Critical Studies in Improvisation
Études critiques en improvisation

Improvising a Music-Theory Curriculum

Garrett Michaelsen

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Résumé de l'article

This article explores the cultural hegemonies perpetuated by typical music-theory curricula and advocates for the use of improvisation—as both classroom activity and guiding philosophy—as a way forward.

Improvising a Music-Theory Curriculum

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Music theory is a curious subject. On the one hand, it claims to describe elemental objects—the pitches, intervals, scales, chords, durations, rhythms, and meters that make up musical sounds. On the other, it describes cultural objects—the common progressions, melodic formulas, and forms of specific musical styles and genres. But does this distinction actually exist? How objective are those fundamental objects? Even a musical aspect as seemingly universal as pitch is in fact defined in cultural terms which music theorists tend to adopt axiomatically and unthinkingly. While the predominant Western conception of pitch relies on a spatial metaphor, in which pitches lie on a spectrum of low to high, this metaphor is far from ubiquitous. Other cultures discuss pitch as being big or small, male or female, young or old.[1] A rejoinder to this observation might be: of course, music theory, if taught in the West, is of the West. Why would this even need to be stated?

One reason for questioning the assumptions surrounding how a subject is defined is that those assumptions have far-reaching ramifications. Cora Palfy has raised the issue of music theory's "'hidden curriculum': a concept or idea that, though not explicitly taught to students, is communicated by the classroom or curricular design" (8). Palfy reveals the results of a survey (analyzed with the help of statistician Eric Gilson) showing the extent to which students have internalized the message that many of their music-theory classes gives them: namely, that music of the Western common-practice tradition is the most valuable. While she does find that many students have been exposed to works by non-male, non-Western, and non-white composers, the quantity of such works pales in comparison to those by, typically, white-male Germans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Philip Ewell has furthered this critique by shining a bright light on music theory's "white racial frame" (1.3). Indeed, Ewell rightfully calls what is commonly termed "music theory" as "white music theory," and reveals the extent to which the entire discipline—in both its pedagogies and research interests—promotes the value of white music and theories over all others (1.1). He draws attention to the explicit racism in influential German theorist Heinrich Schenker's writings and connects this racism to notions of hierarchy in music, ultimately arguing that "race, racism, and white supremacy are, in fact, a significant part of Schenker's music theories, and a part that we should consider in how we approach the man and his ideas" (4.5.5). By resting on a particular edifice—one in which a low-to-high pitch metaphor builds to chords, progressions, cadences, forms, and the like—music theory reinforces a conception of value in music that underlines the hegemony of the common-practice period and white men.

Calls for more diversity in education are omnipresent. What I would like to advocate for in this article, however, is diversity in instructional methods and methodologies. In particular, I would like to discuss the use of improvisation to teach music theory. This is not a new idea. Calls to use improvisation in aural curricula stem back at least to Kate Covington's discussion of how improvisation is a complex, real-world activity that ultimately leads to deeper and more integrated student learning. And these calls have been heeded: most large-publisher music-theory texts adopted by American music departments include improvisation activities, none more so than Nancy Rogers's "structured improvisations" in her recent editions of Robert Ottman's classic text *Music for Sight Singing*. What these approaches lack, however, is a sense that being able to fluently speak in music—whether using Western or non-Western musical structures—is an essential aspect of students' musical training. Tacking improvisation onto conservatory programs focused on molding orchestral performers, who may never be asked to

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improvise professionally, will always feel extraneous. While I am aware of no study exploring the degree to which instructors use improvisation in contemporary music-theory classrooms, I expect that improvisation has not yet broken apart the "holy tetralogy" of most curricula: four-part chorale-style part writing, Roman-numeral analysis, sight singing, and dictation. Many additions have been made to this tetralogy over the years, including counterpoint, model composition, analytical writing, and even improvisation, but these curricular extensions often act as appetizers preceding, or desserts following, the main course.

Defining a Modern Music-Theory Curriculum

What would a music-theory curriculum look like with improvisation placed at or nearer to its center? In the remainder of this article, I will explore this idea and recount my experiences attempting to do so in a music-theory program at a public university in the United States. My approach has not been to substantially reduce the tetralogy and focus extensively on improvisation, an approach taken by Ed Sarath in his book *Music Theory through Improvisation*.[2] While I am drawn to his all-in approach, several factors have pulled me in other directions. The strongest of these factors is the weight of tradition and the expectation of what "knowing music theory" means. The edifice that makes up "music theory of the common-practice era" has evolved over hundreds of years. It has its roots in the teachings of "great" composers like J.S. Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, and has reached a remarkably mature state today. Students who work diligently through this material will emerge with an ability to understand this music in broad terms. They may not be able to explain the differences in tonal syntax among composers like Corelli, C.P.E. Bach, and Chopin, but they will possess the tools to understand their work at a general level. Notably, they will not become fluent speakers of this musical language since they are rarely asked to improvise with it, something that was very common amongst musicians of those eras. But chipping away at this pedagogical monument creates a dilemma: with each stroke of the chisel, what will happen to the structure overall? Which stroke will cause it to topple, and which will open up space for something new? As a music theorist trained in orthodox approaches, the logical progression and clearly defined goals of a conventional theory curriculum appeal to me. But the courageous voices of theorists such as Palfy and Ewell have shown the degree to which this curriculum is not only reductive but also supportive of ideologies that can lead to ethnocentrism at best and white supremacy at worst.

The question of what a music education should contain today is very much unanswered. One of the documents which has catalyzed calls for change is the College Music Society's 2014 "Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors." This document (with Ed Sarath as its lead author) has henceforth (and forebodingly) been referred to as the "Manifesto" by many, and has resulted in countless discussions, conference panels, and papers in response.[3] Its "three key pillars" are "creativity, diversity, and integration," which, as Campbell et al. contend, should be emphasized over the Euro-classical values of interpretation, specialization, and separation (4–6). The authors argue that these changes are necessary to prepare contemporary music students for the broader, global musical culture they will encounter in their careers. They even go so far as to claim that, by shifting from the backwards-looking focus of prior curricula to a present-and-future orientation, these changes can help return music education to a more central place in Western culture. Whether or not this can be achieved, the overall goal of making musical training more relevant to students' needs today reverberates strongly in my department. Our signature programs are audio engineering and music education, with smaller programs in music business and performance, as well as a new program on composition for new media. The students that complete our program are unlikely to perform with orchestras, but are very likely to write their own music, produce and record others' music, or educate students about the nearly

infinite spectrum of music available to listeners today. Even though we began our curriculum transformation a few years before the Manifesto appeared, we came to similar conclusions: our students need to be able to create in our pluralistic musical present.

Jazz Improvisation and the Theory Classroom

As a jazz musician myself, I have drawn on many of the techniques developed in jazz pedagogy to foster the creative impulse amongst my music-theory students. Foremost among these techniques is the ability to improvise while soloing over chord changes. The process of getting students to be able to do this is valuable on its own: we begin by listening to a recording of a tune and discussing its general features (such as timbres, meters, and forms). Next, we analyze the lead sheet, making sense of the chord symbols as harmonic progressions through Roman-numeral analysis. These lead-sheet examples serve dual-duty as opportunities for students to realize keyboard harmonizations. With a firm understanding of the chord structures in place, students then pick up their instruments and work through chordal arpeggiations and scalar representations informed by chord-scale theory. Having students use their primary instruments or voices offers them a more comfortable environment for their exploration of the theoretical concepts contained in any given lead sheet, as well as ingraining those concepts in their fingers and ears experientially. As an example, I have discussed elsewhere the use of rhythm changes to introduce secondary-dominant chords ("Rhythm Changes, Improvisation, and Chromaticism"). Through playing the chords and gaining sufficient mastery to be able to melodically improvise over them, students inhabit the abstract harmonic concept far more fully than they would by merely analyzing it in scores or notating it in four-part chorales.

Another benefit of using jazz improvisation in theory classrooms is that, by requiring students to learn solo improvisation, mastering music-theoretical concepts, and handling these concepts aurally becomes a necessity. As I have written before, "improvisation is music theory and ear training with immediacy" ("Improvising to Learn/Learning to Improvise"). The degree of fluency required to be able to fit into a complex musical moment far surpasses what students typically achieve when sitting passively in class. Their improvisations create a powerful feedback loop in which they conceive musical utterances based on their knowledge of music-theoretical concepts, perform those utterances, aurally process how those utterances fit with the emerging flow surrounding them, and then use those perceptions to inform their next utterances. Anecdotally, jazz musicians are some of the top performers in my theory classes, which I believe stems from the much higher standard of mastery required for them to be able to handle music-theoretical concepts in the moment. While I don't expect all my students to achieve the level of stylistic proficiency that students who specifically study jazz improvisation do, I do expect everyone to demonstrate their knowledge of music-theoretical topics using such improvisations.

Idiomatic and Non-Idiomatic Improvisational Pedagogies

To riff on Derek Bailey's concept of "idiomatic" and "non-idiomatic" improvisation, my use of jazz improvisation in the theory classroom might be called idiomatic. It is obviously idiomatic in that they are improvising using the jazz idiom and I am using the term here to refer to the idiomatic nature of the improvisation itself. I also use it—in contrast to Bailey—to describe the ways in which these classroom improvisations connect to pedagogical traditions in jazz: when performing these activities, students are essentially in a jazz improvisation class learning to improvise in ways idiomatic to jazz. While my goals are ultimately to deepen their understanding of some music-theoretical topic, the improvisations are rooted in an actual musical tradition. Other such pedagogically idiomatic approaches have been explored: Peter Schubert teaches

improvised vocal counterpoint from the Renaissance, Michael Callahan explores Baroque counterpoint through keyboard improvisations, and Gilad Rabinovitch and Johnandrew Slominski use Galant *partimenti* to teach eighteenth century improvisation. All of these examples stem from real improvisatory practices of the past, many of which have only recently been resuscitated. They are also valuable ways to revive improvisation as an essential aspect of musical training in common-practice traditions after its languishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There are ways of using improvisation pedagogically that may be called "non-idiomatic" in that the improvisation activities are not linked to pedagogies of a particular idiom. When I ask students to improvise a melody using a scale in any style they like, I do so in this non-idiomatic sense. It is not that the resulting music will have no idiom, but rather that students are not confined within a specific idiom when asked to engage with the exercise. Improvisation in this sense offers an exploratory environment with fewer rules and limits. Other examples of this approach in the theory classroom include constructing and shifting between meters by layering improvised rhythmic articulations; creating graphic representations of musical contours or textures and then performing them; and composing a twelve-tone row and then using its subsets and sequences for harmonic and melodic improvisations. Some of these tasks can express musical idioms (as in modernist graphic scores) but they often don't connect to the instructional methods of a performance tradition. As a result, I have found non-idiomatic improvisational pedagogies to be useful in introducing students to a concept but not as educationally enriching as idiomatically oriented tasks. Students understand when they are being asked to do something which rests on a historical foundation and will develop a real-world skill, and consequently they value that skill more highly.

Curricular Change *as* Improvisation

In any attempt at large-scale curricular change, battles inevitably ensue. While most of the heated arguments between the old and new guards at my institution preceded my arrival, I could still sense many of the scars those clashes left. The deepest of these scars came from a sense among non-theory faculty that the subject of music theory had become utterly unresponsive to the current needs of students. On one side, the music theorists guarded their turf and felt that, as subject-area experts, their opinions should hold greater weight. On the other, the faculty at large—consisting of educators, recording engineers, historians, composers, and performers—had outlined a vision for the department that necessitated broad change that the music theorists were unwilling to consider. My most vivid memory of one such internecine debate involves the augmented-sixth chord. From the perspective of some of my non-theorist colleagues, the complexity of the topic and its opaque nomenclature made its study seem unnecessary if our goals were to expose students to a broader array of musical traditions. We ended up deciding to keep it, though discussed in fewer class sessions than is typical, as a way of highlighting the differences between "Eurological" and "Afrological" approaches to harmony, to use George Lewis's terms. From a Eurological perspective, the chord offered a chance to explore the apotheosis of a contrapuntal understanding of harmony, with chromatic lines pushing the very identity of the chord as a "chord" to its breaking point. From an Afrological point of view, the chord can be compared with the tritone substitution, a seemingly similar chord that originated in jazz as a process of substituting one chord for another in a repeating form— what Henry Louis Gates Jr. might call "signifyin(g) on" a tune. While the augmented sixth chord and the tritone substitution can result in similar chordal structures, their distinct originations— one through counterpoint and the other through chordal substitution—makes them ideal opportunities for discussing with students how similar concepts can rest on very different foundations.

As I have reflected on the process by which our peculiar (in both senses of the term) music-theory curriculum came to be, it occurs to me that this process was fundamentally improvisational. Instead of being controlled by a single person or single disciplinary tradition, it was open to the perspectives of the whole department, incorporating the contributions of many. Like an improvisation, not every idea made a lasting impact on the direction the curriculum ultimately took, but the lateral airing of these ideas established a tenor of openness that helped make it what it became. Like an improvisation, the curriculum continues to change over time, constantly adapting to the needs of the students and expertise of the instructors. And like an improvisation, the curriculum is unique to its place and time but open to disciplinary nomadism, which is a key aspect of improvisatory sounding.

Constructing a curriculum in this way has not been easy. No text exists that we can easily adopt, and no established pedagogical path shows us the way forward. Our procedure has been to search for materials widely, borrowing concepts from Sarath and others, and writing many of our own documents. One of the challenges of making improvisation fundamental to music theory is a chicken-egg problem: if the instructors teaching music theory are trained without having to improvise, will they be able to teach students using improvisation? And which idiomatic improvisations should be used—jazz, Renaissance, Baroque, Galant, Indian, Arabic, or any combinations of these and other systems? The answer to these questions and conundrums is to be improvisational: teach the students you have using the expertise and willingness of your instructors, while pushing everyone to have a more expansive worldview. Don't expect the needs of one place and group of people to be the same as any other. Just as the term "common-practice period" covers a diverse panoply of musicking practices, no single curriculum-for-all exists. Improvising the curriculum opens a space for change which, like any collaborative and creative activity, involves risk and conflict, but has the potential to better represent the interests and identities of all involved. Every path towards change can and should be different, and improvisation—as both activity and philosophy—can guide the way.

Notes

[1] See Zbikowski, "Metaphor and Music Theory," for more on the topic of music and cultural metaphors.

[2] While Sarath covers four-part chorales in chapter 10 (158–67) as well as the related concept of species counterpoint in appendix 1 (293–307), the proportional time spent on these topics compared to others is an order of magnitude less than a conventional music-theory text. Much of his text frames typical music-theory topics in terms of jazz and its related pedagogies, with a focus on performance and improvisation of concepts using voice, instrument, or keyboard.

[3] See, for instance: Seaton, "Reconsidering Undergraduate Music History"; Snodgrass, "Integration, Diversity, and Creativity"; and Campbell, "The Manifesto in Motion."

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