

Some resources:

- **What if we throw it all out and start over?** My co-authored (with Toby Rush) talk from MTMW 2020 on our work diversifying the curriculum at the University of Dayton: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mIWjSkkDRWZCIYayl27y5Mv3OfAboBV8/view>
- **Advancing Music Theory** (<https://tobyrush.com/theorywiki/>) - Our open-source wiki that includes a variety of materials for undergraduate music teaching
- **Sample syllabi** for our redesigned undergraduate curriculum, which includes modern versions currently taught at the University of Dayton and the University of Connecticut. The theory 1 syllabus was awarded honorable mention for SMT's 2021 Diversity in Course Design Award. https://tobyrush.com/theorywiki/index.php?title=SYLLABUS_SAMPLES
- **Personal teaching website** with syllabi links and links to undergraduate handouts: <https://stefanieacevedo.com/teaching/>
- See attached preprint of article "**Deceptive Gestures: Lies Our "Diverse" Curriculum Is Telling**" - PLEASE DO NOT DISSEMINATE BEYOND RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE.

Deceptive Gestures: Lies Our “Diverse” Curriculum Is Telling

As we innovate music theory curricula, we often find ourselves working against pedagogical assertions made by our forebears, our colleagues, and even ourselves. When spoken out loud, we well-intentioned pedagogues are quick to counter with modern, progressive approaches. However, for our students—past, current, and future—these ideas remain part of the “hidden curriculum” of what and how we teach: concepts “implicitly taught through the way courses are structured, content is communicated, conceptual examples are chosen, or by the personal biases of the professor.” ([Palfy & Gilson 2018](#), see also [Margolis, 2001](#)). We present six of these assertions below, stating in plain language what we believe our curricula are implicitly saying to our students.

1. The study of music theory should focus on melody, harmony, and form.

This assertion is borne out by most theory textbooks in common use today, as they devote their chapters and workbook exercises almost exclusively to these three topics, from music fundamentals to advanced topics like set theory. In fact, this still might understate the bias of many theory curricula, in which harmony is the primary focus—sometimes even the title of the textbook (see Table 1)! In many courses of study, form is a secondary focus—merely a container for harmonic gestures—and melody (specifically pitch) is rarely investigated beyond the relevant fundamentals ([Snodgrass 2016](#)).

<p>Table 1: Major North American Undergraduate Music Theory Textbooks (Adapted from Ewell 2020a, Example 1)</p>
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Author	Title	Approximate Percentage of book (chapters) devoted to tonal/chromatic harmony	2020 American Market Share
<u>Aldwell and Schachter (2011)</u>	<i>Harmony and Voice Leading</i>	91% (30/33)	5%
<u>Benward and Saker (2015)</u>	<i>Music in Theory and Practice, Vol. 1 & 2</i>	50% (18/36)	13%
<u>Burstein and Straus (2016)</u>	<i>Concise Introduction to <u>Tonal Harmony</u></i>	65% (31/48)	11%
<u>Clendinning and Marvin (2016)</u>	<i>The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis</i>	48% (19/40)	25%
<u>Kostka, Payne, and Almén (2018)</u>	<i><u>Tonal Harmony</u></i>	75% (21/28)	29%
<u>Laitz (2015)</u>	<i>The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to <u>Tonal Theory</u>, Analysis, and Listening</i>	63% (20/32)	8%
		Total:	91%

While these three subjects are certainly important—often foundational—there are other aspects of music missing from most undergraduate theory sequences. Lessons on the “fundamentals of music,” as presented in traditional curricula, are, in actuality, fundamentals of white, male, aristocratic European “classical” music and the musical staff notation it uses, situated in our modern understanding of it. An exploration of acoustics—the physics of how sound is created, propagated, and received—represents a more basic and style-independent

foundation of music that informs other music studies, but the topic is absent in the most commonly used music theory textbooks (all texts in Table 1, [Shaffer et al. 2018](#)). An introduction to acoustics is helpful, if not required, for studying another under-examined aspect of musical language and style: timbre. While recent scholarship has introduced some excellent pedagogical approaches for exploring the timbre of electronic music ([Lavengood 2017, 2020](#)), even traditional studies in orchestration could be enriched with a deeper understanding of acoustics and music perception (for instance, as currently studied by the [ACTOR project](#)). Further, an understanding of acoustics can prompt critical discussions around notational representations of sound and creates an opportunity to explore non-traditional curricular topics such as tuning systems and historical or non-European pitch structures.

Finally, music theory study should not confine itself to composers' products—completed musical works—but should embrace the creative process and listener reception as coequal foci of study. These explorations can occur throughout the curriculum, from vocational skills used in composition/songwriting and performance throughout music history (such as text-setting, popular form, scoring, and metrical templates) to investigations of the cultural and emotive factors that help a musician shape their sound during the creative process (including but not limited to genre traits, extended techniques in various styles, recording basics, introductory acoustics, and electronic sound effect creation/identification).

2. Popular music (or jazz, folk, “world music”, etc.) is worthy of study only when it demonstrates musical concepts present in classical music.

Many current music theorists recognize the importance and critical worth of popular music ([de Clerq 2019](#), [Knowles 2019](#), [Alcade 2018](#)) even when it deviates from the stylistic norms of

classical music. However, recent curricular efforts to better embrace contemporary and non-Western styles continue to struggle against a curriculum originally designed around the classical canon, a fact that reinforces music theory's white racial frame ([Ewell 2020a, 2020b](#)). Though we continue to see popular music incorporated into lessons, examples are sometimes cherry-picked to demonstrate specific concepts for a curriculum originally designed to teach the nuances of classical harmony, such as the use of "A Whole New World" from Disney's *Aladdin* to demonstrate tonicizations ([Clendinning & Marvin 2016](#)). In fact, the exaltation of the classical canon at times pervades discussions on a subconscious level, such as referring to V-I cadences as "authentic" or "strong," while IV-I cadences, more common in popular music, are sometimes considered "weak" by theorists (e.g. [Aldwell & Schachter 2011](#)) and non-theorists alike ([thesweetestpunch 2014](#)) or are not considered cadences at all ([Caplin 1998](#))—notwithstanding the erroneous application of classical "cadences" as a concept for analyzing popular music ([Stephenson 2002](#)).

Many of us have fallen prey to this bias, for example, when analyzing a popular song and being dismayed that the harmonic progression is "only" an alternation between two diatonic chords. Let us not be so immediately dismissive! First, the song's primary interest may lie in another musical element: rhythm, text setting, chord voicing, orchestration, or some aspect of production. Second, having been indoctrinated into searching for European tonal syntactic structures, we may be ignoring the functional aspect of these two chords as what Philip Tagg calls a two-chord shuttle, a common element in popular harmony that supports a melodic, formal, timbral, or rhythmic gesture ([Tagg 2014](#)).

The apparent "simplicity" of some styles might cause us to dismiss them as we fallaciously equate complexity with academic worth. We should endeavor to teach how music

works, not only the “interesting,” “complex,” or “good” music but also the so-called “simple” music or “noise.” The use of only complex examples reinforces the idea that music theory is inherently difficult, leading to the common perception among undergraduates that theory classes are a necessary evil to be survived rather than embraced. Further, various structures underlie music that serve a function in people’s lives, and we are all individuals with different lived experiences and preferences. While addressing representation in our classrooms is important, even more so is examining what lies behind a musical act—as Simon Frith writes, “authenticity [of music] ...is a quality not of the music as such, but of the story it is heard to tell” ([Frith 1998](#), 275). This examination can involve harmonic analysis but should also consider various sonic structures—pitch, rhythm, timbre, method of production—and our human relationship to them. We cannot inhabit the bodies of others, but we can endeavor to understand each other by reflecting on the context of and emotional relationships to artistic creations. This engagement can in turn lead to our growth as musicians, composers, and scholars, no matter our genre preferences.

3. University music graduates must be fluent in the theoretical discourse of the classical canon in order to succeed as professional musicians.

This assertion is certainly true in regards to fundamental musical concepts such as scales, chords, and rhythm, but there are some topics emphasized in the traditional theory curriculum for which the most common practical use is in teaching them to the next generation of theory students. An often-cited ([de Clercq 2019](#), [Acevedo & Rush 2020](#), [White 2020](#)) example of this is augmented sixth chords, commonly presented as part of an exploration of 19th-century chromatic harmony. Pedagogical approaches often include discussion of modulations employing

the German augmented sixth chord, inversions used to approach the tonic chord ([Clendinning & Marvin 2016](#)), and voice-leading techniques ([Kostka et al. 2013](#))—some of which are emblematic of only a few (but “iconic”) musical examples. We also spend hours searching for that “diverse” example, resorting to our implicit belief in the previous two deceptions.

It is no secret, however, that these lessons are rarely retained beyond the relevant exam. Few upper-level courses require this knowledge and, if we casually survey the common destinations of our undergraduates, a similar pattern holds true: the professional performer will almost certainly get by without anything beyond a passing familiarity of the concept, the music therapist will likely never use it in clinical practice, and even the K-12 music educator may only ever need to deal with it to pass a certification exam or when they are called upon to teach an AP music theory course. In all of these cases, when the need arises, musicians will relearn the material for whatever task requires it. In fact, there are only three situations where knowledge of augmented sixth chords might be needed beyond a third-semester theory exam. First is the jazz student, who must recontextualize the concept of a German sixth chord as a dominant function in order to understand tritone substitutions ([Biamonte 2008](#))—something solved by more generally comparing the use of chromatic chords in various styles (as opposed to the common approach of teaching the idiosyncrasies of 19th-century chromatic Romanticism). The other two cases are students graduating with music theory or composition degrees—mainly because they are likely to teach undergraduate theory classes—and students taking theory placement exams to place out of classes that teach them these same topics in a graduate program.

We understand that institutional change is a long-term process, but we implore anyone implementing curricular reform at their institutions to consider how their own placement

requirements, at every level, might be acting as gatekeeping tools. When redesigning our own curriculum, we carefully evaluated the needs of our student population: since most of our students do not continue on to graduate school, the curriculum focuses on their practical needs (such as vernacular musics and technology due to high enrollments in music therapy, education, and general music BA programs). We also evaluated department-wide policies that diminished access: for instance, we abolished auditions for the Bachelor of Arts (BA), allowing any student interested to enroll in the music degree, and we use the undergraduate theory placement test as merely a tool to assess students' knowledge, encouraging students who do not read Western staff notation to enroll in a fundamentals course. The latter does not prohibit students from finishing the BA in four years, as it is designed so that students can complete the required theory courses in any two years of their degree.

4. Music Technology should be taught in Music Technology classes, not Music Theory classes.

Composition and analysis of four-part chorale texture is the cornerstone of the traditional undergraduate theory curriculum. A deep-dive into a very particular musical language—specifically, the chorale harmonizations of J.S. Bach—these lessons are a helpful case study of a compositional process: harmonizing a pre-existing melody, finding an effective balance of harmony and melodic shape, maintaining a consistent contrapuntal texture, and working within the ranges and sight-reading capabilities of an amateur choir.

If the primary benefit of a course of study that occupies more than half of the curriculum is the exploration of compositional process, however, we should lend a similar weight to the processes of contemporary music making, necessitating the study of technology in music.

Regardless of genre, much music today is consumed through professionally produced recordings. Recording, mixing, editing, mastering, and even publishing these works is part of the creative musical process, one our graduates are more and more expected to understand, if not do themselves.

Departments have generally evolved to offer technology courses as electives, but many of the concepts taught in these courses—synthesis and sampling, sequencing, microphone usage, effects like delay, reverb and filtering, mixing and mastering, and studio recording techniques—are as near to the core of modern music-making as contrary motion and voice independence were to J.S. Bach and his contemporaries.

Of course, music theory courses cannot and should not replace a technology program, but the need for music theory students to understand technological components for analysis and aural skills training cannot be understated. Technologies have highly affected the compositional process, a fact which bears out in the sonic and musical structures of many modern works. For instance, we can see the effect of layering processes (mediated by the technological layout of Digital Audio Workstations [DAWs] used to create this music) on musical form, timbre, and rhythm in Electronic Dance Music (EDM; [Butler 2006](#)), and consequently, due to genre fusions, on Top-40 forms ([Barna 2020](#)). Similarly, controller interfaces and their modalities influence our perception and emotional response to sound ([Smith 2020](#)), while filters and other effects are used to transform motives (just like transposition or rhythmic alteration) or create formal contrast (much like orchestration, another topic rarely covered in theory classes). Identifying electronic techniques is also vital for aural skills training as students learn to navigate modern sound worlds in order to recreate or notate them. Therefore, we must incorporate these techniques into our own classrooms, in activities such as: aural skills exercises to identify electronic techniques,

discussions of electronic techniques that inform motivic or formal analysis, comparison of extended techniques in various acoustic and electronic genres, transcription exercises to illuminate the complexities of notationally-represented sound, etc.

Deeper explorations into the understanding, analysis and creation of electronic music will certainly present a challenge regarding faculty expertise, and it might be tempting to simply hand these lessons over to technology faculty already familiar with the hardware and software of the trade—but doing so will only reinforce a curricular separation between these fields. While an experiential component is vital here, it is imperative that music theory faculty fully embrace the topic analytically and pedagogically.

Since any major redesign from a traditional curriculum will require some intensive faculty development, those of us who are able to must also endeavor to provide resources for and training to other faculty who cannot devote as much time to curriculum design. This work can include creation of educational workshops at our professional conferences, compendiums of ready-made online lesson plans and class activities, and theory-focused tutorials on electronic techniques and analytical applications. Administrators should also encourage and support these endeavors as components of pedagogy and research portfolio requirements for faculty, not only due to the time and effort commitments that are necessary, but also given the very real economic effects on both our students and departmental enrollment numbers. Our job as educators requires continuous engagement with modern trends in musical creation and production in order to better serve our students in meeting their musical goals.

5. The undergraduate music degree is centered around ensemble participation and individual performance study in a traditional instrument or voice.

The fact that music studies should be built around musical activities and performance experiences, both individual and collaborative, is indisputable. That many of us refer to weekly private study on a voice or instrument as “applied” indicates its importance: it is an opportunity for students to apply academic concepts to the process of music making.

What we should be concerned with, however, is the term “traditional.” A certain amount of gatekeeping occurs with the first question we ask prospective students: “What do you play?” Even students only generally familiar with the music academy know the “correct” answer is either voice, piano, or a standard band or orchestra instrument. Jazz (and even popular music) programs allow for students to study guitar or drum set, but are uncommon ([Larson 2019](#)).

There are students who are passionate about music attending our institutions who lack the “proper” vocal or instrumental background. They play in rock and folk bands with their friends, rap or beatbox along with their smartphones, and create professional-level mixes on DAWs like [Ableton Live](#), [FL Studio](#), or [Apple GarageBand](#). In most cases, they do not major in music because they similarly could not participate in music programs available at their high schools. This could be due to various reasons, including socioeconomic issues such as insufficient district funding for music programs or teachers to serve as mentors, a need to work or take care of family members during rehearsal times, lack of transportation or after-school care, and limited access to instruments. Some eagerly take the music technology or popular music classes available to non-majors at the undergraduate level. They rarely minor in music, lacking an applied lesson teacher or scared away by Western staff notation.

What if “laptop” were an acceptable answer to “what do you play” for the prospective music major? While not a solution for all students in similar positions (for instance, those who

specialize in instruments such as sitar, gamelan, or banjo), one can imagine a self-taught student, with a portfolio of EDM or hip hop DAW compositions, enrolling in a music degree with electronic music as their primary instrument, a program which—like percussion—might involve a broad category of instruments from software synthesizers to EWIs (electronic wind instruments) to drum machines. Such a student would benefit from the full, *redesigned* music theory sequence, with lessons on effective composition, advanced studies of timbre and form, and explorations into other genres. They would gain cultural context and vocational skills from modern musicology courses, such as investigating the diversity of musical creation, contextualizing musical practice within the fields of sound or queer studies, connecting their musical practice to humanitarian causes such as social justice or human rights campaigns, creating multimedia projects that enhance musical engagement via the internet, or creating archival projects to preserve and educate about musical practices. Above all, they would enrich their craft through four years of individual lessons, including juried performance exams, programming solo recitals, and collaborations not only with other electronic musicians but other instrumentalists and vocalists from across the discipline. In fact, the requirements of a music degree could lead to expertise in a “traditional” instrument with opportunities to engage in lessons or participate in ensembles, a beneficial skill for recording jobs that require laying down live vocal, piano, guitar, or drum tracks.

While requiring more faculty expertise, such a modification would not affect degree requirements; even the National Association for Schools of Music’s (NASM) guidelines for the Bachelor of Music specify only “a level of achievement in musical performance” ([NASM Handbook 2020](#), 92) for entrance into a professional performance degree and “Comprehensive

capabilities in the major performing medium” ([NASM Handbook 2020](#), 104) for program completion, with no prerequisite instrumental concentration for general performance studies .

While a student with electronic music as their primary instrument would be a good fit in a composition program or a general liberal arts degree, there is no reason they could not succeed in K-12 music education or music therapy, applying their skills and experience as graduates to fields which have been undergoing the same technological revolution as the rest of higher education. Inviting these students into our programs will certainly present considerable challenges, as many of them might lack what we generally consider to be fundamental skills like the ability to read traditional staff notation. Of course, it is important that students gain fluency in common ways of communicating about music in our current culture, even if it necessitates learning Western staff notation. However, as we determine how best to meet these challenges, and continue to interrogate our common communication system, we must be mindful of creating barriers to entry that reinforce the white racial frame we are struggling against.

6. Four-year music degrees prepare students to become music teachers, music therapists, and performers, arrangers and composers of classical music; students seeking a career in popular music need not apply.

Connections between the academy and popular music are generally incidental: college friends who form extracurricular bands that go on to make it big ([Sutton 2008](#)), or graduates with traditional music degrees who “leave the field” to perform popular genres ([White 2013](#)). In fact, the academic/music industry divide is just a reflection of the fact that the paths leading to these professions are nearly diametrically opposed. While, historically, there was an at least implicit guarantee that those who pursued a music degree would have some measure of career placement, those looking to break in to popular music as independent artists, producers, or session musicians

had no reliable path of entry into a career generally fed by networking, apprenticeship, and a talent discovery influenced by socioeconomic opportunity and blind luck.

This represents a significant challenge for us as educators, and we should acknowledge that our current offerings not only fail to prepare students for it, but specifically avoid attempting to do so. While we would do well to identify the reasons for this (including the commodification of African-American music; e.g. [Morrison 2017](#)), let us imagine a discipline where students are exposed to the great diversity of music in this world and are taught not only to value all of it but also to approach it all with critical thought and academic rigor. Let us imagine a world where music degrees are not balked at by parents saying, “You need to major in something that makes money” despite the multi-billion dollar economic force that encompasses talented musicians, producers, dancers, and singers/actors. Let us imagine degrees whose graduates can find success not only as music teachers and members of professional orchestras but as musicologically literate recording artists and discerning studio-based creatives, and where the it’s-all-who-you-know recording industry begins to find value in a redesigned, reimagined, and newly relevant music degree.

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The myths presented above are generalizations; not only is every curriculum different, but each student will take away a different experience from their professor, their classes, and their personal study. Changing aspects of the curriculum writ large may be difficult for those in precarious positions regarding time or employment security, with large courseloads, or in large departments needing systemic overhaul across programs and approval by numerous colleagues. Even attacking these six assertions head on will not fully address the many problems raised by previously unappreciated voices and underrepresented groups (see for instance [Ewell 2020a](#),

[2020b](#), [Hisama 2021](#), [Project Spectrum](#)). Some of the topics discussed here pervade not just our own theory curriculum but entire department cultures. Many of the necessary changes suggested above involve alterations not only to syllabi but whole degrees, faculties, budgets, and infrastructure, as well as expectations both within and surrounding the academy itself.

It is important to acknowledge and learn from programs who have already confronted and are actively dealing with these biases: for instance by redefining the curriculum at the department level (e.g. [Harvard's](#) and [Yale's](#) most recent music BA requirements), by advancing music industry careers (e.g. [Berklee College of Music's BA in Contemporary Writing and Production](#), [University of Colorado Denver's programs in Music & Entertainment Industry Studies](#)), by focusing on the study of underrepresented musical styles (e.g. [Wesleyan University's music BA](#), [Albright College's African-American music minor](#), [Eastern Tennessee State University's BA in Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies](#), [Texas State University's minor in Mariachi](#)), or by adapting topics in our theory curricula to better fit the needs of our individual students and majors (i.e. through the use of [modular design](#) such as that at [George Mason University](#)). We have attempted to address the issues presented here in our own curriculum, both at the theory program and department level ([Acevedo & Rush 2020](#)), and invite others to collaborate in this effort as we continue its development ([Acevedo & Rush 2021](#)).

Changing a discipline—and an entire industry—will likely take decades. But if someone is going to start that change, why not us?

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