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What is the function of the core curriculum in music theory? What fundamental core knowledge should all undergraduate musicians acquire? These are among the questions that the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) posed to a panel of music theorists at its 2011 annual meeting.[1] While the details of theory curricula will necessarily differ from institution to institution, the broad goals will probably not. A mission statement for the undergraduate theory core might go something like this:

- We aim to teach our students to think in music,
- to read, write, and perform music with understanding,
- and so to contribute to artistry.

The ideal theory classroom would thus be intensely musical, absolutely relevant to what students learn in other parts of the core and in their applied study, and it would challenge students to ever higher levels of artistry (regardless of the level at which they begin). Where schools will differ are in questions of scope and emphasis.

In preparation for this discussion, I placed a call for information on the Society for Music Theory's list-serve, held conversations with theorists teaching in the core, and reviewed trends in recent textbooks.[2] Faculty from 14 institutions responded: from four conservatories, six schools of music within universities, and four

[1] This talk was presented at the annual NASM meeting in Scottsdale, AZ (November 20, 2011) as a part of the organization's review of the current state of the undergraduate core curriculum, and appears in a slightly different form in the *Proceedings of the 87th Annual Meeting*. The other panelists on the session included Gary S. Karpinski (University of Massachusetts at Amherst) and Timothy A. Smith (Northern Arizona University)

[2] My e-mail solicitation provided an excerpt from the NASM session description, and I asked colleagues for input from the perspective of their institutions, including ways the core had changed or developed over time. This open-ended question allowed respondents to focus on any aspect of the curriculum that they wished.

smaller music departments.[3] Based on this input, six themes emerged, which I will discuss in turn.

1) Engagement of professional music theorists in designing and teaching the core

Three schools described a transition to their current core from an older comprehensive musicianship curriculum; this coincided with a move from "generalist" faculty (such as composers and performers) to music-theory specialists teaching in the core. The comprehensive musicianship approach—featuring chronological organization of materials, a focus on individual masterworks in historical context, and style composition from faux bourdon to serialism—has given way to curricula organized around development of a harmonically based understanding of tonal music and tonal forms, followed by an introduction to 20th-century and contemporary music. This type of curriculum prioritizes depth of knowledge over breadth of coverage (here, pre-tonal and non-Western traditions suffer), but it provides the best chance of giving students concrete skills that will serve their core repertoire well.

In schools large enough to have graduate programs and teaching assistants, several described movement away from assigning TAs sole responsibility for a class of students and toward a lecture-lab design, where full-time faculty present the core material in large lectures and teaching assistants run small-group "lab" sessions where hands-on skills are practiced. In these schools, as well as schools where theory is taught by non-specialists or adjuncts, a faculty coordinator typically oversees the whole curriculum, chooses the text (perhaps with a committee), and actively trains those teaching in the core in order to achieve consistency of terminology and approach.

[3] Responses came from the Boyer College of Music and Dance (Temple University), Cleveland Institute of Music, Crane School of Music (State University of NY, Potsdam), Eastman School of Music (University of Rochester), Houghton College, Hunter College (City University of New York), Ithaca College School of Music, Juilliard School, Nazareth College, New England Conservatory, Oberlin College Conservatory, Schulich School of Music (McGill University), University of Alabama School of Music, and University of Massachusetts at Amherst Department of Music and Dance. The sample is thus a bit biased: toward professional music training rather than liberal arts programs, and it comes from the perspective of music theorists rather than other faculty teaching music theory.

An important trend, not captured by these responses, is that music theory *pedagogy* itself has become a specialization within music theory. Theory pedagogy now has its own degree programs, conferences, and journal.[4] An important resource for teachers, the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* launched in September, 2012, a new website (http://jmtp.ou.edu) that will provide text, audio, and video support to both specialists and non-specialists teaching theory classes at all levels.[5] With the rise of theory pedagogy as a research discipline come new pedagogical ideas and a new generation of textbooks influenced by current research. These typically remove the chord-by-chord, roots-by-fifth approach that focused theory classes of the past heavily upon harmony and part-writing. Newer texts now also consider the linear and contrapuntal underpinnings of harmonic motion; they typically begin with two-voice writing before introducing SATB textures, and they attend much more to analysis of phrase and form, giving life and context to the harmonies under study.[6]

[4] An internet search of theory pedagogy degrees identifies masters degrees at the Eastman School of Music, the Peabody Institute, and Michigan State University. In addition, there are graduate certificate programs in theory pedagogy at the University of Michigan, University of Kentucky, and University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Theory pedagogy conferences have been sponsored by CMS, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the Society for Music Theory's Graduate Student Workshop. Finally, the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* is a thriving research journal, now in its 25th year.

[5] In addition to articles, it plans to include links to public domain scores and recordings, sample syllabi and assignments, an open forum, and video options such as teaching demonstrations and peer tutoring via Skype.

[6] Some texts that follow this model include Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011); Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis,* 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton, 2011); and Miguel Roig-Francolí, *Harmony in Context*, 2nd ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2011).

2) Focus on analysis and repertoire, somewhat less on part-writing

Because many core curricula now span only four semesters (sometimes five), and since the abstractions of part-writing may seem less relevant to young performers, many theorists are moving to integrate form and analysis and some style composition into the first two years rather than waiting for an upper division theory elective. Nearly half of the schools surveyed reported a move toward engagement with music repertoire and somewhat less emphasis upon figured bass and part-writing. These writing skills, along with an introduction to species counterpoint, remain critical foundational elements for core theory training, but they are not the sole focus. Teachers also understand that some majors—like music education—have so many required courses that topics like form and post-tonal theory, if not included in the core, will likely not be introduced to these students at all. Even more important, we find that students simply do not know repertoire. The iTunes generation comes to us having listened to more music, and more diverse music, than perhaps any generation before—but their musical choices can be eclectic and leave large and important works and genres untouched.

How do schools integrate form and analysis into a curriculum organized by harmonic topic? Rather than introducing musical forms as a chronological progression, musical works are analyzed, and perhaps composed, as soon as the student has studied the harmonic concepts needed to understand each formal type. Thus excerpts from dance suites to sonatas (even pop songs) are used to study phrase structure, once students understand the basics of diatonic harmony and cadences (typically semester 1). With secondary dominants and diatonic modulation under their belts, they can analyze and write binary forms (semester 2). Once sequence types are mastered, students are ready to study invention and fugue; and facility with modal mixture and chromatic harmony gives them access to a wealth of Romantic Lieder, character pieces, and sonatas (semesters 3 or 4). In the final core class (semester 4 or 5) short modal, atonal, or serial works are studied. Thus the entire curriculum is infused with music, and students have the strong harmonic grounding to explore these forms fully.

3) Integration of aural and written skills and increased time devoted to aural training

Nearly half of the respondents to my solicitation reported that their schools have increased the amount of time devoted to aural skills training. Most schools report a five-day-a-week theory core, often with Monday/Wednesday/Friday devoted to harmony and analysis and Tuesday/Thursday to aural training. However, two schools report reversing that distribution (at least in some semesters) with MWF for aural skills, to provide closer supervision of the skill-building process. Others report incorporating more aural skills training into the "written" theory classroom, thus complementing and supporting the work of the aural skills classes. Many respondents reported that the theory and aural skills curricula are coordinated in content and pacing, even when the two classes are divided. Sometimes both classes are taught by the same faculty member, and when adjuncts or teaching assistants are used for skills classes, their work is overseen by a coordinating faculty member who ensures consistency of content, terminology, and approach.

4) Increased use of technology in teaching

While only five respondents specifically commented on increased use of technology, innovations in this area are impossible to ignore.[7] Many schools now have adopted course management platforms (like Blackboard) institution-wide, and all course reserves, listening lists, assignments, etc. are downloaded or streamed by students. The availability of public domain musical scores for free download

[7] Technology in the core does not refer to CAI, or computer-assisted instruction. Some schools do adopt drill-and-practice software as an aid for out-of-class dictation practice or for review of musical fundamentals, but these resources have not replaced classroom hours where human interaction and diagnosis of problems is key. Some schools are designing their own online materials for ear-training and fundamentals drill rather than relying on commercial packages; this is a function both of our instructors' technological savvy and a desire to coordinate materials closely with local pedagogical approaches, terminology, and curricula. To my knowledge, very few schools provide online courses in music theory beyond basic fundamentals classes; most view the in-class teacher-student interaction with the musical materials as crucial.

has reduced the need for musical anthologies,[8] and library listening rooms stand empty as students listen to all required works by internet streaming (which is available 24/7, unlike most listening labs). Students now have unlimited access to all course materials, so that it is virtually impossible to complain of losing an assignment, not getting to the library for reserve materials, or not knowing when something was due. However, faculty who used to rely on class handouts are now faced with a culture where the norm is the electronic upload, and duplicating budgets have been cut. Asking students to print their own handout before class and remember to bring it ensures that some members of the class will not have crucial material before them when it is needed; students who choose to read the handout from a laptop may really be surfing the web instead of attending to class content.[9]

One solution to the handout problem is to move to digital projection. Many schools have been investing in smart classrooms, and the technology available today has much to offer. A PowerPoint lecture can have lots of bells and whistles—from embedded sound files and YouTube clips, to score excerpts and entertaining animations—but it entails a fundamentally different way of teaching. Students sit in a semi-darkened room and, unless the instructor is very skilled, they receive information in a more passive way. They are not forced to interact with the teacher or synthesize information on the spot. Without a paper copy of the score on their desks, they are less likely to make analytical markings, take notes, or have material to review at home later. With PowerPoint, some of the spontaneity and interactivity of a chalkboard and piano lecture are simply lost.

[8] Examples of score (or score excerpt) download sites include the International Music Score Library Project, IMSLP (http://imslp.org/), Indiana University's Variations project (http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/variations/scores/), Sibley Digital Scores (http://digitalscores.wordpress.com/), Tim Cutler's theory examples website (http://musictheoryexamples.com/), and specialty sites such as Tim Smith's site for Bach cantatas (http://www.bach-cantatas.com/IndexScores.htm).

[9] With regard to student computing, only one school volunteered information about a technology requirement for students in the core. It may be that students now pick up knowledge about music notation programs, recording and editing programs on their own (even before college) without much formal instruction, as software gets better and more intuitive.

Not to oversimplify (because there are always exceptions), we may be seeing a generational digital divide. New assistant professors grew up with computers, used PowerPoint and Finale in high school, routinely design and update their own websites, write and assign blogs, and easily adapt to newer technologies like Smartboards and clickers. Using a smartboard, teachers can project a music notation file, notate a melody or progression interactively during class, listen to it, and save it for future use. Clickers allow students to respond to multiple-choice questions electronically during a lecture, promoting more active learning. Interestingly, technology may enhance core teaching but few faculty seem to rely on it for real instruction outside the classroom. There has been no CAI revolution.

5) Remedial classes are growing

Half of my respondents commented on the increased need for remediation in their incoming freshman theory classes. Creating additional sections of remedial fundamentals classes, however, puts a strain on faculty resources, and often puts these students perpetually behind their peers by a semester or a year. Some schools offer home-grown online tutorials designed expressly for the purpose of getting entering students up to speed before they arrive on campus for a theory placement test.[10] Even so, many students still need the class. One bright spot in this regard is the College Board's Advanced Placement Music Theory Test and coordinated high school theory classes. One respondent noted that scores on placement tests at his institution were going up, possibly due to the increase in AP Music Theory participation (some 18,000 high school students in 2011).

6) Two challenges: improvisation, music outside the Western canon

Because so many theory core curricula are organized around principles of harmonic progression and voice leading, these principles can function as frameworks for structured improvisations; yet improvisation study has been slow in coming to core curricula. There are hopeful signs, however, including new textbooks and new editions of older textbooks that include improvisation as

[10] Notable in this regard are the eTheory class offered by the Eastman School of Music's Institute for Music Leadership (http://www.esm.rochester.edu/iml/entrepreneurship/eTheory/index.php), and MFO (Music Fundamentals Online), which has just launched at Indiana University for admitted students (https://mfo.music.indiana.edu/login)

a core activity.[11] Among the key elements to be considered in an improvisation component are: an early start, with simple melodic or rhythmic pattern improvisations at the beginning, inclusion of exercises appropriate for all instruments and voice (not just keyboard), and clear structures and models for students to elaborate. Viewing improvisation as a series of structured choices within a given framework—rather than as something totally free—makes the enterprise less intimidating for those new to this practice (student and instructor alike).

Over half of the schools surveyed reported that they were now including music beyond the Western canon in their core curriculum.[12] In many curricula, jazz and rock examples that fit the harmonic paradigms under study are simply plugged in as appropriate. In others, the core may include a short unit on jazz harmony. World music is more of a challenge, however, because it does not share the same paradigms. Three schools surveyed took a more radical approach, offering alternatives within the core. In one institution, all jazz majors replace semesters 4-5 of the core with a two-semester jazz theory sequence. In another school, any student may opt to replace semester 4 of the core (chromaticism and large forms) with either jazz theory, popular music theory, electronic music, or world music theory. In another, all students take a required fifth semester core course in global musicianship, which includes comparative

[11] Among the textbooks that include structured improvisation exercises are Robert Ottman and Nancy Rogers, *Music for Sight Singing* 8th ed. (Pearson, 2011); Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011); and Joel Phillips, Paul Murphy, Elizabeth West Marvin, and Jane Piper Clendinning, *The Musician's Guide to Aural Skills*, 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton, 2011). Others are in development and are likely to appear in print soon.

[12] Whether to incorporate music beyond the common-practice canon evokes strong reactions from some faculty on both sides of the question. At the 2011 meeting of the Society for Music Theory (Minneapolis, MN), an evening special session grappled with this question in the form of a debate entitled "The Great Theory Debate: Be it resolved....Common practice period repertoire no longer speaks to our students; it's time to fire a cannon at the canon." Participants included Brenda Ravenscroft (Queen's University), Moderator; Poundie Burstein (Hunter College and Graduate Center CUNY); Justin London (Carleton College); Peter Schubert (McGill University); and Heather Laurel (The City College of New York, CUNY).

world music analysis and transcription skills. These innovations show a new openness to music outside the traditional canon, which is likely to continue.

In closing, let me return to the opening questions. What is the function of the core curriculum in music theory and what basic core knowledge should all students acquire? The function, in short, is to develop music literacy and musicianship; all undergraduates should be able to read, write, and perform music with understanding. We want our students' understanding to inform their musicianship skills, to enable them to learn new works rapidly and with fluency. We aim for more than reading notes off a page, however; we want students to understand the melodic, harmonic, and formal context in which those notes are heard. We want students to internalize musical structure through study of masterworks, through style composition and improvisation, by speaking and writing about music, and through performance; and we want their structural understanding to translate into performance decisions that influence interpretation and foster ever greater artistry.