach their practicing, score study, and creation in a self-directed manner and in private, not in an artificial, timed environment. Likewise, those students who were going on to careers in education or therapy would benefit from a more thoughtful and thorough approach to analysis, as opposed to the “cramming” that usually accompanies major finals, since this approach will presumably allow the knowledge to stick with the student beyond the time of assessment. Those students pursuing graduate work in theory, composition, or musicology would also benefit from thinking of analysis and theory as a holistic part of musicianship, rather than something that you have to do to get a degree. I also made the final an *oral* exam, giving the students the chance to answer questions in a conversational setting. On this exam, the students received a figured bass to realize on paper (since this would incorporate voice-leading, secondary dominants/leading-tone chords, and other relevant topics) as well as two scores – “O Isis und Osiris” from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, and one piece from Bach’s *Clavier-Büchlein vor Anna Magdalena Bach* (a different work for each student). In addition, the students, during their scheduled final examination meeting with me, would do sight-singing and listening/dictation. The students received a rubric, so that they would (a) have a better sense of what was expected of them and (b) feel more comfortable and conversational with the materials. Since we had been working on sight-singing and dictation on a regular basis, and since the examples chosen for sight-singing and dictation were developed based on what was actually covered in class rather than a beginning-of-the-semester abstraction, the students felt they had been able to practice skills more and thus also felt

less pressure to try to do all the groundwork in the two weeks leading to the exam. The oral examinations were well received, with students saying the format put less pressure on them and allowed them to think in terms of the music rather than their grade.

One possible danger with this approach is the possibility for academic dishonesty. Part of that was addressed by each student having a different work from the *Clavier-Büchlein*. I also had found several online analyses of the Mozart, and had them ready as a reference in case I sensed the student had copied someone else's work. I further reminded them of the college's policy on academic honesty, and appealed to the rapport we had built over the course of the semester. To my knowledge, no one cheated on this examination.

Several students remarked that the second semester had a better flow than the first, and student evaluations of the course showed similar to better numbers as compared to the previous semester. The assessments and quizzes on harmonic progression and function especially showed an improvement, with the Spring 2013 average quiz grade for the comparable portion of the class 85% and the Spring 2014 average quiz grade 88%. At the end of the semester, I asked the students if they would like to return to a more traditional plan for the next semester, and of the eleven students, every one of them said they preferred the approach from the just-completed semester to the more traditional system. The multiple assessment-related activities were accepted well; this is in line with research by Thomas Goolsby, who has examined different types of assessment in applied

lesson and ensemble situations.⁴ Since the students are used to multiple assessment instruments and approaches, it made sense to include a diversity of techniques.

Since the change was received well, the new system was implemented again the next academic year. Fall 2014 was set up according to the same parameters, with some small changes. Instead of eight assignments, there were ten per module. I returned to pass/fail grading on assignments, and this was accepted by the students this semester (with several students saying that, upon reflection, they did prefer pass-fail to numerical grading on assignments). Spring 2015 brought a reduction in the number of modules from four to three; this better connected the concepts of harmonic progression and nascent chromaticism. Grades and retention increased in the sophomores, and although the freshman class was somewhat smaller than in recent years, those students who did stay in the program showed higher-than-average grades and a greater willingness to both do the assignments and take part in classroom discussion.

The classes as they are constituted right now are not entirely modular. There are some traditional elements, such as the overall order of concepts (tied to the textbook), the mixing of assignments and quizzes, and the use of a final examination. A truly modular class would be designed to allow the students to pass each module at their own speed; right now, given the constraints of scheduling and resources, this cannot be done. This process has, however, encouraged me to begin a much larger-scale approach to revising our theory curriculum, which might allow for a greater flexibility in terms of completion of both individual classes and the degree. I am currently planning a system in which there are four separate half-semester classes (based around Rhythm, Melody, Harmony, and

⁴ Thomas W. Goolsby, "Assessment in Instrumental Music." *Music Educators Journal*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1999, 31-35+50.

Form) for students in the earlier stages of college and four half-semester classes aligned with various topics (such as Pre-Tonal and Post-Tonal Analysis, Analysis of Popular Music, Analysis of Non-Western Music, Analysis of Art Song, etc.) for upper-division students. These revisions will allow greater flexibility for disciplinary and student interest while still providing a solid framework in music theory and analysis. Each course will also be modular in and of itself; eventually, the final exam will be replaced by two to four end-of-module quizzes (present right now, but in less substantive forms), and “passing” a class will consist of passing a majority of the modules within the class.

Furthermore, this new system should allow a professor to get away, if s/he so desires, from using textbooks. I have used many wonderful textbooks in my teaching career (including the aforementioned *Musician's Guide*), but as textbooks and ancillary materials become more and more expensive, I fear the discipline will price students out. College in general is an expensive proposition these days; music as a discipline often requires additional fees for lessons, instrument rentals, etc., and if we as a discipline do not do what we can to rein in student costs, no one but the wealthiest students will be able to take part in our discipline.

Early feedback indicates that the change in approach has increased student learning. Over the course of now three semesters, one with a more traditional structure and two with the quasi-modular approach, final exam scores from one year to the next were higher (Spring 2013 – 90%; Spring 2014 – 90.5%; Spring 2015 – 93%). The next steps are to apply it across an entire theory curriculum, to adjust assignments to reflect pieces on which the students are working in their ensembles and applied lessons, and to apprise readers on how things develop via my blog (walkinbrain.wordpress.com) and my

Twitter feed (@WesFlinn). All indications are that this has greatly benefitted my students, and that is the single best reason for the switch.

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Appendix 1. Skills/Concepts Lists for each module

SKILLS/CONCEPTS FOR MASTERY – MUS 1102, UNIT 1

Written/Analytical:

1. Identification of different types of motion (parallel, contrary, similar, oblique, repetition) between two voices
2. Understanding of and ability to write good bass and soprano lines according to generally accepted tonal guidelines
3. Understanding of and ability to write melodic embellishments in chorale textures
4. Understanding of the following voice-leading concepts: proper notation, range, spacing, voice crossing, and doubling
5. Understanding of and ability to write a basic phrase (T-D or T-D-T) in four parts with good voice leading and proper cadence type (PAC, IAC, HC)

Aural/Sight-Singing:

1. Ability to sing simple phrases in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
2. Ability to perform rhythms in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
3. Ability to hear and notate melodic lines and bass lines in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
4. Ability to hear and identify tonic or dominant harmonic functions
5. Ability to hear and identify different authentic and half cadences

ASSIGNMENTS (with due dates)

11.1, 11.2	1/22
11.3 – 11.5	1/24
MacGamut 1 (AI 10)	1/24
CL 11.2	1/27
12.1 – 12.3	1/31
12.4 – 12.6 (part 1)	2/3
CL 12. 1 (1-10)	2/5
MacGamut 2 (AI 11, RD 12)	2/7
WRITTEN QUIZ 1	2/7
AURAL SKILLS QUIZ 1	2/3, 2/4, 2/5 (sign up)

SKILLS/CONCEPTS FOR MASTERY – MUS 1102, UNIT 2

Written/Analytical:

1. Understanding of and ability to write V_7 chords in all positions in four parts with good contextual voice leading
2. Understanding of and ability to write ii/ii^o and IV/iv chords in all positions in four parts with good contextual voice leading
3. Understanding of and ability to write vii^o_6 , vii^{\flat}_7 , and vii^o_7 chords in all positions in four parts with good contextual voice leading
4. Understanding of and ability to write second-inversion (6/4) chords in various contexts (cadential, neighboring, arpeggiating, passing)
5. Understanding of and ability to write a basic phrase (T-PD-D or T-PD-D-T) in four parts with good contextual voice leading

Aural/Sight-Singing:

6. Ability to sing simple phrases in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
7. Ability to perform rhythms in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
8. Ability to hear and notate melodic lines and bass lines in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
9. Ability to hear and identify tonic, predominant, and dominant harmonic functions (I/i , ii/ii^o , IV/iv , V , V_7 , vii^o_6 , vii^{\flat}_7 , vii^o_7)
10. Ability to hear and identify second-inversion (6/4) chords in various contexts (cadential, neighboring, arpeggiating, passing)

ASSIGNMENTS (with due dates)

13.2, 13.5, 13.6	2/14
MacGamut 3 (AI 12, HD 1-2, AC 11)	2/17
14.2, 14.3, 14.4	2/19
CL 13.2, 14.1	2/21
15.1, 15.2, 15.4	2/28
17.1, 17.3, 17.4	3/3
CL 15.3, 17.3	3/5
MacGamut 4 (RD 13-14, MD 7-9, HD 3-5, AC 12-14)	3/7
WRITTEN QUIZ 2	3/7
AURAL SKILLS QUIZ 3	3/5 (sign up)

SKILLS/CONCEPTS FOR MASTERY – MUS 1102, UNIT 3

Written/Analytical:

1. Understanding of and ability to write and identify embellishing tones
2. Understanding of phrase analysis and phrase, sentence, and period structure
3. Understanding of and ability to demonstrate various motivic transformations (inversion, augmentation, diminution, fragmentation, intervallic expansion and contraction, interpolation)
4. Understanding of hypermeter
5. Understanding of and ability to write and identify various sequential techniques

Aural/Sight-Singing:

6. Ability to sing simple phrases in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
7. Ability to perform rhythms in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
8. Ability to hear and notate melodic lines and bass lines in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
9. Ability to hear and identify phrase structures and harmonic functions
10. Ability to hear and identify melodic transformation techniques

ASSIGNMENTS (with due dates)

16.1, 16.3	3/21
CL 16.2	3/24
MacGamut 5 (RD 15, HD 6, AC 15)	3/26
18.1, 18.3 (I)	3/31

18.5, 18.6	4/2
19.1, 19.4	4/7
CL 18.1, 18.2, 18.14, 19.6	4/9
MacGamut 6 (MD 10, HD 7, AC 16)	4/11
WRITTEN QUIZ 3	4/11
AURAL SKILLS QUIZ 3	4/9 (sign up)

SKILLS/CONCEPTS FOR MASTERY – MUS 1102, UNIT 4

Written/Analytical:

1. Understanding of and ability to write and identify secondary dominant chords
2. Understanding of and ability to write and identify secondary leading-tone chords
3. Understanding of and ability to identify tonicization of the dominant/relative major
4. Understanding of and ability to identify tonicization of other scale degrees
5. Understanding of and ability to write and identify various chromatic sequential techniques

Aural/Sight-Singing:

6. Ability to sing simple phrases in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
7. Ability to perform rhythms in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
8. Ability to hear and notate melodic lines and bass lines in simple or compound meter and duple, triple, or quadruple signatures
9. Ability to hear and identify secondary-function chords
10. Ability to hear and identify tonicizations

ASSIGNMENTS (with due dates)

20.1, 20.2	4/18
20.3, 20.4	4/21

MacGamut 5 (MD 11, HD 8)	4/21
CL 20.8	4/23
21.1, 21.2, 21.3	4/25
21.4, 21.5, 21.6	4/28
CL 21.1	4/30
MacGamut 6 (MD 12, HD 9)	5/2
WRITTEN QUIZ 4	4/30
AURAL SKILLS QUIZ 4	4/29 – 30 (sign up)

Appendix 2. Alignment of assignments with skills/concepts for mastery

Unit 1:

Skill/Concept	Assignment
Written/Analytical 1	11.1
Written/Analytical 2	11.2, 11.3
Written/Analytical 3	11.4, 11.5
Written/Analytical 4	12.1 – 12.3
Written/Analytical 5	12.4 – 12.6
Aural/Sight-Singing 6	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 7	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 8	CL 11.2
Aural/Sight-Singing 9	MacGamut 1, 2
Aural/Sight-Singing 10	CL 12.1

Unit 2:

Skill/Concept	Assignment
Written/Analytical 1	13.2
Written/Analytical 2	13.5

Written/Analytical 3	17.1, 17.3
Written/Analytical 4	14.2, 14.3, 14.4
Written/Analytical 5	15.1, 15.2, 17.4
Aural/Sight-Singing 6	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 7	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 8	CL assignments, MacGamut 3, 4
Aural/Sight-Singing 9	CL 13.2, 15.3, 17.3
Aural/Sight-Singing 10	CL 14.1

Unit 3:

Skill/Concept	Assignment
Written/Analytical 1	16.1, 16.3
Written/Analytical 2	18.1
Written/Analytical 3	18.3, 18.5
Written/Analytical 4	18.6
Written/Analytical 5	19.1, 19.4
Aural/Sight-Singing 6	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 7	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 8	CL 19.6, MacGamut 5
Aural/Sight-Singing 9	CL 18.1, 18.2, 18.14, MacGamut 6
Aural/Sight-Singing 10	Cl 16.2

Unit 4:

Skill/Concept	Assignment
Written/Analytical 1	20.1, 20.2, 21.1
Written/Analytical 2	20.3, 20.4, 21.2, 21.3
Written/Analytical 3	21.4
Written/Analytical 4	21.5
Written/Analytical 5	21.6

Aural/Sight-Singing 6	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 7	In-class sight-singing
Aural/Sight-Singing 8	MacGamut 7, 8
Aural/Sight-Singing 9	CL 20.8
Aural/Sight-Singing 10	CL 21.1