

Discussion questions on the general approach of music theory pedagogy

1) How do you answer the typical student's question, "Why do I have to take this theory course?"

To answer this question, I think that one must allow music to be seen as a language. Music's goal, like other languages, is to communicate. Perhaps this communication does not take the form of specific ideas or concepts, but some sense of emotion, feeling, aesthetic sensibility, etc. is imparted to the listener through music.

As a further exploration of this metaphor, let us make an analogy between music and the English language. A musical performance is perhaps much like a film or theatrical presentation. The performing musicians are the actors; the composers are the playwrights. Music theory is the grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of our musical language. Therefore, imagine a screen actor who has no concept of the meaning of the lines he is delivering. The actor can enunciate the lines perfectly and has been highly trained in pronouncing English words, phrases, and sentences, yet has no conception of how such grammatical constructs are put together. One would be fairly sure that the performances of such an actor would pale in comparison to those performances of an actor who spoke English natively and could converse fluently, both with the director and the other actors.

Of course, most (if not almost all) good actors are fluent in the tongue in which they perform. That means the good actor can not only read and enunciate, but also can write and speak. Writing and speaking are akin to composing and improvising, respectively. Most people are trained to "compose" and "improvise" in their mother tongue at an early age. In contrast, it is quite a travesty, perhaps, that musicians are often only taught to compose and improvise music until much later in their lives. The teaching of music theory is an attempt to resolve this significant disconnect between "reading," "writing," and "speaking" in musical terms. Music theory teaches the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of music without which a fluent understanding of music is impossible.

2) How do you make theory classes musically relevant to students?

Music theory often involves teaching abstract concepts, such as chord labels, intervals, outlines of form, etc. These concepts can easily be divorced from the music itself. However, since the musical concepts arise from musical issues, a discussion of music theory inside a vacuum devoid of actual musical pieces can quickly create an overly sterile environment.

Teaching music theory in tandem with looking at and listening to real works of music brings meaning to the theoretical concepts.

Of course, many works of music, no matter how hallowed by the pillars of academia, hold almost no interest for students of music theory. In a conservatory setting, pieces from the classical canon may be appropriate and relevant when teaching common-practice theory to undergraduates; these students live and breathe the classical canon. But even these students certainly listen to other genres of music outside the classroom: pop, rock, rap, jazz, etc. I would guess that one of the main problems with the "comprehensive" approach to music theory, starting with plainchant to discuss melodic construction, is that very few students actively listen to plainchant or have even a passing interest in the genre, yet the subject of melodic construction is central to understanding music theory.

The case becomes even more extreme when the music student has only a marginal interest in classical music whatsoever. In these instances, aligning the repertoire of the program with the varied tastes of the student certainly becomes difficult, but some attempt should be made to bridge the interests of the student with the curriculum I would think. Cranking out chorale after chorale to teach four-part harmony seems less and less pertinent to the student living in a world where parallel fifths and proper voice-leading are eschewed all the time. In summary, some "relevance" can be brought to music theory through analysis of "relevant" works to the students' musical lives.

3) When you teach theory...is there something that you wish to impart in addition to the course's topics?

I am not sure exactly what this question is asking, even with the hints and qualifications, but I can say that I would like students to be musicians who can easily write and improvise music. I would like students to feel comfortable with how simple music can be and often only needs to be. I would like students to understand that at its core, complete music-making—that is improvising, composing, singing, performing, etc.—should be fairly easy and second nature. Of course, I in no way desire to alienate students for whom these tasks do not come second nature, but I would like to impart the feeling that it is encouraged, even necessary, to write and improvise no matter how far that writing and improvisation may be from some preordained masterwork.

4) Name one or two general techniques that you would invoke that would help students to learn.

Based on my response to Question #3, I would certainly attempt to fold in much more active music-making into a curriculum. Improvisation would be a key component, too, since for many musical genres, composition is the natural outgrowth of improvisation. Even the great classical composers, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Scarlatti, Bach, etc. were known for their great improvisatory skill. Thus improvisation would perhaps come before or at least in sequence with composition in the teaching of music theory.

Moreover, I think it would be beneficial for students to look at a fair amount of work from lesser composers. Instead of constantly comparing themselves to the masters, students may benefit from analyzing and attempting to copy simpler models whose compositional frameworks are more transparent. Too often, the rift between student and esteemed composer seems so great that crossing such a large gap may appear too daunting. At some point, students must take a close look at masterworks, of course, to understand how to unravel their complexities, but not before lesser works can be copied and unraveled. How can one truly understand and analyze Bach if one does not understand and have a thorough knowledge of Couperin, Vivaldi, and Buxtehude?