

“Duet Me”: Music Theory Pedagogy in the Age of Social Media

BY ALYSSA BARNA

In this article, I outline a possible use of social media platforms in the music theory and ear-training classroom using a model assignment on (but not exclusive to) TikTok. I show how students can work collaboratively and musically in a platform they may use in everyday life to promote collaboration and engagement with musics and people outside the walls of the university. From this study, I extrapolate themes that illustrate both the benefits and pitfalls of social media use (pedagogically and otherwise). The first section situates social media platforms among the variety of technologies used in theory classrooms in the last seven years (2017–2024). I then present the assignment called “Duet Me” that I designed and implemented in theory courses that asks students to engage with creators on TikTok in a creative and collaborative setting. With the extensive number of examples I have collected over two years, I interpret the results into three large categories—parody, improvisation, and new composition—and discuss the learning outcomes, musical choices, and student feedback. I conclude with a discussion of the role of social media broadly as it relates to student engagement and online music-making, to show how technology and media can play a role in carefully crafting public and/or community-minded musical experiences for our students and bring forth opportunities for conversations and collaborations concerning identity and race.



Introduction

In this article, I outline a use of social media platforms in the music theory and ear-training classroom using a model assignment designed for (but not exclusive to) TikTok. I show how students can work collaboratively and musically in a platform they might use in everyday life to promote collaboration and engagement with musics and people outside the walls of the university. From this study, I extrapolate themes that illustrate both the benefits and pitfalls of social media use (pedagogically and otherwise). The first section situates social media platforms among the variety of technologies used in theory classrooms in the last seven years (2017–24). I then present an assignment called “Duet Me” that was designed and implemented in theory courses and asks students to engage with creators on TikTok (or another social platform) in a creative and collaborative setting. After reviewing the many examples I have collected over two years, I interpret the results into three large, often intersecting categories—parody, improvisation, and new composition—and discuss learning outcomes, musical choices, and student feedback. I conclude with a broad discussion of the role of social

media as it relates to student engagement and online music-making, to show how technology and media can play a role in carefully crafting public and/or community-minded musical experiences for our students and bring forth opportunities for conversations and collaborations concerning identity and race.

I argue that engaging with social media in this way provides a controlled opportunity to discuss the significant issues of 21st-century music-making in the classroom.¹ Our current students will never live in a world without these forms of technology; if they are not using TikTok, another platform will emerge. Thus, it is relevant to their work, careers, and daily lives to critically observe how musicians utilize, create, and in some cases, make a living using these platforms, and how the work we do in the theory classroom can relate in small ways. Should the relevance and use of TikTok wane, for reasons legal or cultural, another technology will take its place, and I strive to show the broader implications and applications of social media and technology in our pedagogy in what follows.

Technology in the Music Theory Classroom: Creativity, Connection, and Surveillance²

The use of technology in the music theory classroom grew steadily across decades, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic swiftly brought about challenges and changes to the technology used in (virtual) classrooms. At first, most material was generated by instructors to accommodate online learning as quickly as possible, curated to the needs of their individual courses and students. As online coursework became a new normal, formalized and commercial technologies became widely available for pedagogical purposes. In music theory, we have seen new applications and online programs (such as [Artusi](#) or the [Eartrainer](#) app), open-source, online textbooks such as [Open Music Theory](#), and a renewed focus on online learning materials from music theory and ear-training textbook publishers like W.W. Norton or Oxford University Press. These resources are now well-integrated into in-person learning environments, as their benefits were made clear throughout virtual learning. One benefit lies in

1 To preface questions regarding the media involved in this study, specifically TikTok, I acknowledge the recent actions at the US federal level to control and regulate the platform. The potential that TikTok is soon banned or no longer functional for US-based users is entirely plausible, as already seen in January 2025 when the platform went offline for a day. This article will address some of these concerns in the conclusion but strives to show the applicability of media in pedagogy beyond a single platform.

2 Throughout this section, bolded keywords in the discussion suggest themes that are later used to explore conference and journal output.

improved **access** for students; this means financial access (in the case of open-source texts and technologies), as well as access for students with disabilities or learning divergences.

My philosophy of using social media in the classroom (and the use of the “Duet Me” assignment) centers on two themes: **creativity** and **connection**. These relate to the standards outlined by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME)³ and the National Core Arts Standards.⁴ The National Core Arts Standards add “connecting” as a fourth standard (in addition to creating, performing, and responding used by NAfME) which asks students to “synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art; and relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.” They also emphasize “artistic literacy,” broadly defined as “philosophical foundations and lifelong goals, artistic processes and creative practices, anchor and performance standards that students should attain” (2). The broader and more inclusive practices of the National Core Arts Standards align with the goals of using social media in the classroom, insofar that they create connections between students and artists outside higher education (both professional and amateur) and inherently require musical creativity. Further, “artistic literacy” (more inclusive than “music literacy”) is furthered using technology and performing music in public spaces.

Beyond the pragmatism of content delivery, using **technology** and **media** in music theory can be a direct outlet for creativity and connection. TikTok and social media creation is an art form, and musical participation on the platform articulates the standard of creativity. The scope of creativity in an assignment like this can be boundless if the students are given an open-ended assignment. Many students will be pushed to exercise their creativity and musicianship in ways they never have before, while others may be accustomed to making music in this fashion. The standard of connection articulates the need for students to relate knowledge and personal experience to the creation of art and connect art to society and culture. Using social media in the classroom connects students to the community beyond the university classroom and facilitates their participation in the vast global networks available on platforms like TikTok. In an era that is, paradoxically, more connected but more distanced than ever, making music with others is a cherished opportunity.

As fundamentally creative endeavors, the concepts of **composition** and

3 <https://nafme.org/publications-resources/standards/>

4 <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>; https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/sites/default/files/Conceptual%20Framework%20-%20EDITED_4.pdf

improvisation are common in music pedagogy (including music theory pedagogy). This article suggests a symbiotic relationship of technology and composition and/or improvisation using online media and a digitally collaborative creative effort. Professionally speaking, the broad ideas of collaborative creativity and composition through digital means arise in professional music careers. Whether that be virtual music teaching, collaborating with performance or compositional peers despite geographical distance, fieldwork or ethnography, or many other musical careers and endeavors, the spirit of this assignment has implications beyond the use of social media in a single course or assignment.

A review of four years of programs from Pedagogy into Practice (2017–24)—the largest biannual conference meeting focused specifically on Music Theory Pedagogy research and practice—shows interest in the aforementioned bolded themes, but does not specifically show linear growth in the interest of these areas.⁵ This examination, of course, is not a foolproof means of measuring interest in these topics, but as the premiere stage for new innovations in music theory pedagogy, is an up-to-date resource and draws from work done at all levels, by undergraduate students through full professors. I searched the program for each conference using the broad set of keywords identified above: access (2 appearances), creativity (2), connection (2), composition (7), improvisation (9), technology (13), and media (0, including “social media”).⁶ These keywords address broad topics, but essentialize the spirit of my argument—that the integration of technology and media in the theory classroom can create creative and compositional opportunities that make connections between students and have far-reaching opportunities for outside engagement. Some of these keywords appeared in overarching session topics. For example, technology sessions in 2017 and 2019 featured papers and posters that explored topics like apps for ear training, Smart Music, online resources from textbook publishers, and productivity apps. Composition and improvisation appeared primarily in the context of research in aural skills and improvisational activities focused on common practice music.⁷ Work

5 The conference originally scheduled for 2021 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus resetting the dates biannually to 2022.

6 I do not use the term surveillance in this survey. It happens to not appear in a search of the programs, but moreover it is not typically (and should not be) a priority for instructors, thus its omission in music theory pedagogy scholarship. A focus on best practices in music theory pedagogy within the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* and other journals and conferences likely contributes to a focus less on critique of surveillance culture but a more positive approach to pedagogical practice.

7 An interesting lacuna in the scholarship on improvisation is that of improvising in popular music and jazz in the classroom, given that improvisation is equally (if not more) essential to these

on access typically concerned open-source educational materials, which decidedly broadens access for students, especially those without financial resources. This brief insight into ongoing trends in music theory pedagogy research demonstrates that there is a keen interest in these topics, but there is no singular trend of increasing the role of technology in the classroom. Further, there is no evidence that social media or other everyday technologies have played a role in pedagogy scholarship.

Focusing specifically on technology and media as the most relevant themes of this study, recent issues of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* from the same date range (2017–23, vols. 31–37), just one single resource (and no articles) report a focus on these themes. In the resource, Sean Atkinson demonstrates an example of how to create effective video examples—a prescient idea before the onset of virtual learning in 2020.⁸ There may be several reasons for this gap in scholarship: the format of a written article, even in an online journal, may not be the ideal venue to discuss a hands-on or instructive approach to technology, and presentations may be more well-suited to conveying ideas. Publishing timelines are sometimes incompatible with the pace of technology growth—as soon as a new technology arises, another is already waiting in the wings. This notion is why I choose a specific and general lens—a specific assignment on TikTok, and a general call for the acceptance of productive media use in the music theory classroom.

Beyond music theory pedagogy, scholarship in music studies more generally has paid increasingly close attention to the developing role of media and music-making. Galloway, Goldschmitt and Harper note in their introduction to a special journal issue on Musical Digital Communities that:

Intersections of music, digital media technologies, and modes of sociality in the twenty-first century—considering how music and musical practices shape—and are shaped by—novel digital modalities and media formats that foreground innovative forms of intimacy and public exposure. These modalities enable the formation of new types of musical communities, around sounds that push at the boundaries of what is considered music and how we listen.⁹

As teachers increasingly further removed from the generations to which our students belong, we need to accept—better, *embrace*—that students musicking online is an inevitable part of their daily lives, both personally and often professionally.

genres as common practice music. As the time spent studying popular musics in the undergraduate theory classroom grows, pedagogues should consider this focus alongside or in addition to classical improvisation.

8 Atkinson (2019).

9 Galloway, Goldschmitt, and Harper (2022, 364).

Piilonen explores the digital landscape of “social media music theory” through examples of memes and clickbait that challenge the visual and sonic communication of music theory. Pedagogically, she notes that:

On social media, communicating skillfully about music theory often involves charming, tempting, or frightening people into paying attention. Creating attention-getting content is an ordinary aspect of social media life because these apps are designed to ‘drive engagement.’ Teachers of academic courses in music theory may find themselves ‘charming, tempting, and frightening people into paying attention’ to differing degrees as well, so what is different about communicating via YouTube video or Twitch stream, and teaching a university or youth music theory lesson?¹⁰

Piilonen also describes how social media music theory intersects with “surveillance capitalism,” wherein content is subjected to algorithmic control, and privacy is compromised by data archivization. If instructors implement assignments rooted in the use of social media in the music theory classroom, we must initiate a frank conversation with students about the implications of student work as it relates to privacy and the “economic and political processes with which [social media music theory] is entangled.”¹¹

The surveillance of student work in the use of applications for testing and coursework monitoring in higher education has grown substantially in the era of virtual instruction. Programs like [Proctorio](#), [LockDown Browser](#), or [Honorlock](#) that monitor students remotely through facial recognition, gaze detection, web traffic tracking, screen locking, or audio monitoring. Most of these applications require an institutional subscription and are integrated directly into Learning Management Systems. Primarily used for testing and timed assessments, these programs are indicative of the erosion of trust and academic integrity perceived by some professors when administering virtual work, therefore some utilize these programs as a means of surveillance. A recent and related issue is the increasingly common use by students of artificial intelligence (AI) resources, such as [ChatGPT](#) or [Gemini](#). A complete discussion of the use and prevention of AI in the classroom is beyond the scope of this article, but the management approaches have often been similar and are sometimes grounded in a desire to surveil students.

In response, I suggest that our charge as professors and teachers is not to be intellectual law enforcement: we cannot outsmart the technology coming our way and predict and diagnose all instances of academic dishonesty. Instead, we must

¹⁰ Piilonen (2022, 1).

¹¹ Piilonen (2022, 12).

reconfigure our activities and assessment to keep the focus on student-centered content that renders the temptation of online cheating and AI moot. Embracing technology and social media—in this case, TikTok—is one way to measure musical skills. Attempts to regulate online platforms on college and university campuses have come and gone throughout the years. The use of TikTok is already compromised for students and faculty in some states where the platform is banned on campuses of public universities and could effectively be banned by the federal government in 2025.¹² In this case, the lawmakers’ concerns of outside surveillance have, in another way, imposed the theme of surveillance onto their own constituents. Officials that support a ban have concerns about user data collection by the Chinese government, as well as the spread of misinformation. Proponents of TikTok note that the US traditionally has had an open internet, free of censorship, and the forced sale is seen as overreach. I view these themes of surveillance and censorship as pitfalls of classroom technology but believe that benefits outweigh the drawbacks. For those wary of or unable to use TikTok, I emphasize that the spirit of creativity and connection suggested by this article supersedes the platform type: the assignments and ideas are not specific to TikTok, but rather of media in the classroom broadly construed.

With these caveats in mind, why TikTok? Both students and colleagues have asked me this question. Using this platform for the specific assignment I outline could be decidedly simple to implement for many instructors. Yet the point I hope to impress is that our students are living and growing in a reality that is much different than the analog days in which many instructors were trained. TikTok launched in 2018 but gained traction in US culture in 2020; its success was due in large part to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and bored Gen-Z students living at home, and the app has since become an indelible part of most young people’s lives. When you open TikTok, you are presented with the “For You Page,” a practically endless stream of algorithmically selected, short-form videos created by strangers across the world that use sonic and visual cues of music clips, captions, filters, and/or dance and movement to communicate. TikTok videos—like Instagram posts and reels or YouTube videos and shorts, to name a few—fall under a broad category of *user generated content*, defined by Santos as “any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital

12 At the time of writing, 43 universities (and university systems) have enacted a ban on TikTok on campus Wi-Fi (primarily in the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wisconsin). Anecdotally, colleagues and students from affected states simply state that they frequently “turn off” their phone’s Wi-Fi on campus and use data to access the platform without restriction. I acknowledge this issue of access (and the importance and relevance of access as a general topic) and offer alternatives throughout the article.

systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, *that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources.*"¹³ By understanding and embracing the everyday technology in our students' lives, we can, in one way, make our academic work relevant to music-making outside the walls of the university. To summarize the general benefits to students of this work: there are learning benefits of meeting students where they are, community-building benefits of public-facing work that extends beyond the walls of the university, media fluency benefits, and entrepreneurial benefits (how to build an audience through music).

“Duet Me”

I implemented the “Duet Me” project in three blended undergraduate and graduate courses on the theory and analysis of popular music across two academic years. Assigned and completed in weeks 5–6 of the semester (out of 15 total weeks), students had previously studied form, timbre, and harmonic principles of popular music and implemented skills into analyzing music from a wide variety of popular musics from 1960 to the present. In the project, students are asked to create a specific style of TikTok called a “duet me.” This genre of video uses content premade by another creator, wherein they request the viewer to “duet this”/“duet me.” Students were to create a new musical contribution to an existing video posted by a TikTok creator. This could range from adding a new layer to a looped progression, to creating an entirely new formal section (sometimes called an “open verse challenge” on the platform). The only constraint is that students should not sing or perform an existing popular song (à la karaoke or a cover song), thus ensuring they would create novel material in some way. The complete assignment is shown in Figure 1. The collaborative videos (both the instructor suggestions and many videos chosen by students) involved popular music styles and genres, as fitting for the nature of the courses. It would still be possible, however, to create videos less rooted in popular styles for a class with broader study of classical and popular genres, especially when curated by the instructor.

The learning outcomes for this assignment encompass different levels of Bloom's taxonomy, especially emphasizing understanding, analysis, and creativity. Students will *identify* and *interpret* genres and musical content in the given (or chosen) video. They will demonstrate this *understanding* through two means: (1) the *development* of musical work that fits within the extant material and *creates* complementary musical

¹³ Santos (2022, 108, emphasis mine).

1. Create a duet with an artist from TikTok. Creators sometimes call these videos “open verse challenge.” You’ll want to make sure that you’re creating or improvising new material—not performing a cover of an existing song.

- [Here are examples I suggest](#), but if you find a promising example on your own, I encourage you to explore different options that fit the guidelines of an open verse or duet of new music.
- Pay attention to the genre implied by the original video and *all* musical parameters present (or absent, as the case may be).
- Choose one aspect to duet with the video: this might be a vocal line (with or without lyrics), a melody performed on an instrument, a beat or percussive line, a bass line,
- Ideally, upload it to TikTok and share the link with me. If you object to using the platform, you can send me a video recording in a common video format (.mp4, .wav). You can also upload your video to Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook as a reel if you prefer these platforms.

2. Write a short response (~300 words) describing your approach to the duet and answer the following questions.

Why did you pick the particular example? Did you strive to replicate specific aspects of the style or intentionally go against them—cite what and why. If you added another layer, what would it be? What was the most challenging aspect of this task, technologically *and* musically?

“Duet Me” Assignment Grading Rubric

Category	Scoring Criteria	Total Points	Score
Performance (10 pts)	Vocal/Instrumental considers intonation, style, and timbre	5	
	Audio quality allows for a clean performance	5	
Content (15 points)	Harmony is stylistically appropriate	5	
	Melody is smooth, leaping when necessary and appropriate	5	
	Timbre, dynamics, and texture are considered in relation to the original video	5	
Narrative Summary (15 points)	Summary discusses challenges faced in the assignment and how they were overcome	5	
	Narrative connects the material to either the social/cultural context of the song or lyrics	5	
	Musical choices (harmonic, rhythmic, textural, timbral, etc.) are explained as necessary	5	
Score	Total Points	40	

Holistic Rubric:

- 5: Above average, nearly flawless
 4: Present with good effort
 3: Idea is sufficiently present but underexplored
 2: Needs development
 1: Barely detectable, needs considerable change
 0: Missing

Example 1
“Duet Me” Assignment.

layers and, (2) Subsequent written *analysis* of synthesis between the creator's work and their own music-making. Instructors should share these learning outcomes with students, not only to model good educational practice (especially for students in pre-service teaching degree programs), but also to emphasize the purpose and meaning behind the assignment.

What can students learn about music composition, songwriting, and analysis from this assignment? To properly craft a musical contribution to the clip, students must analyze the clip itself: What is the harmonic progression? What layers already exist, and what instruments and timbres articulate those layers? In what genre(s) is the artist performing, and how can the duet reflect that genre? How can you refer to the given material, but create something new?

Though the assignment and rubric outline expectations for the assignment, it is important to use class time to discuss the background and details of the assignment for the most effective implementation. First, we review the examples I have suggested, and if time allows, search terms on TikTok that bring up additional examples (e.g. searching "open verse challenge" or "please duet this.") so that students have an idea of how to proceed if they would like to find their own duet partner. I address challenges they might face in recording (outlined below), and stress that we are not looking for perfection, just a creative musical experience. Most importantly, this introductory session invites a discussion of "what" and "why": why might using social media be productive musical experience (or not), what musical skills are they developing through the assignment, and why I am assigning something of this nature. With student permission, you can share examples of past work (or your own contributions), which often makes the assignment feel less intimidating. Depending on the scope and level of the course, conversations might focus, for example, on developing ear-training and musicianship skills in a first-year course, or in a higher-level course (or one focused specifically on popular music genres), could encompass broader themes of media and its impact on post-millennial popular music.

A few basic steps to creating the duet on TikTok: locate the video you would like to duet and hit the "share" arrow in the bottom right (arrow pointing right). Scroll and select "duet" (note that some creators can turn off this feature for privacy). Using headphones, perform the duet. The initial recording page is where students can mute audio or change playback speed. After recording the duet, you will click through to the second editing page. Relevant tools on this page include volume adjustment (for both videos), visual effects and trimming, adding captions, and privacy settings. Logistically, TikTok videos are best recorded on a mobile device—all my students

recorded on a phone using the app. A browser-based version of the website is available for watching videos, but the upload feature does not provide all the detailed video editing features available on the app (this is true for Instagram Reels, too). Editing in the browser-based version of TikTok will bring users to an outside platform, CapCut, to create edits. Then, a fully edited video can be uploaded through the browser. If the student's preference is to create and edit the video using different technology or software and then simply upload the video, then this will work.

Using TikTok to perform and record a video is not without technological challenges and limitations. First and foremost, many students noticed a delay or lag between their audio and the existing video/audio. This is a commonly reported issue on the platform, most likely attributed to the use of Bluetooth technology that often creates audio latency. I recommend that students use wired headphones when possible to resolve some of the latency issues, or they can trim and realign the front of the audio clip to align the layers (through the “adjust clip” panel). Some students simply performed ahead of the beat, which proved to be an unexpected yet masterful lesson in microtiming. Additionally, students should ensure the microphone is unmuted and use (wired) headphones for the assignment; otherwise, the microphone picks up the audio playing through the phone and produces an undesirable doubled effect. If students are hesitant to upload to TikTok as a platform, there are several workarounds. It is simple to save TikTok videos to your phone (“send” arrow, then “save video”), which allows the instructor to provide video files via LMS or other file sharing platforms. I have encouraged students to use Instagram or the app Acapella if they prefer. I do not require students to share videos publicly (though it is encouraged), so they can save the video and send it to me if they prefer. I will note that this option, while good for protecting student privacy, diminishes the effects of public music theory and collaborative digital music-making that I discuss later.

Results and Synthesis

Compositionally, students gravitated towards a set of techniques to create their duets as indicated in the instructions and pre-assignment discussion. Most analyzed the chord progression and stayed generally within the articulated key and harmonies. Students often contributed to the duet by changing the textural density of the track. This occurred in two ways: the double-timing of texture, and playing faster over the given track. Or, students layered their track with multiple voices, either on the

same or different instruments and voices.¹⁴ Several students utilized spoken layers, either through rap or spoken word verses—which I encouraged them to do, as these popular music genres are generally underrepresented in theory curricula. These spoken contributions, in addition to other musical layers, were sometimes enhanced through layering, timbral variation, and sound spatialization. Many students performed on their primary instrument, while others used their singing voice, piano, or another secondary instrument as an additional challenge. Some students noted in their responses that they embarked on the project through vocal improvisation and later translated their improvisational content to their instrument. This vocal-to-instrumental network serves as a potential ear-training tool for students working on singing, improvisation, and the connection between the voice and their instrument.

To generalize broader themes of student submissions and contributions, I offer three categories of interpretation: parody, improvisation, and new composition. These categories are *my* interpretation of my students' submissions, and not directly correlated to *their* interpretation of the video duets. These interpretive categories are not distinct, but students often touch upon aspects of one or more of these themes within a single 30–60-second video. I suggest these categories as primary organizing principle(s) for the work, based on written responses and the duet's interaction with the original creator's content. I have devised a sample duet submission in [Example 2](#), recorded on TikTok.¹⁵

An in-depth study of parody is beyond the scope of this article, as there are many terms and definitions that apply and relate to the word “parody” across various art forms.¹⁶ A broad definition of what I categorize as parody in these assignments include ideas like Dentith's notion that a parody can be “any cultural practice which makes a polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice,” or Hutcheon's observation that parody is “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity.”¹⁷ Videos that prioritized parody were characterized

14 This technique is much like the videos created in apps like Acapella, where it is the default to multitrack recordings and present a composite track of several voices.

15 My rationale for posting my own duets for the purposes of this article is to preserve student privacy. While sharing my student's work would be possible pending approval from the IRB, I did not want to affect the outcomes of the project because students were intimidated by possible sharing outside the classroom.

16 For a detailed historical study of parody across ancient, modern, and post-modern eras, see Rose (1993).

17 Dentith (2000, 20); Hutcheon (2000, xii).



Example 2
Sample Duet Me Submission.

by critique, polemic, and the practice of difference and irony. Many students, skeptical of the project or social media in general, wrote in a parodic style because it allowed freedom of expression through ironic or humorous means. Parody also allowed students who experienced nerves, fear, and discomfort because of the new skills and public-facing nature of the assignment a measure of “critical distance,” or established difference as a means of assuaging these feelings. The means by which students used parody included videos that incorporated found sound: for example, a student makes breakfast and aligns the sounds of chopping vegetables and cracking eggs with the percussive elements of the duetted video. Another includes a student starkly playing the trumpet excerpt from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* over a decidedly funky bassline—juxtaposing the different genres and forcing together unusual layers of melody. Some students, in response to political action regulating TikTok, performed spoken and sung duets with original texts that overtly and humorously critiqued these actions in various ways.

Improvisation, while not a requirement or specific goal of the project, ended up being a common thread throughout many submissions. The preponderance of improvised musical contributions in student submissions also convinced me to seek out improvisational research in music theory pedagogy, as previously discussed. Many of these papers and articles discussed improvising in common practice contexts, but none explicitly asked students to freely improvise in a popular music context (as typically demanded by duets on TikTok). Given the nervous energy often incited by improvisation in the classroom, I was surprised to see many students opt to improvise—it seems that the option to erase and restart the clip allows students to rehearse and increase comfort and familiarity with the excerpt and its style. Improvising in this assignment lacks the boundaries (sometimes perceived as “rules”) that improvising in jazz or classical genres seem to impose—some students report in their written responses that this is liberating. Harmonic progression, meter, melodic range, and texture are all relevant parameters the student must engage to adeptly improvise along with the TikTok creator.

New composition encompasses the largest swath of submitted material and indicates a predetermined text and/or music that is rehearsed and performed for an intentional and seamless musical result. Students who engage with parody often use planned novel composition (as represented in Video Example 1), but in cases where parody is not present, general new composition is the guiding principle. Like improvisation, students must analyze the harmonic progression, melodic contour and range, texture and timbre, and metrical structure of the collaborator. Additionally,

creating a new composition often involved writing a text or lyrics as well as musical content—a skill not often highlighted in a traditional theory course—requiring them to utilize ideas from class discussions and activities on text setting. Many students wrote intensely personal texts to accompany their musical content, which allowed for beautiful vulnerability uncommon in theory or ear-training class. Having an accompanying written submission for this assignment is useful for both student and instructor, as it is insightful for both parties to detail the process by which they created their duet, and especially outline challenges they encountered, either in musicianship or in the use of technology.

I previously noted that I used this assignment primarily in courses dedicated to the study of popular music. I acknowledge the privilege of this situation: I have the opportunity to teach courses that focus on these genres at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and it reflects my expertise as a scholar of popular music. One of the benefits of TikTok, however, is that it requires no musical expertise in specific genres. This activity could be implemented into a first-year ear-training course, where student expectations are even more rigorously outlined and guide rails for content are created and supplemented by the instructor (e.g. “create a duet by adding a beat layer to this video” or “improvise a melody vocally over this open verse”). If an instructor is looking to target a specific topic, they could go in and create their own video to be duetted, thus creating a collaborative classroom experience through social media. This assignment also serves as a primer to a larger project on songwriting, if larger compositional works are a part of the instructor’s curriculum.

Through discussions launched by this assignment, students began to realize that music production in recent popular music is intensely driven towards viewer engagement on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Even well-established popular musicians are forced to cater their works towards seeking virality and success on the platform, often at the behest of their label and/or management.¹⁸ Students can learn how recent trends and evolutions in popular song composition are due, in part, to this push towards social media engagement. One of the musical implications of this shift, for example, is an increased focus on a song’s hook. Instead of only a memorable and participatory chorus section, a song now needs to have an approximately twenty-second section that immediately engages the audience—whether that be an opening hook, a shortened chorus or post-chorus, or occurs elsewhere in the form. The efficacy of the hook can come from a unique instrumental or vocal timbre, an electronic

¹⁸ Halsey, FKA Twigs, and Florence and the Machine have spoken out about the practice and pressure of TikTok virality (Chow 2022).

manipulation of the sound (e.g., the trend of “chipmunking,” where the tempo is sped up and pitch is raised in a given song), or the catchiness of a melodic layer or lyrical content. Students are not required to create a hook, but it is a common technique studied during the semester in the analysis of popular songs, and thus using a hook in the “Duet Me” context is another opportunity to revisit the topic. Another recent trend in song composition is a shift toward significantly shorter songs, sometimes barely surpassing two minutes. The truncation of hooks and the time-sensitive nature of social media scrolling has had an undeniable impact on song length.¹⁹ Because TikTok, social media, and mobile technology are native to many Gen-Z artists, they are not bound by the conventions of popular song composition of the past. The evolution of musical ideas due to social media and internet platforms also account for music’s impact on social change. It is imperative that our students, many of whom study primarily classical composition, understand the fullest range of conventions possible, from the 20th century to the present, where their peers are generating musical change online.

Broader Implications of Social Media, Technology, and Student Engagement

The “Duet Me” assignment reveals just a microcosm of the musical activity of the social media landscape, but as I have shown, brings about robust points of discussion for students that center on technology, music-making and collaboration. In the section that follows, I step back from the assignment itself and examine how the use of social media in a music theory or ear-training classroom draws upon broader cultural implications of access, ownership, and musicking in the 21st century.

Returning to considerations of access as discussed in the review of conference and journal topics, an assignment like “Duet Me” creates a fundamentally public-facing assignment, with all the benefits and drawbacks of using technology in the classroom. Boffone states that “TikTok is public pedagogy. Especially considering TikTok’s accessibility, it teaches us how to act, what to listen to, what to buy, how to

¹⁹ In an interview with ABCNews, Pink Pantheress discusses her incredibly short songs: “A song doesn’t need to be longer than 2:30, in my opinion. We don’t need to repeat a verse, we don’t need to have a bridge, we don’t need it, we don’t need a long outro” (Singh 2024). Musician Dionne Warwick responded to her interview on X (formerly known as Twitter), stating “Artists are allowed to create their art in any way they choose. However, I do believe a bridge is important,” revealing an interesting and explicit generational divide between artists and songwriters. Though this example shows the contrasting opinions of just two artists, it can become part of a larger conversation with students about the evolution of songwriting.

speak, how to interact with one another, and more. We learn how to be ourselves on TikTok.”²⁰ Acknowledging and embracing digital musical communities—whether our students are currently participants or not—demonstrates priorities of a community-engaged mindset. Though the content is freely accessible in theory, TikTok and other social platforms are not without downsides. Belcher, Kim, and Reese warn of the neoliberal push for technology and public-facing work, while potentially neglecting student access:

The physical needs of such an assignment may be an issue—technology access is taken for granted, and not all students will have reliable or stable internet access or smartphones. Less tangibly, social media requires yet another form of cultural competency—in addition to those that are required by more traditional U.S. college classrooms and performance spaces—that is not shared by all students in the U.S., much less across the globe.²¹

The technological fluency and cultural competency demanded by social media can be interpreted as both a benefit or a drawback, depending on the individual student’s situation and needs.

Engaging with music on TikTok (or other social media platforms) also brings up the question of ownership of music and art. The notion of ownership is common to the themes of parody, new composition, and improvisation, especially in the ever-changing and litigious landscape of music copyright law. Hutcheon describes the concepts of repetition and possession as it relates to parody, that parody can sometimes be perceived as “too direct a threat, either through its formal collusion with satire or because it is seen as a menace to the ownership of intellectual or creative property.”²² New composition and improvisation in the context of a TikTok duet inherently involve reshaping and repetition to some degree, but equally challenge the notion of ownership. However, in this context the creators (i.e., owners of the work) are specifically inviting collaboration and partnership in music-making, with the expectation that boundaries of ownership will be blurred. I believe that the discussion of balance between repetition and ownership is a worthwhile topic for students in music courses, regardless of their personal or professional background and goals.

In this assignment, the thrust of what I propose is pervaded by the idea that students participate in *musicking*. Adapting Christopher Small’s original concept of musicking, Paula Harper proposes a 21st-century digital update for the term,

²⁰ Boffone (2022, 5).

²¹ Belcher, Kim, and Reese (2023, [2.18]).

²² Hutcheon (2000, xiv).

defining *viral musicking* “to take part in a performance of viral music in any capacity, whether by performing and/or providing material, by viewing/listening, by remixing or remediating, or by sharing that material—giving it the potential to pass on and ‘infect’ new ‘hosts.’”²³ Sharing musical content online is what creates a meaningful act viral musicking: “the act of sharing a piece of viral content, whether through direct or (eventually, quite reified) digital means, is primarily about the transmission of common affective, emotional, and sensory experience—rather than simply the audiovisual content or information” (8–9). There is no expectation that the student’s duets will “go viral,” of course, but meaning-making through public transmission is an extremely culturally relevant classroom conversation to have in the present day. A slight dissonance may arise in this discussion, that some students’ desire to complete the assignment privately does not allow the opportunity for online musicking. This incongruence could be a beneficial point of conversation, as it centers on the balance of online privacy and public-facing work. As young scholars and musicians, students likely have or will encounter this in their professional and/or personal lives, and this assignment and resource present an opportunity to touch upon this discussion in the theory classroom.

A related idea, wherein musical content is collaboratively reshaped online, bringing forth new meaning is Braxton Shelley’s concept of “digital antiphony,” which he defines as the “emphatically intertextual and intermusical product and process of meme culture. Digital Antiphony is a rich, emergent conversation that simultaneously materializes and refigures social categories and concepts like race and gender, belief, and authorship. As antiphony’s animating form, the meme reveals a digital preoccupation with form. The meme, then, offers one sense of what it might mean to be musical in the 21st century.”²⁴ Shelley’s work focuses on memes, but the concept applies to musical experiences on social media as well. In asking students to engage with music in this way, we are asking them to contribute to an existing musical discourse and inevitably reshape the conversation through their collaboration. Music-making never happens in a vacuum or in isolation, and this is especially true on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.²⁵

23 Harper (2019, 8, citing Small 1998).

24 Shelley (2020, 8:42).

25 These conversations may move away from the nuts-and-bolts of ear-training and practice, they invite rich and important conversation about musical collaboration and online media, and move towards divestment from music theory’s “white racial frame” (Ewell 2020). It is our responsibility to have these classroom conversations about the music we study and in which we participate; and

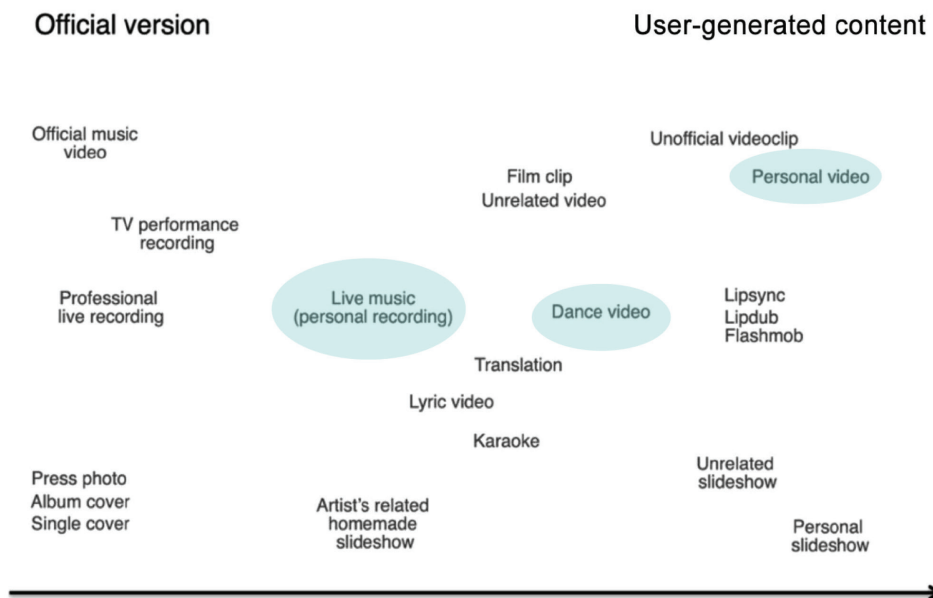
Corpus-based research on the evolution of “user-appropriated content” on YouTube (Martet 2023), supports similar ideas on how interventions by users reshape and evolve original musical content on the platform. Martet’s study is broad due to the corpus (including the number of years YouTube has been online—nearly twenty), and the many types and purposes of videos that users post to the platform. What is useful for the present study is their notion that users of the platform are reframing and reshaping musical material online in a very public way. Examples of these evolutionary changes are found in Example 3 (from Martet 8.3). This is a departure from the typical models students encounter in music programs in universities (and professional settings), wherein the work and development is done in private, then presented in a concert or performance setting. Making (and re-making) music online creates an inherently participatory framework, akin to Turino’s concept of participatory music making. Turino’s framework describes how it departs from presentational performance (e.g., rehearsed concert music) in that it is intensely varied, repetitive, often features dense textures and a constant groove.²⁶ Types of participatory musicking for Turino include genres as diverse as karaoke (especially in Japanese culture), Peruvian Aymara sikuri (panpipe), or Midwestern contradance.²⁷ For musicking on TikTok, the biggest departure from Turino’s model is that the participation crosses digital boundaries, with musicians never collaborating explicitly in person. TikTok, and platforms like it have demanded and created a completely new form of participatory music making, defying the physical and musical boundaries of in-person performance (or presentational performance). This is not to say that presentation or in-person activities are or should be diminished—quite the opposite, as we have learned the value of in-person musical experiences when faced with virtual experiences only during the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital communities of TikTok

how our contributions may be positive or negative. As Ewell notes, “Who gets to decide what music theory is? Since the beginnings of American music theory, it has been white (and male) persons” [7.5]. The privilege of teaching music theory without considerations of race, gender, and culture is a notion of the past, and this project precisely exists to bring these conversations to the fore in tandem with collaborative music-making. Consider Ewell’s suggestion, too, that theoretically inclined people of color have moved away from the field to other areas of music studies [6.6] and consider along with students how we may be able to invite their scholarship back into the classroom through these conversations.

26 Turino (2008, 28–32).

27 Karaoke as a participatory music making genre relates to TikTok’s roots as a lip-sync app, Musical.ly, which predates and was merged with TikTok in 2018. Even in its infancy, the app encouraged exploration between the lines of the official musical version and user-generated content, as seen on Martet’s figure.

and other social platforms create a new opportunity for musicians of all stripes to come together to create musical experiences.



Example 3

Types of user-generated content from Martet 2023 (Figure 8.3, 184).
(annotation mine to emphasize creative music activities)

It is vital to share the concepts of (viral) musicking and (digital) antiphony with students in the discussion of this work. Realistically, the chances of a student's work going viral are slim, but in a pedagogical setting I do not see virality as a measure of success. Regardless of their relationship with media and technology professionally or personally, they will encounter various modes of musicking throughout their careers, and it is worthwhile to explore the concept and empower them to interpret meaning and discover their agency as artists.

The "Duet Me" project is just one activity that engages with social media in the music theory classroom, but the implications are much further reaching than any isolated class assignment. It will always be impossible to rigorously and swiftly implement technological innovations into the academic classroom in the timeliest of ways, but the assignment provides the opportunity to have timely classroom

conversations and responses to ongoing cultural and musical discourses. By opening this discussion, we allow our students to connect student-led musical activity that stimulates musicianship and compositional growth with potential benefits of technological fluency, community-based music-making, and the possibility for cultural critique. If nothing else, the clearest takeaway is that the “Duet Me” project is a single assignment: a low-stakes way of “trying out” something new in your classroom without significant repercussions for semester-long schedules and outcomes that can be modified for a variety of courses. At best, you will open the door for meaningful conversations that reach beyond a single assignment; at worst, your students will still have an engaging and creative musical experience that they likely would have never encountered outside your class.

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