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Incorporating Popular Music in Teaching: Ideas for the Non-Expert

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Music theory instructors who center their teaching around common-practice music often do so because they believe this repertoire helps students learn broadly applicable skills. But incorporating some (broadly defined) popular music may help students make connections to other repertoires, form more robust and accurate knowledge structures, and exercise creativity. This article is addressed to instructors who do not feel expert in popular music who still want to engage these benefits. Such instructors can remove from themselves some of the burden of claiming expertise they do not feel they have and learning new repertoire every year in order to stay current by giving their students greater degrees of agency. These range from alternative assignments, which require more expertise on the part of the instructor, to student involvement in the priorities and emphases of a class, which opens up the class to the full range of student ideas and preferences.

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Music theory teachers tend to view what we teach as broadly applicable: as Kris Shaffer succinctly puts it, "Music theory is a *discipline*, in which we study *multiple theories* about *multiple musics*" (italics in the original). Given that we could not possibly teach every aspect of every musical style, even if this were desirable, we teach a foundation—one which, traditionally, is rooted in common-practice harmony— and expect that students will understand that this foundation is not an end in itself, but a means so that they leave the classroom able to "teach themselves things that go beyond what we can cover in these courses—and even things that won't come over the musical horizon for another 20 or 30 years" (Shaffer 2014). Anecdotally, this perspective seems common: many professors teach common-practice repertoire because it is what they know best, and they feel it provides an effective starting point for further learning.

Online posts by current or recent students, on the other hand, tend to see the common-practice curriculum as an end in itself and, by extension, view it as out of touch with contemporary music-making. Perhaps the most visible of these to the music theory community recently has been Ethan Hein's article in the online magazine *Slate*, in which he asserts that "the conventional teaching of music theory serves practicing musicians pretty poorly" and argues that our "common-practice" repertoire should be modern pop and rock music, not Bach-through-Brahms (2014).[1] Ivan Trevino,

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1 This comment, of course, raises the question of how we define "pop and rock music." This question will be addressed below.

similarly, states that in his imagined ideal music school, "Classical music will be a focus..., but so will other genres of music." He also extolls the virtues of composing and arranging in a range of styles, and adds, "Maybe this means we axe that last semester of atonal theory in favor of some more practical theoretical skills that we can immediately utilize in our post college lives" (2014).

Two dismissive thoughts might immediately come to mind. First would be to blame the students. If they are looking for practical skills, they should get an internship or play in a band; and perhaps this focus on getting a "practical" education is blinding them to the creative process of extrapolation from what we teach to what they do. Second would be to blame their teachers: perhaps these students have learned from teachers who are just going through the motions, assigning abstract textbook readings and worksheets without making connections to real music or modern practice.[2] Yet neither of these responses is helpful. Even if both are true, if we embrace them, we miss an opportunity to question the status quo and revitalize our teaching practice.

It is not my intention to suggest that this disconnect between teachers' pedagogical philosophies and students' perceptions is a new or even newly-discovered problem.[3] Rather, my overview above is meant to highlight the current state of discussion about this problem—a state that is perhaps more interesting than usual, since the ease of online publishing means that new voices can be heard, and more quickly. In the body of this article, I will suggest some ways of incorporating the music these students are calling for, primarily popular music (broadly defined), for instructors who do not currently feel comfortable doing so. These suggestions will not likely convince every student that everything we do will be directly applicable to their future careers, but when we incorporate the pop and rock music that Hein advocates or the "other genres" of Trevino, we invite our students to make further connections themselves. In addition, we may set ourselves up for better success in more traditional goals, as detailed below.

This article is not addressed towards those who feel fluent in the languages and

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2 Indeed, Hein suggests this in a comment on music theorist Bryn Hughes's blog, saying (addressed to Hughes): "You are clearly part of that community [of music academics who are coming to grips with the mismatch between the baseline standards of their profession and the music being made in the world], much to your credit." Yet Hein's comment also notes that the school he attended—which he includes in his critique—is a "fairly progressive school" (Ethan Hein, February 28, 2014, comment on Hughes 2014).

3 The interesting literature on contrasts between teachers' and students' perceptions in general often focuses on writing assignments and includes Wolsey, Lapp, and Fisher (2012); Macbeth (2006); and Nelson (1990).

practices of modern popular music, but rather towards those who do *not*.[4] Many teachers who focus on common-practice repertoire do so not because they are averse to popular music, but because they were trained in the former and find it to be an effective means of learning terminology and developing skills in musical analysis and communication. (Discomfort with the unfamiliar may, of course, also be a factor.) Such teachers face two particular challenges. First, how does a "traditionally" trained teacher incorporate popular music in an authentic way? And second, how does this teacher do so without having to spend an immense amount of time and effort learning a vast new repertoire and then repeating this effort every few years to remain current?

The central thesis of this article is that every degree of choice and creativity one allows to students—within the constraints of a course's purpose, goals, and available resources—eases these two central problems and invites students to greater success in any curriculum. Focusing on learning objectives, rather than on how a student must approach that learning objective, allows multiple paths through material, which in turn facilitates student ownership and also the contextualization of the "traditional" curriculum. Asking students to actively participate in selecting content for the class has many of the same benefits, but in addition alleviates some of the "authenticity" burden from the teacher and makes clear that student preferences and opinions are welcome in the classroom. Notably, these solutions do not require fundamental redesign of curricula.

This article, then, is addressed primarily to teachers who do not feel that they are experts in popular music. It will first explain why such teachers might want to incorporate this repertoire, drawing both on the tensions identified above and on the scholarship of teaching and learning. The following section is designed to help these instructors imagine ways of giving their students greater freedom in the service of integrating popular music. It begins by describing small degrees of flexibility, and ends with ways of more fully reflecting, encouraging, and productively using the diversity of tastes and backgrounds represented among our students.

Learning Benefits of Incorporating Popular Music

The most intuitive benefit of incorporating popular music is the connection it makes to students who identify with that repertoire. Justin London suggests a

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[4] As such, this article and its exploration of the benefits of incorporating popular music are not intended as a criticism of contemporary music theory teaching but rather as a resource for interested instructors. Indeed, the survey results reported in Snodgrass (2016) suggest that most music theory instructors do use at least some popular music in their teaching.

disconnect between the music we teach and the music students interact with most often:

> The failure of our students to connect theory to their other musical experiences is perhaps our fault... We must take the initiative to show our students how theory plays an important role in critical listening, and how a knowledge of music theory can enhance their musical understanding and experience. (1990, 113–114)

Other music theorists have made much the same point, including Folse (2004) and Ripley (2011). A slightly different critique from *outside* the field, embodied in the internet postings listed above, asserts that what we teach in the music theory classroom is not relevant to music making today. But these calls for change are, perhaps, two sides of the same coin: musicians wish music theory classes were more useful, while music theorists wish musicians could more easily see how useful music theory is. The solution from both sides: incorporate more popular music! This perspective, echoed in other publications, suggests a kind of forward-looking benefit: if we make connections between different styles of music, students will be able to make further connections themselves later.

There is a strong argument to be made that education should be about learning to think and adapt to future realities rather than acquiring today's "useful" skills, despite the concerns of the students referenced above. Yet incorporating popular music is useful from this perspective as well. Since many students are familiar with popular music, intentionally incorporating it activates prior knowledge. As stated in the book *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* by Susan Ambrose et al.:

> Ideally, students build on a foundation of robust and accurate prior knowledge, forging links between previously acquired and new knowledge that help them construct increasingly complex and robust knowledge structures.... If they do not draw on relevant prior knowledge—in other words, if that knowledge is inactive—it may not facilitate the integration of new knowledge. (2010, 13)

There may have been a time when the majority of students entered music school aurally understanding pivot chords, for example, or sonata form, and the teacher's job was simply to activate this knowledge and give the student proper terminology for it. But if so, that time is past, and students are likely to come to music school with a wide range of experiences with a wide range of music.[5] If we activate this knowledge

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5 Given this reality, Telesco (2013) advocates creating mental schemata for use in sight reading based on students' familiarity with popular styles. This is a slightly different, but compatible (and also popular-music-based), response to problems related to those presented in the current article.

as we present new concepts, we will be helping students make these "complex and robust knowledge structures." This is presumably why Ripley (2011), among many others, advocates using popular music for its familiarity—though it is easy to forget that there are also many students not well-versed in popular styles, or familiar with different popular styles.[6]

Making these connections also puts the "traditional" curriculum into context. *How Learning Works* further points out that while it is important to activate prior knowledge, "when learning new material, students may draw on knowledge … that is inappropriate for the context, and which can distort their interpretation of new material or impede new learning" (Ambrose et al. 2010, 23). This is often a hang-up in the study of older styles when they are not explicitly compared with new styles, for example, when studying eighteenth-century voice leading without talking about differences in modern rock or even contemporary choral music. Activating prior knowledge and *comparing* it to new knowledge can facilitate not only greater understanding, but also comprehension of when different perspectives are appropriate. For example, sometimes allowing parallel fifths in part writing, or comparing the effect of parallel power chords with the effect of contrary motion in eighteenth-century voice leading, can help students understand when certain voice-leading norms are appropriate and when they are not. If we participate in making such comparisons, we can help make sure they are accurate and effective. In this way, incorporating some popular music may not dilute the "traditional" curriculum, but strengthen it.

A fourth beneficial connection with students regards attitudes towards learning. Teresa M. Amabile, a notable researcher on creativity, found that creativity—one of the central focuses of the report of the recent CMS Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major—flourishes when a person's abilities are matched with intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation. Of course, extrinsic motivators like teacher-given instructions and grades are (in most cases) impossible to avoid in higher education, but Amabile found that these are not necessarily bad when paired with intrinsic motivators (1997, 45). One excellent way to increase intrinsic motivation is to study music that students care deeply about and to ask them to bring in materials that they are interested in. In addition, Carol Dweck has demonstrated extensively the difference between students with a fixed mindset, which posits that intelligence is fixed and leads to poorer learning and lower levels of risk-taking, and students with a growth mindset,

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6 This is one reason for giving students flexibility to bring in their own repertoires, as described below, rather than simply bringing in the music the instructor considers "popular."

which posits that intelligence is malleable and produces better learning outcomes.[7] A curriculum focused almost exclusively on common-practice repertoire will make it easy for students steeped in that repertoire to develop a growth mindset, but may simultaneously contribute to a fixed mindset among a subset of other students who do not get as many opportunities to feel successful.

Finally, an embrace of creativity in music theory classes is a virtue in and of itself. Dire warnings about the state of employment in traditional music careers are easy to find. The CMS Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major Manifesto gives a more positive spin:

> The creative and expressive dimensions of music have been progressing rapidly over the past several decades. Factors include an expanding, interconnected global society with its cross-cultural influences, crossover stylistic expressions, electronic as well as acoustic performance and production, advances in technology, access and transmission afforded by the internet and digital media, and growing creative impulses for many real-world musicians in the form of improvisatory and compositional endeavors.

They follow this, however, with the statement that the academy does not prepare students for this reality, since it "has remained isolated, resistant to change" (2014). Though this controversial statement ignores the great diversity of music teaching today,[8] a curriculum that invites creativity and novel ways of recombining material, exposes students to a broad range of today's active music-making and invites students to bring their own preferences and ideas into a setting where they can be studied, questioned, and creatively manipulated is one that will better prepare students for this rapidly changing musical world.

Increasing Degrees of Student-Centered Learning

To return to the central thesis of this article, every degree of freedom granted to students will contribute to alleviating the burdens of claiming authenticity for

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7 Though much of Dweck's work has focused on these themes, they are expounded at length in Dweck (2016). An excellent source for advice on how to give feedback that encourages a growth mindset is Dweck (2007).

8 Among the many published and presented responses to the report of the CMS task force was a strong rebuttal of its characterization of contemporary music theory and aural skills teaching by Snodgrass (2016). Snodgrass reports the results of a survey that shows that the vast majority of responding music theory instructors do teach at least some popular music, though 11% of respondents reported giving their students no exposure to this repertoire. It is important to note that though the CMS task force was convened by the College Music Society, it was not voted on or endorsed by the members of the CMS.

the instructor and learning new repertoire—which means that insights from the student-centered learning movement will be helpful. Student-centered learning is not necessarily a new idea, but it has recently been envisioned more radically than before. The standard music theory pedagogy text focuses on student learning rather than teacher effort when it states, "A distinction should be made between teaching (i.e., transmitting information--for example, through a lecture) and learning (connecting the student's mind and needs in some way to what the instructor is talking about)" (Rogers 2004, 161). This in itself is a kind of student-centered perspective, but it still focuses on content. Kris Shaffer gives a more radical definition, arguing, "A student-centered curriculum treats the student as a subject, and the materials as the objects to be engaged, manipulated, even constructed by the student-as-subject" (2014). While Michael Rogers advocates paying attention to student learning, Shaffer proposes that students be empowered as agents directing their own education. Stamatis (2014), similarly, specifies that a student-centered learning environment "encourages student engagement, active learning, self-examination, and individually designed projects."

For an instructor not well-versed in popular music to incorporate it without wholesale redesign of curricula, it will be necessary to juxtapose this repertoire with "traditional," common-practice repertoire. Fortunately, this can be a very good thing, particularly in its encouragement of creativity. Creativity is often defined in words similar to those of Sir Ken Robinson et al. (1999): "Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value" (30). Amabile (1997) describes creativity as thriving when three components are in place: prerequisite prior knowledge ("expertise"), intrinsic motivation, and "creative thinking skill" (42). This latter category essentially refers to the ability to generate novel ideas, and is particularly likely to be strong when people are asked to think in new ways. Juxtaposing seemingly different things is clearly a valuable component of this element of creativity, whether it means recomposing Lady Gaga in the style of Bach, experimenting with interplay between technical virtuosity and artistry in different styles, or recording a "crossover" album.

Before providing specific suggestions for giving students greater flexibility, it is necessary to address an elephant in the room: what, exactly, is popular music? John Covach has argued that the term is problematic in a society where many popular repertoires are given a high cultural position, since our uses of the term "popular music" usually imply an opposition with supposedly highbrow "classical" music (2015).[9] Yet in this context it might make sense: while prestigious mass media like

9 Covach's primary recommendation, that music schools not focus on a specific repertoire

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the New York Times and National Public Radio began covering non-"classical" music some time ago, the theory classroom still often preserves the distinction. We might count as "popular" anything that is mainstream within our culture but not explicitly contained within the (Bach-through-Brahms, plus second Viennese school, Bartók, and Stravinsky) repertoire we have traditionally used as our foundation. Even if this distinction is vague and even problematic, that may not be a problem—students come to our classes with many different kinds of preferences and backgrounds, and if we give them some say, we will reflect those preferences, whatever they are. Our primary concern should be opening the doors to new repertoire, not necessarily defining exactly what may come in.[10]

Perhaps the easiest way to invoke creativity in the classroom—and a way that is already travelled in many classrooms—is to ask students to compare or contrast two seemingly disparate things. While this type of task still relies on a teacher's instructions, it asks students to make novel and creative connections, and can easily be designed to eschew single correct answers. Applied to popular music incorporated within a traditional curriculum, such activities might include:

♦ Comparing Clementi's Sonatina in G major, Op. 36, No. 5, movement iii, with the Mindbenders' song based on the Clementi, "Groovy Kind of Love."[11] There are technical differences (Clementi's diminished leading-tone chords, for example, are usually replaced by minor supertonic chords, and parallel fifths abound in the latter song): to what extent do these explain the aesthetic differences?

♦ Evaluating a shape-note song such as Sarah Lancaster's "The Last Words of Copernicus" (Sacred Harp #112) from the perspective of Bach-style voice leading and part writing. Do the many parallel fifths and octaves, emphasis on tonic harmony, static lines, missing thirds, etc. make this a bad piece? If not, what is the value of so-called "rules" of voice leading?

♦ Investigating the common pop music progression where V^7/V is followed by IV (as at 1:22 of Bruno Mars's "When I Was Your Man"). What is the effect, compared to a "proper" resolution?

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but teach many repertoires as their core, also resonates strongly with this article. Covach's lecture can be viewed on the University of Rochester Institute for Popular Music's Youtube Channel at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6b3M7KF7C7U&feature=em-subs_digest.

10 The challenges, of course, get bigger the more culturally distant the repertoire gets from the traditional canon. For example, music that doesn't use Western notation or scales may be very difficult to juxtapose with, say, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Of course, there are still valuable insights to be gained from this juxtaposition—just different ones from those focused on here.

11 This comparison is suggested by Clendinning and Marvin (2011, 198).

♦ Improvising on some instrument using only a predetermined set class over a twelve-bar blues.

A teacher with a strong commitment to teaching popular music might criticize these exercises as all being based in "classical" knowledge: stylistically-defined norms of harmonic progression, eighteenth-century voice-leading, resolution of tendency tones, etc. Certainly, it would be valuable to come at such comparisons from other perspectives: for example, critiquing the "naturalness" of Schubert's text setting when compared with the freer, more syncopated styles of modern pop. Yet the point of these exercises is to show ways that a traditional curriculum can be enriched, not fundamentally changed. Fundamental change is welcome, but it can also difficult for teachers with a traditional background and many constraints on their time. Simply beginning to reach out in this way can dramatically change the classroom atmosphere and may lead to further and more substantial changes later.

More important, perhaps, these activities do not solve the problems mentioned before. Since the teacher defines the task, such activities rely on the teacher's knowledge of popular repertoire and may suggest to the student that the teacher is an expert in popular music—an impression many teachers will be uncomfortable with. Teachers who do not already have deep repertoire knowledge can still design such projects by searching through the repertoire they do know, investigating currently popular music at websites like Billboard's The Hot 100 (http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100) to see if any of it relates productively to what they are planning to teach, using resources like HookTheory's "Find songs with the same chords" (http://www.hooktheory.com/trends) to find songs that follow a chord progression they would like to investigate, searching online for crossover versions of classical "hits" that could spur discussion about why the music appeals to the crossover artist,[12] or asking knowledgeable colleagues for ideas to go with a particular unit. (A good opening strategy is simply to do an internet search for "popular music [topic of class]," for example, "popular music counterpoint," "popular music Neapolitans," etc.) But while such small initiatives can be helpful, they are only moderate steps along the road to greater student freedom and a diverse classroom

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12 Just as a sample, there are virtuosic metal guitar covers of Corelli's La Folia variations and the third movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata recorded by artist Dan Mumm, while Nas's rap song "I Can" samples Beethoven's Für Elise to highlight an important rhythmic/contour motive and convey a sense of seriousness and high-mindedness. There are also cover recordings the opposite direction, like Vitamin String Quartet's tribute to Radiohead and the album *Strung Out on OK Computer*, and it is not too hard to find recordings of Beatles songs by symphony orchestras.

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repertoire.

The suggestions listed above ask students to be creative with a teacher-given task; taking student freedom a step farther, a teacher could focus on a learning objective, rather than a task, and allow the students multiple paths to that objective. Such multiple paths could be seen as a less radical form of some changes proposed by the College Music Society's report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major. This report recommends greater student choice in curricular pathways; allowing more choices within existing courses is an initial step in this direction. Below are listed several common class types, along with a few ideas to spur thinking on how popular music might be incorporated and juxtaposed.

Fundamentals courses. These are perhaps the easiest in which to employ this type of thinking. Because many of the typical skills taught here—note reading, writing time and key signatures, transposition, intervals, and chord construction—are not tied to a single style or genre, learning objectives can often be met regardless of style preference. For example, students could be asked to bring to class five popular songs they enjoy and be ready to write appropriate key signatures for them on the board. Students could either find scores online or use their aural skills to identify tonic. Or students could identify intervals, write out chords, etc., for music in almost any tonal style.

Aural Skills. Some skills developed in aural skills courses—e.g., musical memory, tonic determination, notation, basic sight reading—are not highly style-dependent. These can use music from different styles in different ways: for example, a class could be given a choice of two transcription projects, one in "popular" style and the other "classical," or students could choose pieces to transcribe themselves. (To keep grading manageable, the instructor could require that multiple students work, independently or together, on each chosen excerpt.) Developing aural schemata, however, is likely more style dependent. Instructors who wish to inculcate a specific style here should probably focus on that style, though it may be advantageous to occasionally compare it with other styles. Instructors who serve diverse populations could, again, give students some choice in which repertoire they focus on.

Diatonic and chromatic harmony courses. An instructor who wishes to focus on common-practice harmony will still likely find it useful to compare it to popular-music tonal harmony, as such comparisons can put the common-practice norms in relief. For example, one could ask students to do an harmonic analysis of a Mozart minuet and a student-chosen rock piece that uses a cycle of three to five chords, and compare the two in terms of the effects of harmony and cadences, or in terms of

how they modulate. Instructors who want to serve groups of students with different interests more effectively could have a unit or class called "harmony" but multiple alternative sets of readings and assignments. Another assignment might ask students to find a piece of music that uses a given chord (say, the dominant chord) in a piece in any style, label the chords that come before and after, identify where it comes within the phrase model, and/or describe how a tonic is established in that style.

Counterpoint. Counterpoint, especially when identified with a certain period (e.g., sixteenth-century counterpoint), is clearly tied to a style, and there is not a strong tradition of counterpoint teaching within popular music practice. Nevertheless, students could still analyze and describe the relationships between, say, outer voices of a rock song, using the terms parallel, similar, oblique, and contrary.

Form. One way to activate prior knowledge at the beginning of a class or unit on form would be to ask students to create a timeline of a piece from their personal music library, and to think about what elements they are using to make their decisions (usually, this means harmony/key areas and especially themes). Or, students who have learned about a given form could be asked to evaluate its appropriateness to popular styles. For example, there are a number of forums and blogs on the internet that assert connections between sonata form and popular song (verse-chorus) forms.[13] Students could be asked to evaluate these claims: why are they made, and do you agree?

Twentieth-century modernism. Serialism might seem difficult to juxtapose with non-classical music, but it is possible and useful even here. Dave Brubeck (though some would include him in the "classical" category) wrote jazz pieces that feature twelve-tone melodies but not serialism (an example is "So Lonely"). This could engender an interesting discussion on why he does this, and even an assignment to write a piece using a twelve-tone row in a popular style (I have had students do this with a remarkable degree of success).

Most of the suggestions given so far rely to some extent on a teacher's knowledge of popular repertoire, but this is not an absolute necessity for incorporating popular music. Every degree of freedom afforded to students puts less responsibility on the teacher to know repertoire and present it in an authentic way and gives a greater invitation to students to bring their own ideas and preferences to the classroom. The

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13 Given the ephemeral nature of some of these sites, the best way to find these is probably through internet searches for "sonata form popular music," but as of the writing of this article they include an informal post on the blog Think Like a Cellist (https://thinklikeacellist.wordpress.com/2015/02/25/sonata-form-and-the-modern-pop-song/), an instructional post on the blog of writer Julie Wu (http://juliewuauthor.com/?p=18940), and even a post on Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/107m57/a_pop_song_in_sonata_form_music_is_awesome/).

prime example given above is letting students find a piece that is an example of a concept or where a concept is useful, potentially opening up the classroom to a good deal of diversity. This strategy can be very useful in a number of different situations, including choosing pieces for transcription or dictation in aural skills, finding examples of harmonies, and simply practicing analysis. It may, however, be more useful in the later stages of a given unit, once students have already demonstrated some understanding, so that students are more likely to bring in appropriate pieces.[14]

Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, it is possible for students to be collaborators in the design or implementation of a course. This is an admittedly radical step, and perhaps easiest for teachers who already have experience and strong ideas that will be applicable to many situations and the confidence to deal with the unknown. There are resources to help those that wish to go this route. The one most relevant to music theory teaching is Alegant and Sawhill (2013): though the authors spend much of their essay discussing self-grading, they also include self-design. Another excellent resource is Davidson (2015). In a classroom where students have an active role in creating the course, the diversity of their music preferences will be reflected.

Not all teachers (or perhaps especially institutions) will be comfortable with the idea of students helping to design a course, but even this radical step can be tailored to different levels of comfort. We can still bring our preferences and ideas to the classroom, adding our own voices to the mix. We might, for example, come on the first day of class with a list of learning objectives, then ask students to prioritize these or to add their own (for which we might still define the methods of assessment). Or we might say, "I would like for you to learn something about the effects of different harmonies, which ones are most important, and ways that they progress from one to another, but I am open to doing so with regard to different repertoires. Keep in mind that if you choose a repertoire I am not expert in, there will be more responsibility on you to bring in examples and to explain how you think they work."

I have also, particularly at the end of a curriculum track, given much more open-ended assignments that allow for student design. The most open-ended of these was an assignment I gave in the last weeks of a final aural skills course: the assignment was "Get into groups and do something that involves aural skills." I gave the students

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14 Instructors should, of course, have a plan for what to do when students bring in inappropriate pieces, e.g., an "example of a V^7/V" that turns out not to include this chord. Choices include awarding partial points if the example has some aspect of the desired element (say, a French augmented sixth instead of a V^7/V, since it does include some of the same notes) and asking students to try again.

some examples of appropriate projects—working up an a cappella group arrangement of a popular song, learning a piano or string quartet piece from a recording instead of a score, coming up with a framework for improvisation, sight-reading their way through a defined repertoire—but left room for other possibilities. Student groups were tasked with crafting a proposal that made clear what they expected to get out of the project educationally. We dedicated several weeks to this project, and in these weeks I acted no longer as instructor but now as guide, listening to groups as they worked and offering advice when appropriate. My students worked enthusiastically, and as I walked from group to group, occasionally consulting but mostly feeling a bit useless, I witnessed amazing results: students explaining to each other important concepts and ways of working, significant effort, and truly creative performances. (Incidentally, all of my student groups chose popular-music-related projects, suggesting to me that they feel there is not yet enough popular music in my class.)

Conclusion

We have much to gain from an embrace of popular music in the classroom. The benefits will include the building and activating of more robust knowledge structures, the demonstration of relevance, and communicating to our students their own value—and the value of their ideas, backgrounds, and preferences—to our classes. These benefits are available not just to teachers who consider themselves popular music scholars, and not even just to teachers with a sizeable popular music section in their music libraries, but to all teachers who take steps to incorporate these repertoires. Even just an occasional comparison between the "core" repertoire of a class and a "popular" piece of music can make a big difference and open doors to further changes in the future.

To the extent that we embrace student agency in the classroom, we will open the studied repertoire to a greater diversity of music, bring students' ideas and preferences into play, and foster creativity especially through comparison of seemingly disparate things. In doing so, we have the opportunity to embrace student perspectives and remove from the teacher the responsibility of being an authority on all aspects of popular music. And we gain the benefits of perceived usefulness of class material, appropriate activation of prior knowledge, encouragement of different kinds of students, and a fuller embrace of creativity.

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