Tools for Teaching Popular Music Without Staff Notation
Trevor de Clercq, MTSU

Hello. Let me start by giving you a little background as to WHY I teach without staff notation.

[NEXT] Although MTSU has a School of Music, I teach in the Department of Recording Industry, where students can major in three areas: Audio Production, Music Business, and Commercial Songwriting. [NEXT] The Department of Recording Industry offers two music theory courses: RIM 1230, the introductory commercial musicianship class, which includes fundamentals, basic rhythms, and diatonic harmony. And the other class is RIM 3450, advanced commercial musicianship, which covers more complex rhythmic topics and chromatic harmony. My main role at MTSU for the past decade has been to coordinate and teach these two courses, which are taught exclusively through popular music.

For many years, I taught these classes using staff notation. But recently, I have been teaching them without staff notation. The main reason is that my students generally don't read staff notation when playing their main instrument. I, for example, am a fairly skilled guitar player, but I cannot read staff notation when playing guitar, despite having a PhD in music theory from Eastman and being able to read music on the piano. That's because, like most of my students, I learned to play guitar entirely by ear. So I've come to think that learning music theory and developing aural skills don't necessarily require learning how to read music on the staff. And given the limited amount of time I have with my students, I wanted to maximize what they were learning about the music itself. Of course, I need to illustrate musical concepts in some way in my classes, so I developed a few visualization tools that I thought I'd share with you today.

Now some of the tools I use are certainly familiar to you. [NEXT] For example, I use form charts, like the one shown here for the song "Easy" by Lionel Richie. [NEXT] I also use what I call a form timeline, such as the one shown here for the song "Cake" by Flo Rida. [NEXT] I might also add some notation to help show the dynamic changes through the sections. These are fairly standard visualizations, though, so nothing should be too surprising here.

[NEXT] Many of my students learn to play songs off the internet from what I call a "chord and lyric chart," such as the one shown here for the song "Wide Open Spaces" by the Dixie Chicks. A chart like this is useful, but it has some obvious disadvantages. One issue, among many, is that a chart like this does not show how long any of these chords last.

[NEXT] As an alternative, musicians in the Nashville, Tennessee area play songs from the notation shown here, which is an example of the Nashville number system. Unlike the chord and lyric chart we saw earlier, a Nashville number chart shows the chords of the song in a functional way, similar to Roman numerals but with Arabic numbers instead. The tonic of this song is E, which is circled in the upper-left-hand corner of the chart. And then each number on the chart corresponds to a bar worth of time. If you want to have more than one chord in a bar, you just underline them or put them in a box. [NEXT] In this chart, for example, the first bar of the verse is split between a ONE chord and then a TWO minor seven chord, in other words, an E major chord and an F-sharp minor seventh chord.

What I especially like about a Nashville number chart is that you can show the chords for an entire song on a single piece of paper. As a music theorist, it's also nice to see that professional studio musicians DO in fact think about functional harmony, as chords in relation to a tonic.

[NEXT] I use Nashville number charts a lot in my courses, although I usually make them a little prettier, as shown here. I could spend the rest of my time today talking about Nashville number charts, but I've already published on this topic and made a few presentations about this notation. In addition, the advantage of a these charts is also their disadvantage. By reducing the song to its chords only, a Nashville number chart doesn't show the melodic structure or how the chords and melody relate.

[NEXT] That's where a lead sheet is useful. Here, for example, is a lead sheet for "Wide Open Spaces." Lead sheets, of course, use traditional staff notation. [NEXT] Notice, for instance, that the first couple bars of this lead sheet show the acoustic guitar part in staff notation. Now speaking as a guitar player, I'd much rather see this guitar part in tablature, since tablature shows me exactly what to play, which is

especially helpful in this case because you're dealing with a drop-D tuning and a capo on the second fret.

[NEXT] The rest of this lead sheet shows the vocal melody, of course. But you know, almost any vocalist who wants to learn this song will probably not bother reading the pitches from the lead sheet. They'll just learn the melody by ear. After all, what's written here is just an approximation of the real melody. (I don't have time to play the recording of the song, but believe me that the rhythms and pitches in the lead sheet represent a significant simplification of the actual vocal melody.) That said, if you wanted to sing this melody from this notation, how would you do it? If you're like me, you would turn the dots on the page into note names, then turn the note names into scale degrees given the key, and then turn those scale degrees into sound. But wouldn't it be nice if there were some sort of vocal tablature—something like guitar tablature—that showed you more directly what you should be singing or hearing?

For this reason, I have been using a sort of custom notation in my classes that combines a few different notational strategies. [NEXT] Here, for example, is the guitar tablature for the main riff of "Moby Dick" by Led Zeppelin. Like most guitar tablature, the riff is also shown in standard notation, which inefficiently creates two staves for just a single instrumental part. How might we make an equivalent tablature if we wanted someone to sing this guitar riff?

[NEXT] First, let's get rid of the noteheads. In the Kodály method, this is called stick notation, although traditional stick notation doesn't usually show the pitch contour, as I have here. [NEXT] Now that the note heads are gone, we can put in the note names. Notice that there is no key signature now, since there is no staff, but that's necessarily not a bad thing. [NEXT] Notice that the staff notation for the riff—and this is taken from a publication by Hal Leonard—includes two sharps in the key signature, implying that D major is the key, even though the main riff is clearly in D minor pentatonic. As you may or may not know, a lot of scholarship on popular music has problematized the notion of a major-minor key systems, so NOT having a key signature may actually be a notational improvement.

That said, the tonic pitch here is definitely the note D. [NEXT] And so we could represent the riff like this, with scale degrees rather than note names. Be aware that scale degrees in popular music always refer to the tonic of the parallel major scale. So flat-7 is the note C, whether we think we are in D major, D minor, or neither.

I don't really have a name for this kind of notation, but it's something I use a lot, since it shows the pitch and rhythmic organization of a melody or instrumental line in a functional way, without the student having to translate dots on the page into note names and then into scale degrees.

[NEXT] As a final little detail, you'll notice that the tablature doesn't include new fret numbers for notes that are tied over. After all, it's not a new note. So I usually don't include a new scale degree for notes that are tied over, as shown here [NEXT]. I'm somewhat on the fence about whether that's a good idea or not, though, but it's not a central part of this notation. I mention that only as an FYI for future examples.

[NEXT] I should admit that there is some precedent for this kind of notation among professional studio musicians. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a chart of the song "Daydream Believer" by the Monkees, as notated by a Nashville pro. As you can see, the main guitar riff is notated using this type of hybrid scale degree and stick notation. That all said, this type of notation is not in widespread use. As I reminder, the Arabic numbers when used with stick notation represent scale degrees, whereas the other Arabic numbers on this chart represent chords. So there is some potential confusion as to whether an Arabic number represents a chord or a scale degree. So I've done some further tweaking.

[NEXT] Consider, for example, the opening melody from "Viva La Vida" by Coldplay, which in staff notation looks like this. [NEXT] In contrast, I more directly indicate the scale-degree content by notating it as shown here. But to indicate how the melody and harmony interact, I need chord symbols. Now I could put Roman numerals above the staff, but for reasons not worth getting into here, Roman numerals and popular music don't really work very well together, and I've written about that in my 2019 JMTP article. Instead, I use Nashville numbers, as we've seen in the previous examples. But I want to clearly distinguish between the scale degree numbers and the chord numbers, so in this context, [NEXT] I simply put a box

around the chord number. It's kind of a hack, I admit, but it helps visually separate the chords from the melodic scale degrees, which is useful in more complicated settings.

[NEXT] Speaking of more complicated settings, this type of notation can get pretty cluttered, especially given the high levels of syncopation in popular music. But if I'm just trying to show the relationship between the melody and chords, then I don't necessarily need the stick notation in some cases. [NEXT] Here, for example, are just the scale degrees of the melody with the chords from the song "Bruises" by Train. [NEXT] I use this song in my teaching because it shows how a melody will tend to use the root note of the chord when a secondary dominant is in first inversion, such as the THREE over sharp-five chord, which is the secondary dominant of the following SIX MINOR chord. Slashes in Nashville numbers, by the way, indicate chord inversions not applied functions, just like slashes do in pop chord symbols.

[NEXT] I also sometimes circle melodic scale degrees to highlight what I call the melodic skeleton, which is a sort of rudimentary voice leading analysis. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the song "We Are the Champions" by Queen, where the circles show how the melody moves by step from scale degree one to scale degree five through scale-degree SHARP 4, which is the third of the 2 chord, which itself is the secondary dominant of the FIVE chord.

[NEXT] To be clear, there are many times in popular music where it's difficult to say what is scale degree ONE. So sometimes, I'll simply use note names and standard chord symbols. Here, for example, are the melodic pitches and chords for opening of the song "Jane Says" by Jane's Addiction. Some people might say that the song is in G Lydian. Others might say it's in A Mixolydian. But in my own hearing—given how much the melody emphasizes the notes D, F-sharp, and A—I hear the song in D major; we just never hear a tonic chord in the song.

[NEXT] Speaking of chords, voice leading in a keyboard texture IS something I teach, although I'm not concerned with traditional voice leading rules. I just try to get students to connect chords smoothly. Here, for example, is the voice leading for the opening verse of "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" by Stevie Wonder, showing the pitches in the left- and right-hand parts, along with the chord symbols and

Nashville numbers above. [NEXT] There are some really interesting harmonies to unpack here, especially this F over G-sharp chord, which functions as the secondary dominant of the following TWO minor chord. It comes from sliding the notes in the right hand down a half step from the previous bar and then down again into the next bar, kind of like a tritone sub but not exactly.

[NEXT] If I need to add rhythmic notation to the chords, I can do that below or above the staff, kind of like lute notation. Here, for example, is the opening chord progression to the verse of the song "Human" by Human League, which uses an inverted pedal of the note E-flat at the top of the voice leading to glue the chords together, which creates some nice extended chords.

[NEXT] When talking about form, especially smaller models like phrase organizations, I find it useful to show only fragments of the melody, so that students can focus on the relevant factors. Here, for example, is the opening verse to "Lyin' Eyes" by the Eagles, which shows a parallel period structure. Notice that the antecedent phrase ends with a half cadence on the FIVE chord, with scale degree TWO in the melody, whereas the consequent phrase ends with plagal motion from the FOUR chord to the tonic, with the melody ending on scale degree ONE.

[NEXT] Finally, this Hank Williams song is a classic example of a 32-bar AABA form. As you can see, the melodic and harmonic factors that define the various cadence types are shown clearly by the fragmentary melodic scale degrees and the Nashville numbers.

[NEXT] I realize this has been somewhat of a whirlwind tour of some notational approaches. There are other variations that I could show, but my time here is limited. That said, I hope that I've given you a sense of how you COULD display pitch and rhythmic content without using staff notation. I'd be happy to talk more about any of this after our meeting. Thank you very much for listening!