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Conference Report: Pedagogy into Practice

J. DANIEL JENKINS AND ANGELA RIPLEY



Pedagogy into Practice: Teaching Music Theory in the Twenty-First Century, billed as the first peer-reviewed conference on music theory pedagogy, took place at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, from Thursday, June 1, through Saturday, June 3, 2017. Spearheaded by the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy, the conference attracted pedagogues from diverse teaching situations and career stages. As the conference subtitle suggests, discussions abound regarding changes in higher education in general, and in music schools and departments in particular, in the twenty-first century. In order to (re)consider music theory pedagogy's relationship to practice—a topic that often comes to the forefront in discussions of the twenty-first-century musician—the conference organizers provided a prestigious, yet congenial, venue where all felt welcome to discuss a variety of issues and topics related to teaching music theory in secondary and post-secondary environments. While unable to provide a comprehensive and thoroughgoing account of all the wonderful scholarship presented at the conference, we nevertheless hope that the following overview will serve as a representative survey of the main themes that emerged from proceedings.¹

The program included four types of sessions: paper sessions, workshop sessions, poster sessions, and keynote addresses. Parallel sessions featured either traditional 20-minute papers, each followed by 10 minutes of discussion, or workshops, which provided 45-minute slots for speakers to engage the participants in activities or delve into a topic more deeply. The workshop format often allowed free-flowing discussion rather than the 30 minutes of presentation followed by 15 minutes of questions that is customary at some conferences.

The program committee organized an innovative poster session, and went to great lengths to ensure its success. There were 24 posters, and no papers were scheduled during the poster session to compete for our attention. To encourage maximum participation, conference goers were given a “passport” booklet with a number on the front and a page for notes on each poster inside. Poster presenters gave those who visited their posters a sticker, with some participants trying to collect as many stickers as possible. After two hours, participants divided into six discussion groups,

¹ The entire conference program can be found at <https://music.appstate.edu/about/music-theory-pedagogy-online/conference/2017-conference-program>.

randomly distributed by the number on the front of their passports. Discussion leaders led the groups in wide-ranging conversations that began with the posters themselves but quickly veered into much broader issues, including the role of music theory in undergraduate education in light of the Manifesto produced by the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major.

The influence of the CMS Manifesto could be felt in presentations that focused on improvisation. The Manifesto "takes the position that improvisation and composition provide a stronger basis for educating musicians today than the prevailing model of training performers in the interpretation of older works."² Jeffrey Lovell (Lebanon Valley College) brought his background in popular music to bear by creating loops in GarageBand over which his students improvised. As the loops played through the classroom speakers, all students sang an ostinato bass line while individuals took turns improvising melodically. These exercises always had a specific goal (e.g., "include a leap between re and ti"), and Lovell required each student to continue to improvise until they included the required element. In her workshop, Tiffany Valvo (Syracuse University and Nazareth College) provided the valuable insight of someone who was hired to teach applied clarinet and ended up being given an aural skills class as well. In response, Valvo took a class on Gordon Learning Theory and put what she learned into action. James Sullivan (University of Evansville) led a workshop exploring his approach to helping aural-skills students improvise parallel periods in order to reinforce concepts of phrase rhythm, cadence, and form in both tonal and post-tonal settings. Similarly, Philip Duker (University of Delaware) and Daniel Stevens (University of Delaware) showed how they use improvisation in the process of "scaling to real music."

While posters and presentations accepted through the review process were essential, and will be discussed in more detail below, the highlights of the conference were the two keynote addresses. The Thursday afternoon keynote address was given by Ken Bain, President of the Best Teachers Institute and author of the widely-read books *What the Best College Teachers Do* and *What the Best College Students Do*, who began Centers for Teaching Excellence at universities including Vanderbilt, Northwestern, and New York University. The Friday afternoon keynote address was given by Anna Gawboy (Ohio State University), who is known for her scholarship on flipped pedagogy and for the online materials she has created and edited for the textbook *Concise Introduction to Tonal Harmony*.³ Furthermore, Gawboy presented a

² College Music Society (2014, 2).

³ Burstein and Straus (2016).

workshop on Saturday called “Keynote into Practice,” where participants divided into small groups to discuss the main topics and questions that emerged from her address.

Notably, Bain delivered his keynote address, “Deep Learning,” remotely, streamed to a large television screen positioned on the stage of a moderately sized recital hall. Responding to the keynote’s title, Bain discussed the common problem of students adopting a surface or strategic approach—rather than a deep approach—to learning and examined factors that contribute to these learning approaches. Synthesizing a broad array of research on teaching and learning, Bain discussed the motivation, mindsets, and mental models of students. To promote deep learning among students, Bain encouraged instructors to consider ways in which they can foster intrinsic motivation and a growth mindset among the students enrolled in their courses. Adroitly demonstrating the pedagogical principles advocated in his address, Bain guided members of the audience toward an understanding of the ineffectiveness of some existing mental models and provided practical suggestions for constructing new mental models to foster deep learning in students and instructors alike. No less impressive than his concise discussion of a broad literature was Bain’s skill as a teacher as he engaged the audience in an interactive learning experience despite the constraints of video conferencing. Bain combined lecture with small-group discussion throughout his address and included opportunities for individuals to share their reflections with the audience as a whole. Topics discussed during the question-and-answer period included building rapport with students, identifying the most important threshold concepts for students to learn in a field of study, and using the masterclass approach to engage students in large classes.

Pedagogical approaches informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning were well represented among the presentations at this conference and sparked an ongoing dialogue with the ideas presented by Bain in his keynote address. Hermes Camacho (Picardy Learning) and Scott C. Schumann (Central Michigan University) synthesized peer learning with the inverted, or “flipped,” music theory classroom, and Benjamin K. Wadsworth (Kennesaw State University) incorporated Bloom’s Taxonomy into the design of his introductory course in Schenkerian analysis.⁴ Addressing the topic of student motivation, Meghan Naxer (Kent State University) cited research on the benefits of adopting an incremental self-theory rather than an entity self-theory and presented a theoretical model to help instructors design and revise courses to foster an incremental self-theory among students. Students with an incremental self-theory believe their abilities can improve, so they are more likely to persevere when learning

⁴ A revised version of this paper appeared in *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 30.

challenging material than are students with an entity self-theory, who believe their abilities are fixed. Finally, Michael Callahan (Michigan State University) explained the metacognitive benefits of presenting new material via interleaving rather than blocking. Blocking involves teaching and mastering one concept at a time (e.g., scales before intervals before triads before seventh chords), while interleaving mixes together, or interleaves, practice on related concepts. Callahan supplied examples of interleaved units on several music-theoretical topics, such as an interleaved unit on ternary, rondo, and sonata form.

Presentations focused on assessment were closely related to those engaging the scholarship of teaching and learning. Gary S. Karpinski (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) provided practical methods for grading melodic dictation exercises and highlighted the difference between the data-gathering process of assessment and the process of assigning grades through evaluation. David Marvel (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) showed how students contract for aural-skills grades by agreeing on which activities and benchmarks they will achieve to receive their desired grades. In a fitting conclusion to the conference, Sara Bakker (Utah State University) encouraged instructors to assess the effectiveness of the assessments they use in their courses and suggested ways to increase the effectiveness of assessments for student learning. Bakker's suggestions included adopting elements of peer- and self-evaluation, using multiple methods of assessment to increase the validity and reliability of grades, and using backward design to move from learning objectives to assessment types and course content.

Prose writing as a means of assessment—including analytical essays, metacognitive reflections, and interdisciplinary assignments—was addressed in a number of presentations. By following in-class analyses with guided essay assignments, Jennifer Shafer (University of Delaware and Temple University) provided opportunities for students enrolled in a freshman-level harmony course to develop their writing skills and revise their work in response to feedback. Anna Ferenc (Wilfrid Laurier University) advocated using metacognitive reflection assignments with writing prompts that go beyond the content of the course to focus student attention on the process of learning.⁵ Exploring interdisciplinary connections between music fundamentals and disciplines such as graphic design, history, and film criticism, Chelsey Hamm (Missouri Western State University) used prose-writing assignments to broaden the intellectual horizons of students who are beginning their studies in music theory. Student writing was also a component, albeit not the primary focus, of other presentations. For example, the

⁵ A revised version of this paper also appeared in *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 30.

focused reading responses proposed by Camacho and Schumann required students to write their reactions to reading assignments for subsequent discussion and evaluation in class.

Gawboy focused on “The Art of Listening” in her keynote address. Though a passing glance at Gawboy’s title might suggest an emphasis on aural skills, she addressed the topic at a more fundamental level. Her address was divided into three parts. In the first section (Listening Experience and Habits), Gawboy framed the discussion by quoting statistics about the listening habits of teenagers. She also noted that there are modes of listening which, from least active to most active, include background, casual, holistic, embodied, focused, participatory, and responsive listening, and talked about exercises designed to engage these different modes. The second part of Gawboy’s address (Listening to Learn) focused on more active approaches to listening. The goals of activities that develop these skills include relating sound to written notation and vice versa, focusing on a single element in a complex texture, focusing on a specific event in a longer time span, tracking how a specific element develops through time, shifting focus between elements, remembering heard events, and understanding a series of heard events as a continuity. In the third and final part (Listening, Theorizing, and Creativity), Gawboy recounted the story of a student she taught in a chorale model composition course when she was a graduate student at Yale. The student produced a musically satisfying final project that sounded more like a classical crossover composition than something by Bach. Inspired by her experience with this student, who is now a successful commercial musician, Gawboy has devised a style composition project in which a binary form by Mozart serves as the model, but within which students are free to include elements from their favorite music. In assessing these works, which do not conform to traditional model composition guidelines, Gawboy thinks about her previous students and is beginning to think less about rules and more about sounds.

The following day, Gawboy led a workshop open to all conference participants in which we considered four questions: (1) How do we engage students intellectually, musically, and creatively? (2) What are the theory skills students really need for their progress as musicians? What evidence shows that they have acquired those skills? (3) How do we teach the essential skills given the resources available to us? (4) How do we communicate music theory’s relevance to contemporary practice? A stimulating discussion in small groups culminated in the recording of each group’s conclusions in a shared Google Doc for the future reference of participants.

Gawboy’s four questions, discussed on the final day of the conference, reflected

the issues, topics, and concerns that many presenters at the conference addressed in their papers, workshops, and posters. One common theme throughout the conference was the relevance of music theory to students. Several presentations emphasized connections between repertoire selected for analysis and the perceived relevance of music theory, and some presenters demonstrated the close relationship between analysis and performance by playing or singing their own musical examples. Emphasizing connections between analysis and performance, Alexander Trygstad (Eastman School of Music) described his compilation and analytical use of an anthology of solo repertoire studied by students enrolled in his course. Cora S. Palfy (Elon University) addressed the hidden curricula presented by music commonly studied in the theory classroom and encouraged instructors to engage student-centered repertoire choices and attend to the representation of music by composers of color, music by women composers, and music from outside the classical canon. Relating tritone substitutions to augmented-sixth chords, Julian Guillermo Brijaldo Acosta (University of Miami, Frost School of Music) connected traditional and jazz theories and discussed the expansion of repertoire found in theory textbooks. And J. Daniel Jenkins (University of South Carolina) spoke about a course he teaches called “Public Music Theory,” in which students develop podcasts, videocasts, and blogs about repertoire and theoretical questions of interest to them.

As with relevance, student engagement emerged as the theme of several presentations. Benjamin Hansberry (Columbia University) used discussion to help students discover the underlying complexities of new concepts by hosting a music theory debate club in which students played specific roles within small groups. For example, three students respectively focused on tendency tones, perfect intervals, and counterpoint while a fourth student recorded the group’s realization of a given figured-bass exercise. Similarly, Angela Ripley (Baylor University) developed music theory mock trials—such as a case debating the identity of the enigmatic *Tristan* chord—to stimulate critical thinking and encourage students to consider multiple interpretations of musically ambiguous examples. Other presentations employed popular music to spark student interest. For example, Cynthia I. Gonzales (Texas State University) and Bonnie Smith (Churchill High School, San Antonio, TX) demonstrated their use of genres such as Mariachi music to draw students into the process of singing guide tones and chord arpeggiations along with music videos in preparation for harmonic dictation.

Adoption of technology as a way to remain relevant and to engage students was another topic of discussion at the conference. Some presentations focused on

specific products. At two sponsored lunches, we heard about updates to the cloud-based notation software Noteflight and some of the online teaching tools available with textbooks published by Oxford University Press; two workshops focused on the web-based apps available from Picardy Learning and Harmonia by Illiac Software; and poster presentations described the use of SmartMusic to develop sight singing proficiency and a roll out of W. W. Norton's InQuizitive, a web-based software already available with their theory textbooks. Furthermore, there were presentations on the role of technology in flipped pedagogy, open-source and instructor-created textbooks, and using Casio keyboards to develop keyboard skills in theory class.

The role of popular music in the undergraduate theory curriculum continues to be an important topic as we think about student engagement. During one of the lunches, we watched an instructional video from Kevin Holm-Hudson's *Music Theory Remixed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), a text that uses examples from popular music in the context of what is otherwise a very traditional approach to the undergraduate curriculum.⁶ Others are teaching popular music on its own terms. In his workshop on the Nashville Number System, Trevor deClercq (Middle Tennessee State University) detailed an alternative to both Roman numerals and lead sheet symbols for the purpose of notating chord progressions. Using Arabic numerals to reference scale degrees, the system has long been used by studio musicians in Nashville. As mentioned in the workshop, the Nashville Number System is already a feature of Jennifer Snodgrass's *Contemporary Musicianship: Analysis and the Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). DeClercq showed us not how we might include popular music in the traditional curriculum, but rather how we might develop an entirely new curriculum for educating popular musicians. Matthew Hough (University of California, Berkeley) also provided a glimpse into how popular music plays an important role in his non-traditional theory classes.

The conference also included ample discussion of more traditional topics. Presentations on the pedagogy of post-tonal theory spanned both written and aural skills, the latter of which focused on singing rather than dictation. Strategies for singing atonal melodies emphasized connections to what students have learned in their previous study of tonal melodies. David Geary (Indiana University) and Robert Komaniecki (Indiana University) used a shared solmization system for both tonal and atonal melodies, and Kent Cleland (Baldwin Wallace University) linked methods for singing atonal melodies to major and minor scale segments and concepts such

⁶ A review of this textbook by Brad Osborn (University of Kansas) appears in the current issue of this journal.

as polymelody and modulation. A further connection between tonal and atonal music appeared in a presentation by Ji Hyun Woo (State University of New York at Fredonia), who retained traditional musical notation in her twelve-tone matrices. Timothy Chenette (Utah State University) featured aural experience prominently in his approach to set class analysis; students played and discussed trichords before they encountered the apparatus of pitch-class set theory. Effective presentations on post-tonal analysis varied substantially in their emphasis of depth versus breadth. Adopting Brian Alegant's scuba-diving metaphor, Nora Engebretsen (Bowling Green State University) suggested repertoire through which to engage students in deep analysis in a post-tonal capstone to the undergraduate theory core.⁷ At the other end of the continuum, Amy Fleming (Eastman School of Music) and Aaron Grant (Eastman School of Music) emphasized broad connections among analysis, aural skills, and music history in a course design inspired by Alex Ross's *The Rest Is Noise*.

A number of presentations revealed a desire to integrate keyboard harmony more fully into the undergraduate curriculum. Several of these presentations were historically informed. Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska (Northwestern University) detailed the central function of the rule of the octave in theory classes taught by her and her colleagues.⁸ In his workshop, Michael J. Masci (State University of New York at Geneseo) revealed how he avoids discussing functional harmony at the beginning of the theory curriculum in favor of taking students through a regimen of French-conservatory-style figured bass and solfège. And Derek Remeš (Eastman School of Music), who is completing a dissertation on J. S. Bach's pedagogy, has developed a curriculum in which chorale harmonization serves as the vehicle for harmonic understanding, complete with a range of exercises to be performed at the keyboard.⁹ Some of these presentations resonated with a statement Gawboy made in her keynote that historically, four-voice writing was the first step in learning style composition; however, we now have a pedagogical anacrusis with no downbeat. Thus, in some instances, keyboard performance replaces rather than supplements part-writing exercises. Callahan, Barbara K. Wallace (Dallas Baptist University), and Jennifer Weaver (Dallas Baptist University) reported that the integration of keyboard performance exercises into their curricula has been accompanied by a decreasing emphasis on part-writing as a paper-and-pencil activity.

⁷ Alegant (2014).

⁸ A revised version of this presentation appears in the current issue of this journal.

⁹ A revised version of this presentation also appears in the current issue of this journal.

One striking lacuna among the presentations was the lack of discussion of rhythm and meter.¹⁰ From presentations on teaching harmony to improvising in aural skills, there was a clear emphasis on topics related to pitch—specifically harmony—either at the expense of discussions of musical time, rhythm, or meter, or within which these were secondary features. For example, rhythm might be part of a topic such as melodic dictation or improvisation, but not the primary focus. A notable exception was deClercq’s poster in which he proposed an alternative to the familiar simple/compound dichotomy in meter classification. As previously discussed, deClercq places popular music at the center of his curriculum and finds that the simple/compound classification does not accurately capture concepts such as “shuffle” or “swing,” observing that swing tunes are often notated in $\frac{4}{4}$, not $\frac{12}{8}$.

From murmurings heard in the hallways as the conference drew to a close on Saturday, the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy is already thinking about future iterations of this conference. Whether an annual or biennial event, this conference would be an important addition to the current slate of regional and national conferences. The conference provided an atmosphere in which everyone, from the most well-known textbook author to the undergraduate student, was welcome to express their opinions and to learn from each other. Conference attendees included some of our performer colleagues who teach music theory, and it would be ideal to have even more attend in the future. And while there was one session geared to high school music theory teachers, including presentations by Jane Piper Clendinning (College of Music, Florida State University), Karpinski, and Gonzales and Smith, anything that could be done to encourage more participation and engagement from this population would be most welcome.

In conclusion, we extend our congratulations to all presenters for their high-quality presentations, to the co-coordinators of the conference, Jennifer Snodgrass (Appalachian State University) and Austin Patty (Lee University), and to the program committee, Elizabeth West Marvin (Eastman School of Music), chair, Patricia Burt (Harford Community College), David Castro (St. Olaf College), Rebecca Jemian (University of Louisville), Steve Laitz (The Juilliard School), and David Thurmaier (University of Missouri, Kansas City). Whatever the future of *Pedagogy into Practice*, this first conference set a high standard for quality and collegiality and laid a solid foundation on which to build.

¹⁰ For a recent discussion of this topic in undergraduate pedagogy, see Cohn (2015).

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