

Teaching music theory in UK higher education today: contexts and commentaries

Tom Attah, Esther Cavett, Byron Dueck, Sue Miller & Lauren Redhead

To cite this article: Tom Attah, Esther Cavett, Byron Dueck, Sue Miller & Lauren Redhead (31 Jan 2024): Teaching music theory in UK higher education today: contexts and commentaries, Music Education Research, DOI: [10.1080/14613808.2024.2306650](https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2024.2306650)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2024.2306650>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 31 Jan 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 104




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Teaching music theory in UK higher education today: contexts and commentaries

Tom Attah^a, Esther Cavett ^{b,c}, Byron Dueck^d, Sue Miller^e and Lauren Redhead^f

^aDepartment of Music, Leeds Arts University, Leeds, UK; ^bDepartment of Music, King's College London, London, UK; ^cSomerville College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; ^dMusic Department, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK; ^eDepartment of Music and Sound, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK; ^fDepartment of Music, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This multi-authored article offers accounts of how programmes for teaching music theory within the Western-notated tradition were created in two UK higher education institutions. These accounts are followed by two more discursive reflections on the nature and purpose of music education today, advocating the importance of listening skills and inclusive pedagogies. The article is framed by an introduction and conclusion contextualising the issues raised in relation to a selection of prior contributions to *Music Education Research* and comparing approaches to music literacy and theory teaching as represented in recent music theory conferences in the UK and the United States.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2023
Accepted 10 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Music theory pedagogy; higher education; social justice in music; diversified curricular

Introduction: defining the terrain

Esther Cavett

The publication of Philip Ewell's paper 'Music Theory and the White Racial Frame' (2020) during the febrile summer of COVID-19, and the international protests following the death of George Floyd (BLM n.d.), has become a notorious marker of the controversies within contemporary music theory teaching in the higher education today. In the US, the principal target of Ewell's critique, and in the UK, music theory has largely been taught by reference to canonical Western classical music compositions viewed through the lens of theories developed by dead white men (Burton 2015). Taking his stance from critical race theory, Ewell argued for no less than the dismantling of existing systems supporting the teaching of music theory, claiming that music theory pedagogy needed new methodologies, proponents, and repertoires in order to be relevant to today's learners.

About the same time Ewell's paper was published, similar concerns were being expressed in the UK, leading to the formation of the EDIMS (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Music Studies) network in 2019 (EDIMS n.d.), focusing on redressing historical exclusion and under-representation in higher education music in the UK. One of the network's working groups was created for the purpose of 'Reimagining the HE Music Curriculum'. Several members of that working group presented a themed session on the teaching of music theory, drawing on ongoing discussions in that working group, at the 2023 Royal Musical Association Annual Conference, in Manchester

CONTACT Esther Cavett  esther.cavett@kcl.ac.uk  King's College London, WC2R 2LS, UK, Somerville College, Oxford, OX2 6HD, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

(RMA n.d.). It is from that themed session that the contributions to this multi-authored article, other than my introduction and conclusion, are drawn. The conference session was designed not to question what place music theory as an independent area of research might have within a current higher education curriculum but rather to offer ‘practical solutions to immediate and practical problems’, as the chair put it, and particularly how the theoretical content of Western-notated music could be taught in such a way as to engage higher education students who had *themselves* requested to learn these skills, for whatever reason, including in order to participate more fully in certain parts of a curriculum or to further their post-university engagement in music.

A search for the term ‘music theory’ across all past issues of *Music Education Research* yielded over 600 results; however, the titles of articles using this term suggested that none focused on the teaching of music theory in higher education institutions in the UK, whether in the sense of an entry-level skill to reading and interpreting Western-notated scores or as an autonomous area of research.¹ Therefore, the current article provides a helpful foil to concerns represented in this journal related to the teaching of music theory at other educational stages, matters of social justice, accessibility, widening participation in music education, and music pedagogy more broadly, including internationally. Contributions to this article are also directly relevant to the issue that led the Society for Music Analysis trustees to commission the SMA report (McQueen 2020), namely their perception that there was a skills ‘gap’ between what students learn at school and courses they are required to engage with on arrival at university.

The following sections of this article are derived from contributions to the original RMA session in summer 2023. The first two contributors describe the creation of new Music Theory programmes in their institutions. One of these programmes will be available open-access and online; it therefore answers a need expressed by participants in the SMA report, who wanted access to good quality materials on music theory. One of the report’s recommendations was that the SMA could review existing online resources with a view to making recommendations for students and teachers. Next, come two ‘position statements’ from the respondents involved in the original session. I conclude by reviewing new approaches to music theory pedagogy in the UK and US as represented in recent annual conferences in the UK and US.

My personal interest in this article grows from my working at the interface between academia and the performance of music in community settings. As a pianist I organise and then play at events combining professional performers and state-school children from some of the most deprived areas of London; as an academic, I teach music theory at Oxford University, one of the most elite and sought-after higher education providers in the UK, as is the University of Cambridge (referred to in McGregor’s contribution to this special issue). During the annual university admissions round, I celebrate those occasions where a talented young person who has taken part in a widening participation and access programme of the kind with which I’m involved gains a place at Oxford – or, if they don’t, I hope they will find a sympathetic place to be, for instance by attending courses such as those described in this article. No one size fits all, and some young people are much better served by a degree unlike that offered by Oxford: the important thing is that the opportunity is there to enable those who have not had the benefit of a privileged childhood music education to develop their skills at the tertiary level. Music theory is often seen as the barrier to such access, but the following contributions show that it does not need to be thus.

Revisiting the introduction to music theory at the Open University

Byron Dueck

I work for the Open University in the UK. Around 2020, my department agreed to produce a suite of free courses to complement its existing offering in Western music theory and staff notation. The new courses are being made available on the OpenLearn website, which offers free learning materials – produced by Open University staff – to the general public.² They will complement one of the most

successful existing OpenLearn music courses (Bray 2011), which provides a grounding in the basics of Western music notation and in Western concepts of pitch and rhythm. It is aimed at students in schools and universities, a general audience of musicians interested in learning Western notation and theory, and Open University students preparing for undergraduate studies in theory and analysis. The goal of the new courses is to introduce Western music theory at a more leisurely pace while exploring additional musical concepts and notational methods from around the world.³

The new suite of courses seeks to address a number of intersecting contextual issues:

Increasingly limited access to music education. In 2019, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, the Incorporated Society of Musicians, and the University of Sussex reported that the number of secondary school music teachers had fallen by over 1,000 between 2010 and 2017 (Daubney, Spruce, and Annetts 2019, 25). More recently, the UK-based Independent Society of Musicians recorded a drop of 36% in GCSE entries in music between 2010 and 2023 (Incorporated Society of Musicians 2023). As school provision decreases, social stratification appears more likely, with students from wealthier families continuing to have access to private instruction in music (including traditional music theory training) while it disappears for other students.

The ongoing importance of music theory to employment in music. Musicians with competency in Western notation and music theory can obtain employment across a wider range of jobs in music than musicians without that competency, for example, as keyboard accompanists for singers and instrumentalists, as orchestral, pit and session musicians, and as teachers of the next generation of note-readers.

Continuing demand. Many students continue to want to develop these competencies, whether to broaden their skills as musicians, out of curiosity, or to make them more employable.

Diversifying student cohorts. Universities and conservatoires are increasingly welcoming students who work in traditions outside Western art music. However, these institutions are not always relinquishing requirements for students to have a grounding in Western theory and notation.

The provincialisation of Western music theory. There is increasing critical pressure on what Philip Ewell (2020; 2023) calls the white racial frame of music studies. In short, there has been an interrogation of the extent to which university music education, including music theory and analysis, privileges Western art and popular music, when these constitute only a small part of global musical practice and experience.

The push for more inclusive curricula. Related to the preceding point, music instructors inside and outside the academy are increasingly seeking to address exclusions in music studies by including a much wider range of music in their teaching.

Producing a new introduction to music theory thus necessitates addressing a complex set of intersecting issues: on the one hand, the exclusiveness of what has traditionally been taught as music theory, and, on the other, the increasing inaccessibility of music theory, knowledge of which remains a significant factor in obtaining more secure employment in music in the UK.

The Open University's new introduction to music theory seeks to address these challenges by developing the ability to use staff notation and an understanding of the basics of common-practice music theory while at the same time avoiding any implication that these skills constitute universal methods for representing or thinking about music. The idea is to teach not only a language but also linguistics – that is, to teach not only common-practice Western music theory but also ways of organising music more broadly. To this end, each course within the suite focuses on a musical parameter or set of parameters: form, pitch, rhythm/metre, timbre, interval/scale/mode, harmony, and texture. Each of these is explored with respect to Western music and notation as well as other musical traditions. At the end of the suite of courses, students should understand something about Western staff notation and music theory, as well as the limits of these, and they should have some familiarity with other ways of representing and thinking about music.

For example, the first course in the new introduction to music theory (Dueck 2023) focuses on form. Starting with form departs from an approach that is common in teaching in Western music theory, where form tends to be taught after harmonic analysis, once students understand the concept of modulation. I take this approach because, in most repertoires, the form can be taught without an understanding of harmony and without reference to staff notation, simply by identifying

audible processes such as repetition and contrast. Accordingly, in the first course, students learn three ways of communicating information about form: using specialist terms such as the words ‘verse’, ‘chorus’, and ‘bridge’, using alphabetical designations such as AABA, and using visual representations including diagrams and tables. They also study form across a range of styles: popular songs from the United States and the Democratic Republic of Congo, First Nations powwow songs from North America, vocal and instrumental jazz from the United States, and Hindustani classical vocal music.

The second course in the sequence, on pitch and notation (Dueck *forthcoming*), teaches students how to represent pitch using the Western staff. This course is more like a traditional introduction to music theory than the preceding one, with around half of the teaching material designed to introduce the Western staff and the symbols used for representing pitch. Nevertheless, it also introduces students to alternative ways of organising and representing pitch. For instance, through a discussion of Arab classical music, students consider how pitch can be organised in systems other than the diatonic and chromatic collections. They also learn alternatives for notating pitch, including number-based Sundanese cipher notation.

Relatively early in the process of writing these courses, one major challenge became evident to me as author: the complexities of musical systems and music theories outside of my existing areas of expertise. Although my training as an ethnomusicologist incorporated the study of music from many world traditions, it did not give me sufficient expertise to write with confidence about certain world music theories. When writing on form in Hindustani classical music and on pitch in Arab classical music, therefore, I asked for support from Morgan Davies and Saeid Kordmafi respectively. I also requested more general feedback from Eshantha Peiris, an expert in the field of world music analysis.⁴ It could well be that in any areas of the course outside my own specialisation and where I have not been able to recruit expert guidance, I will need to correct or nuance the text once it goes public.

As indicated, the new introduction to music theory does not free instruction in music theory from a centre-periphery dynamic or a West-and-the-rest structure. Nor does it substantially challenge the links between note-reading, prestige, and job security in the UK music system. However, it does move away from the universalisation that tends to characterise introductory offerings in Western music theory by avoiding the implication that there is only one music theory, or only one that matters. Put another way, it makes it clear that it is introducing one musical language among many while offering glimpses of several others.

Delivering music theory learning: reflecting on student expectations

Lauren Redhead

For students in higher education, learning music theory is not only a theoretical question. While university music departments may be concerned that students will not be able to engage in certain musical practices and musicological approaches without a grounding in Western music theory, their students may be more interested in the practical application of music theory skills once they have decided that, for whatever reason, they would like to acquire them, perhaps for the first time.

In the music department of Goldsmiths, University of London, where I work, not all students have backgrounds that include reading and writing music notation, and for many their path into music may have been through autodidactic or informal learning. This state of affairs reflects the realities of our students’ educational opportunities prior to studying music in higher education today, including whether they have previously been able to access formal music education, as well as their personal choices. Nevertheless, while university staff may strive to present a variety of *music theories* that may be taught, learned, or expressed in a variety of situations, and while they may design and present learning opportunities that do not need students to read and write music, many of these students still express a desire to learn ‘music theory’. Most often this label

is used to denote the ability to read and write Western music notation and to use technical language about aspects of pitch, rhythm, and harmony. Despite the interest expressed by students, previous attempts to offer music theory teaching in my institution have resulted in low or no engagement. It was in order to address this contrast between expressed desire and lack of sustained engagement that I came to be involved in the project *MusoGym*. I worked on *MusoGym* with a colleague in the Computing Department, Dr Simon Katan. Simon is a musician who is also interested in using programming to create interfaces that support learning. He had previously done this very successfully in the programme *Sleuth* (Katan n.d.), a detective game that teaches programming. One of the principles behind *Sleuth* was that mimetic and repetitive learning are needed to develop language skills required for programming; Simon was influenced in developing this aspect of the game by considering the ways that musicians learn. What interested me about this is that while musicians do learn this way, often it is not the way that university students want to learn. The people who use *Sleuth* to learn programming are either highly motivated independent learners, or they are required to engage with it as a part of the module 'Introduction to Programming' at Goldsmiths, a module in which they are not required to have any previous skills or knowledge in this area, so their learning journey is modelled in the game. In my department, students either enter with some expectation of their ability to read printed music and understand the information in that format or without any requirement for such knowledge depending on their degree programme pathway.

Part of the difficulty of engaging all of these students in module-based learning is the degree to which they differ in their prior knowledge. However, I believe there is a more significant challenge, applicable to all their forms of learning whether co-curricular or informal. This is the contrast between their experiences of learning where they are able to draw on their existing strengths (for example, performing, improvising, or composing using digital tools) and their experiences of beginning to learn music theoretical skills, often for the first time. The regular practice of skills that they perceive as being at a lower level compared to their other abilities may not seem appealing. In addition, because this learning is not required as an assessed element of their degree programme there is no motivating factor, in contrast to the students using *Sleuth* within an assessed module. This supposition was confirmed through semi-formal surveys of students conducted during the pandemic and lockdown. In seeking feedback from students regarding their experiences of rapidly changing learning circumstances, I learned they valued being inspired but had difficulty motivating themselves to study in environments involving a high component of independent learning (even when using digital tools). These insights helped me to understand what some students might be hoping for in their university learning and also informed the design of the *MusoGym* project.

Simon and I knew that there were already many free, accessible, music theory learning tools and apps, so creating more resources was not the solution to the problem of engaging students; rather, our project sought to address questions of ongoing motivation and making the learning activities seem desirable to complete in and of themselves. This is often referred to as 'gamification' of learning (Knapp, Blair, and Mesch 2013).

Using a small internal grant as seed funding for a pilot project, Simon and I conceptualised a system whereby students would sign up to receive regular prompts to complete short music theory tasks in pairs, choosing to collaborate or compete with collaboration assumed as their default choice: both of these are modelled as working together and therefore 'competition' is only activated where both participants choose this option as one that reflects their personal learning motivations. Webster (2011) describes how collaboration may be a route to future competitive advantage while Knapp, Blair, and Mesch (2013) and Gutiérrez-Braojos et al. (2019) show that collaboration may be more effective in most but not all hybrid learning situations. The system would be responsible for pairing the students, sending them a music theory task, and inviting them to schedule a video call where they would collaborate to complete the task. They would then upload the finished task and thereafter receive a correct solution. Students would also be

invited to rate the difficulty of the task so that over time they could receive tasks better tailored to their current level of understanding. The expectation was that the system would assign a new partner and task every 48 h, with each task designed to take around 15 min to complete. Initially, we had intended to prompt students to access external learning tools such as apps, but we ended up developing specific resources for the pilot study, limited to the system and learning categories within it. These categories were: chord recognition; key identification; reading and transcribing rhythms; harmony; and figured bass.

This was not a perfect system. For instance, there were many ways for students to ‘cheat’ if they desired, although there would have been no intrinsic motivation to do so since the exercises were not marked, and the process was intended simply to motivate students to engage in collaborative learning. Part of my role was to design some exercises that could be completed collaboratively, and that could be ranked clearly by participating students in terms of their perceived ‘difficulty’. Additionally, we designed a pilot so that we would receive student feedback on how their perception of the level of difficulty of the exercises matched the ways in which we had ranked them, how they completed the assigned tasks, and their chosen method of working.

We had planned to collate student feedback during the pilot, which ran in the 2021–2022 academic year, involving students studying at the foundation level (the preparatory level for entering the degree) and level 4 (the first year of the degree), before we sought additional funding to expand the project. Unfortunately, a number of technical problems and external factors limited its success, which meant that the total number of exercises completed was much lower than expected, and too low to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the learning experiment. Nevertheless, the learning methodologies that underpinned this project are not dissimilar to those used by the app *DuoLingo* which has recently developed a music-learning app, blending learning aspects of notation and aural musicianship (Duolingo Team 2023).

I have gained several insights from this project that are of general pedagogical application, including music theory pedagogy. First, students’ expectations of learning may be at odds with the skills they need to learn music theory, and this may explain why their eventual achievements do not always match their initial desire to access learning. Therefore, it is helpful to focus initially not on learning resources and teaching methods but rather on how to motivate students to become independent learners. Second, where intrinsic motivation or compulsory assessment does not lead students to learning, collaboration and/or competition could be introduced to incentivise them to do so. Third, teaching music theory could be more effective if it focused the students’ attention more on the need to develop behaviours that will lead to effective learning than on the overall substantive learning goal. In the *MusoGym* project, we used language that was focused on metaphors for exercise and fitness to help students feel they had achieved success in attaining a series of short-term goals. We did not ask them to begin by understanding a whole category of information. The accumulation of completed short-term goals therefore led to achieving longer-term goals and made those long-term goals more attainable (this method is advocated in non-learning contexts by, e.g. Clear 2018). These reflections could be relevant to learning in other areas beyond music theory. The crucial learning for me was that focusing on how to achieve student learning *commitment* as opposed to learning *methods* adds a valuable perspective on how to engage students in informal and co-curricular learning.

Position statements

To capture the sense of dialogue in the original RMA session as well as the many views that higher education teachers of music theory will keep in mind when devising their courses, the following are two position statements from the original conference session. Each emphasises the importance of listening as central to the development of music theory skills and each is designed to raise questions ‘in the moment’ rather than necessarily resolve them.

Articulating literacy

Tom Attah

Popular musicians learn in many ways, often outside formal classroom scenarios, and with technology leading and supporting the process. The insistence of the academy on the musical score as a *lingua franca* constrains the technologised literacies that are at the forefront of popular music performance, production, and composition. UK higher education continues to reflect and reproduce the traditional and conservative values endorsed by wider society (Green 2008) when there is now an urgent need to work towards greater inclusivity (Ewell 2023).

Anthropologists have considered cultural traits to be learned rather than inherent (Oliver 1970, 11). The concept of musical *enculturation* refers to the acquisition of musical skills and knowledge by immersion in the everyday music and musical practices of one's social context. For popular musicians, this is generally achieved through informal processes rather than within the confines of a school or university (Green 2001). Green identifies three ways of engaging with music and thus becoming musically enculturated; (1) playing or singing, (2) composing and improvising and (3) listening. Through the process of enculturation, the customs and values of one generation are passed on to subsequent ones, and this may account for the persistence of some cultural elements within music performance. The process of *acculturation*, where the meeting of two or more distinct cultures lead to the evolution of a new one, perpetuates, develops, and disseminates popular musics and cultures. To these factors may be added the process of *cultural diffusion*, or the spread of culture by imitation and influence (Oliver 1970, 11). Of particular importance in the learning of our students is the influence of media, not least audio and/or video recording to support mimetic learning.

Musicianly behaviours are then subject to the (potentially contradictory) processes of normalisation and adaptation in the individual musician through the influence and guidance of teachers, mentors, peers, local communities, and the organisations that institutionalise musical conventions. In other words, the successful performance of a technique is rewarded and thus encouraged, whereas poor performance receives demotivating reactions such as '... scolding, warning, ridiculing, [and] the use of sarcasm' (Merriam 1964, 150–151). Engagement with a mentor or teacher extends to a special subdivision of enculturation: *education*, defined here as the directed learning process, both formally and informally carried out, for the most part during childhood and adolescence. Education equips the individual to take their place as an adult member of society (ibid., 146). It has been argued that some non-literate societies lack formal education institutions, particularly in the areas of music. Indeed, some cultures have no separate terms for 'music' or 'dance', seeing the two elements as culturally interdependent (Small 1987), but this in no sense means they have no musical education system. Culture persists, and since culture is learned behaviour, learning must take place (Merriam 1964, 146).

In summary, there is a need to move towards an inclusive teaching of music theory which better reflects the diversity of music-makers and music-making in the centres of excellence in popular music production and performance which include the United Kingdom and North America. This will mean the lowering of barriers between the traditional music establishment and the makers of commercially and culturally-celebrated popular music, and the adaptation of current ideological systems to embrace an inclusive pedagogy.

Listening well

Sue Miller

I now teach at Leeds Beckett University, but I began years ago firstly as a class teacher and then as a freelance musician teaching theory and aural skills as part of my instrumental teaching role (flute, piano, and saxophone). At this time in the late 1990s, I also taught guitarists piano (as their second

study) at Leeds College of Music, helping students understand the rudiments of traditional music notation and theory as well as chord structures and harmony. Later, when studying for a PhD at Leeds University, I taught music theory, musicianship, and performance to students in both the ‘classical’ and ‘popular and world music’ courses where I embedded music theory knowledge into my delivery covering a wide variety of musical traditions and skills (both written and oral/aural). After the PhD, I became a senior lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University, where there was a distinct classical-pop music curricular divide. At the time, all popular music students were required to sing in a classical choir and those who could not read music were expected to pick up reading skills along the way. This approach was not successful as most of my popular music students had come specifically to study popular music and had little to no reading skills – the whole enterprise made the majority of them feel insecure. To provide a more effective and relevant pathway for students from what was then called ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ (who are now, of course, more the norm than the exception on most higher education music courses), I therefore devised some modules that worked using music the students were already familiar with to help them develop the kinds of skills they would want to use in their future careers (for further details see Miller 2015).

I have continued this approach in my current role at Leeds Beckett University. Philip Tagg’s materials for the analysis of popular music (Tagg 2013) acted as a helpful starting point and, like him, I make use of music videos to support student learning, using timecode and captions to underline key musical concepts. My modules teach theoretical concepts through applied research within analysis, music history, songwriting, composing, and improvising modules, introducing appropriate music theory terminology in context. Mostly, though, students pick things up by ear, and I encourage them to keep these aural skills at the core of everything they do. I have seen the modules in many places fail because they inadvertently leave the popular music students feeling inadequate, and yet some of those students have much better aural and improvisational skills than their peers. Similarly, classical musicians can be scared to improvise because they are so tied to notes on the printed page and their ears can sometimes be divorced from what they hear. It would be great not to map popular music skills solely onto popular music repertoire but to see how they might apply to classical music, for instance, and vice versa of course.

During the pandemic, I was contacted by Lin Manuel Miranda’s arranger who had seen me playing on YouTube and asked me to record some Cuban charanga flute for the *Vivo* animation production. I was given two days to record flute parts (sent as notated parts) and my own improvisations to the two guide tracks sent and was offered a commercial rate of pay for this by Sony music production. I tell this story to my students because it helps them visualise how learning a mix of aural, notational and improvisation skills can be helpful for their future careers in music. This is why I like the look of the OU materials Byron has introduced us to. His message seems to be that if you develop a variety of skills and approaches, then you can mix and match them. I like to emphasise that there are many ways you can sound and be creative in music, and you can approach learning from and through a whole variety of repertoires, but foundational to everything is listening. Listen well and you will find you have many options open to you for the future.

Concluding thoughts

Esther Cavett

The contributions set out above offer a variety of perspectives on music theory teaching in the UK. Dueck aspires to create a new course mixing traditional repertoire and world music repertoire as well as considering different ways to represent sound. Redhead concludes that course design should focus not so much on content but on providing motivation to learn, and that collaborative, peer-group learning may be more effective than tutor-led intervention. Attah and Miller, from their perspectives as performers and teachers of popular music, each emphasise the importance of using inclusive music pedagogies and engaging with our own vernacular musics through listening.

As indicated earlier, at the RMA session that formed the basis of these contributions, the chair made it clear that contributors reported on how they responded to student demand for the teaching of notated music theory rather than seeking to theorise the wider curricula or socio-political issues raised by such teaching. To contextualise their work, therefore, I next identify some broader trends in music theory⁵ teaching today, as represented in presentations offered in the two flagship music theory conferences in the UK and US within the last year (2023), respectively that of the Society for Music Analysis (OxMAC) and the Society of Music Theory (SMT), held jointly with the American Musicological Society (AMS). I organised OxMAC, and the music literacies strand of that conference has been reported on in detail elsewhere in this issue (see Donn and Elphick); I base my comments on the SMT/AMS conference on the detailed programme session abstracts (SMT [n.d.](#)).

Their most recent programmes show how music theory research and teaching in higher education today is going through nothing short of a revolution, fuelled by the urge to decolonise music scholarship and dismantle whiteness in academic culture and production in order to counter the dominance of US-UK modes of learning. In other words, Ewell's article, mentioned in the introduction, was symptomatic of a sea change that was already in progress and that is continuing. In OxMAC, the following themes were identified: a call to be sensitive to the philosophies and values of the musical tradition under consideration, rather than assuming western musical values are applicable; the increasing and sometimes intrinsic role of technology in music analysis; the greater availability of music from outside the Western canon within previously traditional courses in analysis; the importance of aural and improvisation skills in analysis; and the need to take account of practices of literacy as they relate to non-Western music. The AMS/SMT conference in the US is a sprawling leviathan many times larger than the UK offering just described; inevitably, the SMA themes reappeared, but in more urgent or polemical formulations. Three sessions in particular attested to the necessity to dig deep into existing categories of knowledge in order to challenge systemic bias in higher education music theory pedagogy.

'Beyond the Staff: Pedagogies and Practices', organised by the AMS 'Music Notation, Inscription, and Visualization Study Group' (Arewa, Momii, and Mahler 2023), demonstrated how specific notations have the potential to alter the underlying narratives we introduce in the classroom. The event offered practical strategies to introduce students with no prior knowledge of notation to both staff and non-staff notations. Additionally, it reviewed some modes of music visualisation and manipulation made possible by modern technology including music production software. The session also proposed some entry points for classroom debate, to encourage a critical approach to notation and transcription systems that is sensitive to their connections to (settler-) colonialism, capitalism, and structural racism.

Another session called 'Redefining music theory through translation' (Quin, Goldberg, and Tenzer 2023), demonstrated how translating previously marginalised music-theoretical sources has the potential to expand the scope of music theory beyond the remit of Anglophone scholars. The session argued for the need to consider how ethics of translation should animate inquiry into the epistemic framework of music theory and it proposed an investigation of what kind of labour the music theorist performs in the process of translation. A third session, called 'Decolonizing Mode in the Twenty-First Century Music History Classroom' (Ludwig 2023), advocated the need to interrogate Western conceptions of mode that have not been challenged for almost 63 years in order to offer a decolonised presentation of mode in the classroom. It proposed an alternative timeline to the one offered in existing accounts of the development of modes, one that acknowledges Arabian musical influence on mode in the North Indian subcontinent as early as the eighth century CE, and the creation of a broader conceptual framework of mode through the lens of Hindustani rāga. Overall, this session indicated how a deeper understanding of mode is essential in order to provide secure foundations for overhauling current musicological and theoretical curricula.

Within such a contested field, full of striking new developments and with no existing narrative or hierarchy immune from being toppled or at least reconfigured, it was refreshing to find in this summer's RMA session two calm voices claiming the territories they chose to work on based on

pragmatics rather than ideology and two voices offering their complementary perspectives in a respectful debate rather than in polemic. The benefit to those in the music industry of being able to read notation, observed by Dueck, may well fade into obscurity in the light of new technologies including AI. However, the impulse to talk *about* music and thus communicate symbolically about the making of sound in a medium other than itself (that is, theorise about music), will surely survive since that impulse is fundamental to all cultures (Hasty 2010; Reznikoff 2008).

Notes

1. For further on music theory and analysis as an autonomous discipline, see Horton (2020) and Agawu et al. (2023).
2. OpenLearn can be accessed at <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/>.
3. My thinking about this suite of courses has been influenced by conversations initiated by Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh and with contributions from Ruard Absaroka, Joe Browning, Freya Jarman, Sue Miller, Laudan Nooshin, and Lara Pearson at panels on music analysis at the July 2018 CityMAC conference at City, University of London, the September 2018 conference of the Royal Musical Association at the University of Bristol, and the April 2019 conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology at the University of Aberdeen.
4. Thanks also to two Open University colleagues, Maiko Kawabata and Lilian Simones, who provided feedback on framing and pedagogy.
5. My references here to music theory generally include music analysis and vice versa, but, like Horton, ‘I maintain this synonymy, while acknowledging its inadequacy: practitioners might distinguish between theory (as the modeling of musical systems or the taxonomy of praxis) and analysis (as the application of theory in the elucidation of works)’ (Horton 2020, 63).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Associate Professor Tom Attah is a musician, teacher and published author who leads the BMus (Hons) Popular Music Performance and BA (Hons) Music Production degrees at Leeds Arts University. <https://www.tomattah.co.uk>.

Dr Esther Cavett is a Senior Research Fellow in Music at King’s College London and Lecturer in Music at Somerville, where she teaches music analysis.

Byron Dueck is Professor of Music at the Open University. His research interests include North American Indigenous music and dance and the music of central Cameroon.

Sue Miller is Professor of Music at Leeds Beckett University. Her writing has been informed by both her professional practice as a performer and her experience as a music educator.

Professor Lauren Redhead is Head of Music at Goldsmiths, University of London, a composer of experimental music, a performer of music for organ and electronics, and a musicologist.

ORCID

Esther Cavett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4842-4641>

References

- Agawu, Kofi, Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, Esther Cavett, Jonathan Dunsby, Julian Horton, Alexandra Monchick, Ian Pace, Henry Stobart, and Simon Zagorski-Thomas. 2023. “Valuing the Surplus: Perspectives on Julian Horton’s Article ‘On the Musicological Necessity of Music Analysis’, *Musical Quarterly*, 3/i-ii, pp. 62-104.” *A Critical Forum. Music Analysis* 42 (iii): 412–471. <https://doi.org/10.1111/musa.12221>.
- Arewa, Olufunmilayo B., Toru Momii, and Anabel Mahler. 2023. “Beyond the Staff: Notational Pedagogies and Practices.” Conference Session Presented at the Joint American Musicological Society and Society of Music Theory Conference, Denver, US, November 2023.

- BLM. n.d. "George Floyd". Black Lives Matter. Accessed 26 November, 2023. <https://blacklivesmatter.uk/georgefloyd>.
- Bray, T. 2011. "An Introduction to Music Theory". *The Open University: OpenLearn*, <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/music/an-introduction-music-theory/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>.
- Burton, Sarah. 2015. "The Monstrous 'White Theory Boy': Symbolic Capital, Pedagogy and the Politics of Knowledge." *Sociological Research Online* 20 (3): 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3746>.
- Clear, James. 2018. *Atomic Habits*. New York: Random House.
- Daubney, Alison, Gary Spruce, and Deborah Annetts. 2019. "Music Education: State of the Nation: Report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the University of Sussex". Accessed December 12, 2023. <https://www.ism.org/images/images/State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-WEB.pdf>.
- Dueck, B. 2023. "Introduction to Music Theory 1: Form". *The Open University: OpenLearn*. <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/music/introduction-music-theory-1-form/content-section-0>.
- Dueck, B. Forthcoming. *Introduction to Music Theory 2: Pitch and Notation*. *The Open University: OpenLearn*.
- Duolingo Team. 2023. "Our Brand-new Music Course Hits all the Right Notes". *Duolingo Blog*. October 11, 2023. <https://blog.duolingo.com/music-course/>.
- EDIMS. n.d. "Equality, Diversity in Music Studies." Accessed 26 November, 2023. <https://edims.network>.
- Ewell, Philip. 2020. "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame." *Music Theory Online* 26 (2), <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>.
- Ewell, Philip. 2023. *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Green, Lucy. 2001. *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Green, Lucy. 2008. *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education*. 2nd ed. Suffolk: Arima Publishing.
- Gutiérrez-Braojos, Calixto, Jesus Montejo-Gamez, Ana Marin-Jimenez, and Jesús Campaña. 2019. "Hybrid Learning Environment: Collaborative or Competitive Learning?" *Virtual Reality* 23: 411–423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10055-018-0358-z>.
- Hasty, Christopher F. 2010. "If Music Is Ongoing Experience, What Might Music Theory Be? A Suggestion from the Drastic." *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie 7/Sonderausgabe [Special Issue]*, 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.31751/546>.
- Horton, Julian. 2020. "On the Musicological Necessity of Musical Analysis." *Musical Quarterly* 103 (1-2): 62–104.
- Independent Society of Musicians. 2023. *12.5% Decline in GCSE Music Entries 'Great Concern' Says ISM*. London: *Independent Society of Musicians*. <https://www.ism.org/news/12-5-decline-in-gcse-music-entries-great-concern-says-ism/>.
- Katan, Simon. n.d. Sleuth. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://simonkatan.co.uk/projects/sleuth.html>.
- Knapp, Karl M., Lucas Blair, and Rich Mesch. 2013. *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction Fieldbook: Ideas Into Practice*. London: Wiley.
- Ludwig, Jacob. 2023. "Decolonizing Mode in the Twenty-First Century Music History Classroom." Conference Session Presented at the Joint American Musicological Society and Society of Music Theory Conference, Denver, US, November 2023.
- McQueen, Hilary. 2020. Questioning the Gap in Music Literacy in England: Defining a role for the Society for Music Analysis in preparing students for music degrees in higher education today. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.12012.74883.
- Merriam, Alan P. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Miller, Sue. 2015. "Activating Improvisational Creativity in the Performance of 'World' and 'Popular' Music." In *Activating Diverse Creativities for Changing Higher Music Education: Contemporary Research and Practices*, edited by Pam Burnard, and Elizabeth Haddon, 99–122. London: Bloomsbury.
- Oliver, Paul. 1970. *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues*. London: Studio Vista.
- Quin, Rong, Daniel Goldberg, and Michael Tenzer. 2023. "Redefining Music Theory Through Translation." Conference Session Presented at the Joint American Musicological Society and Society of Music Theory Conference, Denver, US, November 2023.
- Reznikoff, I. 2008. "Sound Resonance in Prehistoric Times: A Study of Paleolithic Painted Caves and Rocks." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 123 (5): 3603. <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.2934773>.
- RMA. n.d. "Past Events". Royal Musical Association. Accessed 26 November, 2023. <https://www.rma.ac.uk/events/past-events/>.
- Small, Christopher. 1987. *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music*. London: Calder.
- SMT. n.d. Annual Meetings of the SMT. Society of Music Theory. Accessed 20 November, 2023. <https://societymusictheory.org/meetings>.
- Tagg, Philip. 2013. *Music's Meanings – A Modern Musicology For Non Musos*. Huddersfield, New York: The Mass Media Music Scholar's Press.
- Webster, Chris. 2011. "Competition and Collaboration in Teaching and Learning." *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences* 4 (1): 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1120/ells.2011.04010007>.