

Chapter 1 and Chapter 23

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The Norton Guide to Teaching Music Theory makes an assuredly welcome addition to the primary resources for music theory instruction. My own bookshelf of texts exclusively pertinent to teaching college-level music theory has long consisted of only two: the seminal *Teaching Approaches to Music Theory* by Michael Rogers, and *Guidelines for College Teaching of Music Theory* by John D. White. As detailed by the four preceding reviews, Rachel Lumsden and Jeffrey Swinkin, the editors of *NGTMT*, have stocked the text chockfull of updated and wide-ranging teaching advice, modifiable by instructors of almost any experience level for the many courses in our field.

Except for one: pedagogy of music theory. No chapter in *NGTMT* covers such a course specifically, but the notion does not go completely unaddressed. In briefly reviewing the volume's opening and closing chapters by L. Poundie Burstein and Elizabeth West Marvin, respectively, I wish to highlight philosophical and practical aspects of the pedagogy of music theory, and mention a few ways these two facets can manifest within a pedagogy of music theory course.²⁷

Lumsden and Swinkin do enumerate several practical activities for “a typical pedagogy course” (xiv), pointing to a few specific chapters and describing how students can directly apply the concepts therein; at a higher level, students can critique and discuss the concepts themselves (xiv-xv). At the end of this short section, the editors express the “hope that this volume will meaningfully aid those journeying to find their own pedagogical credos” (xv). To formulate those philosophical beliefs—which may certainly change on our journeys—we need to debate and examine, with ourselves and our colleagues, the very pedagogical topics we teach, questioning the “why” so often begged by “what” (instructors know that students excel at such inquiries!).

In the central portion of the first chapter, “The Practice of Music Theory, and Music Theory versus Practice,” L. Poundie Burstein problematizes four-part chorale writing. After surveying issues such as voice-leading, doubling guidelines, and an “atypical” harmonic progression (IV⁶–I, in Ex. 1.1), he warns:

...if burdened with too many guidelines, students might lose track of the more essential lessons that may be acquired from studying four-part harmony. For the purposes of four-part harmony assignments, it is more beneficial to focus on the main possibilities and concepts, letting students discover others... (7)

²⁷ For more on the state of theory pedagogy instruction in North America, see Elizabeth West Marvin's contribution to the current volume of this journal.

A bit later, he concludes:

...the aim of a lesson is...to impart abstract concepts that could then be applied to a broad range of ever-changing, often unanticipated real-life conditions. (8)

And thus Burstein has zoomed out from several picky “what” questions to a “why” answer. Out of this, as a practical matter, Burstein’s viewpoint could inform the structure of the course: how might an instructor scaffold skills to help students achieve this goal of general applicability?²⁸

Burstein also examines the supposed rigidity of form labels and expanding the repertoire of study beyond the Western classical tradition, again arguing for more panoramic understanding, here of the dynamic forces that shape compositions, and music styles. We teach species counterpoint not to have students memorize dogmatic rules, but rather to “heighten students’ awareness of melodic and contrapuntal effects that appear in a variety of musical settings” (9). Ultimately, he argues for a connection between doing music theory and doing music:

Whereas the main goal of music performance, composition, and improvisation is to create music that is beautiful, expressive, and inspiring, the main goal of music theory is to deepen understanding of underlying musical forces that give rise to this beauty, expression, and inspiration. (9)

Burstein’s chapter shows how quickly we can find “why” within “what.” Just as Lumsden and Swinkin suggest, I like to offer my pedagogy of theory students opportunities for philosophical debate, allowing them to probe more “why?” questions than “what?” with their classmates (e.g., “Why do we continue to teach figured bass part-writing?”). This can happen communally in class, or more introspectively by having students write a philosophy of teaching music theory.²⁹

Elizabeth West Marvin’s “What I Know Now: Reflections on Music Theory Pedagogy” closes *NGTMT* aptly: she concentrates not on specific topics taught in the theory classroom, but rather pedagogy itself. Two broad headings structure the chapter: focusing on music and musicianship, and planning for student-centered engagement. Marvin takes a top-down approach, relating six higher-level concepts to a few concrete examples. In keeping with *NGTMT*’s overall spirit of pragmatic applicability, she phrases each concept as a constructive and active teaching strategy.

²⁸ For more on Jerome Bruner’s concept of scaffolding, via Lev Vygotsky, see the references in David Rickel’s review of Part IV of *NGTMT*.

²⁹ An assignment inherited from Elizabeth West Marvin. Ideally, students revisit their philosophies near the end of the course, to see whether and how their attitudes and beliefs have changed.

To focus on music and musicianship in our instruction, Marvin lists (1) maximizing intrinsic motivation, (2) preferring contextual over acontextual examples, and (3) employing the outlook of comprehensive musicianship. All of these help to answer one of my favorite questions to pose to pedagogy students: how do you motivate a student in a core or required class? Intrinsic motivation “is grounded in...the inherent desire to develop our own abilities, to act of our own accord, and to connect with others and our environment” (366). Marvin outlines tasks that give the student a sense of achievement, give the student agency self-direction, and partner with other learners. Extrinsic—external—motivators can also do the same, and even positively with appropriate understanding and acceptance. Strategy 2 essentially asks instructors to provide real and diverse music as much as possible: for instance, using Mozart’s two-voice mostly 1:1 counterpoint setting of “Ah, vous dirai-je maman” to teach intervals (she later writes: “if ten minutes go by without sounding music, the lesson plan needs to be re-thought” [374]). Comprehensive musicianship hearkens back to that movement from the 1970s, and despite the difficulties of its implementation, CM’s “laudable tenets” (370), such as exposing students to many musics (widening style knowledge, per Burstein) and integrating relevant extramusical features into our lessons, can initiate understanding toward “why” out of “what.”

Instructors can improve student engagement by (4) avoiding the role of “sage on the stage,” (5) creating a natural critical learning environment, and (6) teaching in different modalities. The former two elevate active learning and encourage more secure skills acquisition; for these Marvin mentions the flipped classroom and scaffolding (371–72). The sixth strategy appeals to the idea that students take different avenues in learning: “visual, aural, kinesthetic, or social” (373). Instructors will, for instance, speak while they write, sing as they notate, and bring students in pairs to the keyboard to play written two-voice counterpoint exercises. Some research shows no validity to the idea of learning styles, but Marvin believes “that sensitivity to learning styles can improve teaching” (373). At the least, we might use the four dimensions to make ourselves and our students more aware and engaged, and, along the lines of CM, link written theory, aural skills, and musicology classes closer together. Marvin goes on to address the mechanics of course planning, parsing the coverage of a topic over 3–4 class meetings, and she concludes with a look at spiral learning, particularly effective in a repertoire-driven curriculum. She refers to the variations to “Ah, vous dirai-je maman,” undoubtedly rich with theoretical concepts. I find Beethoven’s Bagatelle in G Minor, Op. 119, No. 1 good for revisiting, covering harmony, cadences, diatonic and chromatic embellishing tone analysis, key relations, sentences, periods, augmented

sixth chords, variation procedure, ternary form, binary form, motivic relations, the reciprocal process (Steve Laitz), common tone modulation, the ponte scheme, the “one more time” technique (Janet Schmalfeldt), and apparent “on purpose” parallel octaves.

All the contributors to *NGTMT* have laid out an almost limitless fertile ground for all theory teachers to explore and grow. Its currency calls for immediate implementation. This text will generate much fruitful conversation among theory instructors, and justifiably so. I further hope that we will extend that discourse to include our colleagues in music education. Although their content mostly regards secondary education, I occasionally have pedagogy students read from *Teaching for Musical Understanding* by Jackie Wiggins, *A Philosophy of Music Education* by Bennett Reimer, and *Teaching Music: Managing a Successful Music Program* by Darwin E. Walker. Some of the material must undergo recontextualization for higher education, but the offered strategies, principles and ideas, and above all extensive research can all enhance our teaching.

(Author’s note: complete review available at <https://jmtpp.appstate.edu/review-norton-guide-teaching-music-theory-edited-rachel-lumsden-and-jeffrey-swinkin> [accessed 01/28/2020].)