“There is a deep, long-standing, and now increasingly dysfunctional divide between the historic classical music practices and the contemporary ones that draw upon a much broader range of aural, notated, analog, and digital forms of music making...At this point, our educational models and practices represent a bizarre misfit with the contemporary world that would be impossible to imagine in virtually any other field.” —Roger Johnson in [“Critically Reflective Musicianship”](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16950546W/Music_education_for_changing_times)

# Introduction

Core music theory courses are often designed with the hope that students will be able to sufficiently distill and absorb those musical practices which are more general while simultaneously recognizing the stylistic idiosyncrasies of a given composer or repertoire. This is the essence of [L. Poundie Burstein’s](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents/burstein.html) somewhat unnerving assessment that “[m]usic theory courses today tend to present general concepts through the study of one relatively specific musical style.” Teaching generality via singular specificity is not only challenging, but it belies the pluralistic present in which we all live and make music—a musical landscape that is unequivocally *not* singular in its culture, shape, sound, or, and perhaps more pertinently, its harmonic and voice-leading practices. The divergent pluralism of the present, when contrasted with the limited musical engagement in the conventional classroom is, in part, responsible for a conspicuous lacuna between study and practice, an example of what [Nicholas Cook](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7384534M/Music) has called a “credibility gap between music and how we think about it.” Recognizing the existence and nature of this gap can function as the catalyst for transformation, a process which warrants careful reflection about not just *how* we teach, but *what* we teach in the music theory classroom.

Given the current state of the discipline and present musical diversity to which our students are exposed, we should strive to offer students a more complete musical perspective. Few of our graduating professional musicians operate within spheres where such a narrow focus on music of the Western classical tradition is warranted. Put bluntly, imparting such a narrow cultural perspective no longer functions as a substantive education; it teaches too much about too little. In order to meet the curiosities and professional needs of our students, I want to present a more challenging yet culturally magnanimous approach: engage *lots* of different music using *lots* of different music theories.

A Justification

Beyond performance, contemporary students can expect to participate in such varied activities as publicity, outreach, speaking, writing, reviewing, programming, producing, managing, educating, administrating, and advocating. Such activities require a disposition that is not only comfortable with multiplicity, but also possesses the tools to empathically parse it. Adopting an ethos of inclusion in the classroom while consciously approaching music from as many theoretical perspectives as possible can serve to expand the mind instead of narrow it. Transformative curricular efforts of any sort should foster an ever-increasing social and cultural cognizance, and this is precisely what is so lacking when “general concepts” are taught “through the study of one relatively specific musical style.”

Notwithstanding the relative scholarly acceptance of [Claude V. Palisca and Ian D. Bent’s](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/44944) recommendation to adopt a “multi-dimensional and pluralistic attack on the musical object,” such fundamental practices do not seem to have yet percolated into the typical classroom. [Nicholas Cook](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7752044M/The_Cambridge_History_of_Western_Music_Theory_(The_Cambridge_History_of_Music)) has even suggested that “epistemological pluralism” is one of music theory’s defining characteristics, making its curricular absence all the more conspicuous. The forcible conflict between pedagogical precedent and professional discourse—not to mention the veritable meiosis of music into “musics”—is indicative of a need to revisit the purposes, realign the outcomes, and re-form the means of conventional theory instruction. Surveying the discipline and its practitioners with the aim of integrating and reflecting present practice into classroom pedagogy is one of the many constructive ways to proceed.

# Some Prospects

There is a genuine reluctance among most music theory instructors to engage what have historically been considered to be supplementary, let alone “alternate” topics within an undergraduate classroom. I have found that this hesitation often stems from longstanding disciplinary assumptions about priority and precedent, both of which have been challenged by postmodern shifts, [nobrow culture](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL3963777M/Nobrow), and [“New Musicologies.”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_musicology) Such anachronistic priorities, however, often continue to be justified by positing a comprehensive knowledge of common-practice voice-leading and harmony as a precondition for pluralistic encounters. Comprehending the myriad of analytic methods which are pervasive in the present discourse, however, rarely requires an extensive prerequisite knowledge of stylistically confined part-writing procedures. To insist, for example, that one must master the voice-leading conventions of an imagined rule-mongering Platonic Bach before delighting in the semiotic invocations of the latest [Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles soundtrack](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZLSjYUZqSQ) is to confuse a prerequisite with a distant precursor.

The following incomplete list of curricular candidates have been plucked from the current state of the discipline as possible examples to pursue and could each conceivably be enlarged into its own respective unit. I recommend integrating them into theory instruction early and often, before narrow habits of mind and practice are established. Each subject is intensely interesting, comprehensible, requires relatively little prerequisite knowledge, and has the potential to significantly enlarge the palette of our students’ perspectives far beyond the limited purview of part-writing.

* **Semiotics** - Introductions to musical semiotics could be readily understood by college freshman or even non-majors if thoughtfully approached, by exploring instrumentation, harmony, and rhythm as essential characteristics of mood, genre, and signification. The first few minutes of virtually any slapstick cartoon, whether it be [SpongeBob Squarepants](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SpongeBob_SquarePants) or [Oggy and The Cockroaches](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oggy_and_the_Cockroaches), can easily provide enough material for an introductory discussion about how music is used to *mean* via reference and representation. Within the classical canon, Raymond Monelle’s work about [horns](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL4109640W/The_Musical_Topic) or [horses](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7757386M/The_Sense_of_Music), for example, can usher students’ minds away from the “music itself” and towards the broader cultural invocations that are unavoidably at play. [Juan Chattah](https://youtu.be/3PKGLArQYcs) has recently produced a webinar about how an instructor might integrate topic theory and critical thinking into the theory classroom utilizing the work of Kofi Agawu and Philip Tagg.
* **Transformation** - Only rudimentary notions of triadic harmony and inversions are necessary in order to broach [Neo-Riemannian](http://jmtp.ou.edu/journal-article/transformational-theory-undergraduate-curriculum-case-teaching-neo-riemannian) or transformational topics, with late-romantic, pop, minimalist, and [contemporary film music](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25716055M/The_Oxford_Handbook_of_Film_Music_Studies) serving as genres of particular interest. [Frank](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fmts.oxfordjournals.org%2Fcontent%2F35%2F1%2F1&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGm2mw_ZYci-GVAJxUufp_Hh1jfmA) [Lehman](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.4/mto.13.19.4.lehman.html) in particular has contributed to the growing oeuvre of research applying transformational theories to music in cinema. Reiterating musical tendencies of parsimonious voice-leading within new stylistic contexts can provide opportunities for musical exposure and epistemic pluralism within the province of familiar triadic proclivities.
* **Schenker** - The value of [Schenkerian perspectives](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.3/mto.12.18.3.larson.html) may be proposed if students have encountered concepts of tonic/dominant syntax and non-harmonic tones, providing a vehicle to apply hierarchical notions of micro harmony and melody to macro phrases and forms. Because entry-level analysis often focuses on the fleeting pitches and harmonies of the moment, the reduction of complex textures, melodies, and large-scale forms is rarely addressed directly. Grasping the overall harmonic trajectories of any piece can improve performance, memorization, and broaden one’s view beyond merely what precedes and what follows. Emphasizing Schenker’s idiosyncratic (and much contested!) perspectives can highlight both the subjectivity and pragmatic utility of theory, in addition to its ability to generate many possible “hearings.”
* **Repetition** - Exploring repetition, perhaps via the brilliant work of [Elizabeth Margulis](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25711681M/On_Repeat_How_Music_Plays_the_Mind), pays pedagogical tribute to a feature that is so overwhelmingly significant in so much music. [Electronic dance music](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/mto.05.11.4.garcia.html), minimalism, rock, pop, hip-hop, not to mention common-practice implementations of repeated rhythms, harmonies, or melodies are all fodder for theoretical exploration and analysis. The fruits of organicism—motives, themes, and even binary, ternary, rondo, or sonata forms—are all examples of how repetition has been used to great effect in music that is likely already part of the curriculum. A [brief history](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25746647M/Audio_Culture_Readings_in_Modern_Music) of aesthetic ideologies for and against repetition can background theoretical discussion and assignments.
* **Emotion/Cognition** - Considering the likelihood that music’s relation to emotion and cognition played a vital role in students’ resolve to formally study music in the first place, explicitly exploring these topics can deeply engage majors and non-majors alike. [David Huron](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL10238232M/Sweet_Anticipation) and [Bob Snyder](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL9525663M/Music_and_Memory) are just two of many scholars who have produced eminently digestible work that undergraduates can read, resonate with, reflect upon, and utilize in their analysis of musical endeavors.
* **Aesthetics** - Brief forays into [aesthetics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics_of_music) can serve to disarm combative or ethnocentric thinking, and I have yet to encounter a student who doesn’t enjoy a debate about “what makes music ‘good’?” Many students carry outmoded aesthetic assumptions that have never been discussed in an open forum, let alone challenged by thinking that is clearer, more practiced, or simply different than their own. Teaching students to carefully listen, discuss, and defend their ideas is arguably one of the most important skills any pedagogue can help develop, forging a distributed respect for the community of the classroom and beyond.
* **Timbre and Acoustics** - Timbre, despite suffering a prolonged history as an [elusive](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690401003620730) or [“secondary” musical parameter](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/meyer85.pdf), can be explored as an extension of musical semiotics, cognition, or memory. Additionally, personal computers can be used to perform spectral analyses using free software such as [Audacity](http://sourceforge.net/projects/audacity/) or [Sonic Visualiser](http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/index.html), providing a basis for instrumental, structural, or harmonic observations. [Entire repertoires](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spectral_music) of music have been forged out of an obsession with music *qua* sound, not to mention the near ubiquitous use of audio manipulation techniques which are so prominent in the recorded music of virtually any genre or style. Exploring timbre directly can swing the analytic pendulum away from notated abstraction and back to music’s experiential realm.
* **History of Music Theory** - Integrating anecdotes about and ventures into the history of music theory can also go a long way towards neutralizing any pseudo-scientific airs, as it demonstrates that theory springs from ever-changing cultural values, and has often been constructed and promoted with particular aesthetic agendas. [Schenker’s ethnocentric nationalism](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25716058M/Keeping_Score_Music_Disciplinarity_Culture), [Riemann’s fabled “undertones”](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL13607782W/HUGO_RIEMANN_AND_THE_BIRTH_OF_MODERN_MUSICAL_THOUGHT), or [A.B. Marx’s overriding organicist impulses](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7752044M/The_Cambridge_History_of_Western_Music_Theory_(The_Cambridge_History_of_Music)) can all serve as instructive tales about the construction of a discipline from vested interests and malleable minds. It’s still constructed this way, thankfully, and conveying the much contested, multifaceted nature of our living, breathing body of knowledge can serve to sober any single-minded students as they musick beyond the classroom’s walls.

# A Riposte

It may be argued that what I’m proposing amounts to “snorkeling” and runs contrary to the “scuba diving” approach elegantly proposed by [Brian Alegant](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/alegant.html). While depth and breadth may appear to be fundamentally dichotomous, creative approaches can ensure that they instead function as one another’s complement. Acknowledging that “scuba diving” within a single sea has tacitly functioned as the discipline’s pedagogical *modus operandi* for far too long is critical to accurately correcting for it. There are many waters, each of which warrant a snorkeling sweep or, if the instructor and students so choose, an occasional deep-sea dive. Notably, embracing greater breadth could be construed as the central admonition of the recently published report from [College Music Society’s Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major](http://www.music.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1859). When exploring new or novel curricular possibilities, breadth can function as a pragmatic contemporary corrective; in the words of [John Shepherd](http://www.jstor.org/stable/853206) “[t]he academic musician needs to be a polymath, not a pedant.”

I suggest that at least a portion of the solution to the challenge of incorporating breadth into the classroom consists in caring a lot less about part-writing and caring a lot more about the unique features of different musics, only some of which may be related to harmony or voice-leading. [David Kulma and Meghan Naxer](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/kulmaNaxer.html) have recently explored this, and their suggestions warrant serious consideration to anyone entertaining any degree of curricular transformation. Making part-writing a single unit, as they suggest, is a strategy that would go great lengths towards encouraging teachers to creatively reach into new territories, many of which they may have avidly pursued as researchers but not as pedagogues. Given that most textbooks employ part-writing as the central, albeit indirect vehicle for conveying harmonic and contrapuntal conventions, engaging in considerably less of it has the potential to create room for more compelling possibilities.

Moving Forward

Shifting away from the maintenance of a [musical museum](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL10135144M/The_Imaginary_Museum_of_Musical_Works) and towards the creation of our students’ futures requires the adoption of an educational model that is congruent with the [cultural and professional](http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=10852:the-ninth-semester-preparing-undergraduates-to-function-as-professional-musicians-in-the-21st-century&Itemid=124) realities that will most likely be faced by our students upon their exit from our classrooms. Rules don’t need to be learned before they are broken; such a dictum posits the existence of aesthetic mandates without questioning the values from which they originate or the ends which they serve. Rule-following and rule-breaking as an overriding metaphor becomes meaningless in a musical present where no single game is being played. It is an outmoded pedagogical premise which feigns profundity as a veil for Procrustean rigidity. [Critical pedagogy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_pedagogy) has moved beyond such a hegemonic model of education, the application of which means shifting towards [“teaching to transgress”](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25685482M/Teaching_To_Transgress) and away from teaching to conform; towards boldness and away from obedience; towards mutiny and away from compliance; towards plurality and away from singularity. Only when these values are pursued can the conspicuous gap between study and practice begin to productively contract.

Transformation can be challenging and awkward, perhaps most especially when shifting away from models and methods which have been refined and made inexorably efficient. Moving forward we can instead choose to benefit our students and ourselves by [“embracing the uncertainties, unpredictability, and messiness of learning.”](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/critical-pedagogy-intentions-realities/) Knowledge, much like its creators, grows, writhes, bleeds, and cries—experiences which are best shared, not hidden. If we allow our classes to be reconfigured by the pluralistic present along with the theoretical content of our contemporary discipline, new lectures, listening, discussions, readings, approaches, assignments, and potential syllabi begin to emerge from the beautiful morass of what we already know but all too often fail to convey via inherited curricular models. Along with the shift towards greater breadth in our curricular decisions, theory pedagogues can move beyond prescriptivity, and realign the sails towards the analytically descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory. Conveying the *many* and sometimes competing generalities that make music and its theories so compelling requires a bold, serious, and, at times, whimsical enthusiasm for the myriad of beautiful particulars we and our students encounter in the here and now.

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