

# Conference Report

## Pedagogy at the Society for Music Theory Annual Conference Jacksonville, Florida, November 7–10, 2024

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The 2024 annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory featured a large number of explicitly pedagogy-oriented presentations, in several formats. In addition to a session sponsored by the Pedagogy Interest Group (this year in collaboration with the Improvisation Interest Group), the program included a record number of pedagogy-related poster presentations, a corporate-sponsored session highlighting innovative work in computer-assisted instruction as related to curricular reform, and additional papers related to disability and accessibility.<sup>1</sup> This report summarizes what the co-authors were able to attend, and indicates the breadth and vibrancy of current pedagogical research within the Society.

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### Posters

At least eight posters presented at the public music theory poster exhibit expressly related to the topic of music theory pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> Authors focused upon topics ranging from curricular design to detailed outlines of in-class activities for a variety of learning environments. As a convenience to readers of the journal, any materials shared by the authors (via QR code) are included as links in the footnotes below.

Some poster presenters explored progressive approaches to curricular design and assessment that allow students more agency in determining which courses they take and/or what music they study. Wesley Bradford provided an overview of the modular music theory curriculum at his institution (University of Louisiana at Lafayette).<sup>3</sup>

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1 Other sessions at the conference (not reviewed here) included some discussion of music theory pedagogy as well, including, but not limited to, the “Navigating Sensitive Topics” panel sponsored by the Professional Development Committee (chaired by Evan Jones).

2 Four of these papers were presented earlier on the same day at the standard poster session as well. The board of the journal commends the SMT program committee for providing two opportunities for these authors to present this important research.

3 Bradford’s materials are available [here](#).

While many programs have now embraced small core/elective-heavy curricula,<sup>4</sup> the set of courses from which students may “mix and match” in this iteration stands out as a uniquely promising application of this model—even more so given the emphasis on open-source materials and adoption of standards-based grading. While Bradford’s poster outlined how students may have curricular flexibility *after* completing the first-year core, Jennifer Shafer England’s poster demonstrated how one might allow students choices *within* the first-year sequence. Her “choose your own adventure” approach empowers students to decide which assignments they complete and which types of music they study, even allowing students to complete fewer assignments with a lower maximum possible grade. Students are likewise afforded the opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments until they receive a mark of “satisfactory” (replacing an “unsatisfactory” designation on an earlier submission); though this may sound challenging to implement, Shafer England reported that these measures improve the overall quality of student work and increase student engagement while maintaining a manageable instructor workload.

Other poster authors instead provided a detailed overview of specific classroom activities. Megan Lyons, for one, presented a poster outlining her elaborate “escape room experience” that she creates for her students at the end of the first-year theory sequence.<sup>5</sup> This activity is not only an enjoyable reward, but also reviews the topics covered throughout the year, demanding knowledge of course content to complete the tasks successfully. Students reportedly find the activity so compelling that sophomores and juniors sometimes return to first-year theory on “escape room day” to watch a new group of students solve the challenges. Meanwhile, Anna Stephan-Robinson’s poster provided the materials and rationale for two complete lesson plans united by a common goal: developing “active listening” skills without reliance upon a musical score.<sup>6</sup> One lesson, using the “Structural Harmony Listening Worksheet,” emphasizes the importance of hearing the structural centrality of tonic and dominant harmonies. The other, “what do you hear,” uses excerpts without an explicit harmonic progression to focus on listening to other parameters—those that are often underexplored in theory classes.

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4 Modular theory curricula have been a regular topic of discussion in theory pedagogy spaces for the past several years. See for example Sayrs’s report (2019, 287) on the second “Pedagogy into Practice” conference.

5 Lyons’s materials are available [here](#).

6 Stephan-Robinson’s materials are available [here](#).

Others still demonstrated through their posters that theory pedagogues can include topics and competencies *through* the classes we teach—even ones that do not clearly fall within the purview of music theory. Michael Buchler’s poster provided a valuable resource for those who teach in the arts or humanities at any public institution in a state with laws that limit the subjects that may be discussed in the classroom. He explained that in the case of Florida’s recent legislation, although instructors are limited in what topics they are permitted to discuss, students face no such limitations. Therefore, simply by asking students the right questions, students may discuss important “disallowed” topics that their professors may not be at liberty to bring up directly. Just as our students need to have the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics, Angela Ripley argued that it is likewise clear that today’s musicians need leadership and entrepreneurial skills to be successful in their careers.<sup>7</sup> Although not all music students can “fit” a course devoted to honing these skills into an already crowded curriculum, her poster made clear that instructors can indeed incorporate the development of leadership skills into music theory and aural skills courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels, providing a range of activities that, in her words, “serve the dual purpose of engaging students in disciplinary thinking and equipping them with transferable skills.”<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, some presenters discussed experiences in teaching music theory (broadly defined) in settings outside of higher education: respectively, a senior center and a secondary school. J. Daniel Jenkins—a long-time advocate for the value of public music theory<sup>9</sup>—presented a poster about a songwriting course he taught for senior citizens.<sup>10</sup> In this course, he succeeded in teaching a group with no previous musical experience about common formal shapes (12-bar blues, SRDC form, etc.) as scaffolding before collectively composing a song for the class to perform together. Robert Layton Wells introduced a new kinesthetic method for teaching written theory in high school through what he calls “moveable tile boards.”<sup>11</sup> His poster showed that a subject often reliant upon drilling and memorization can be enlivened with the added tactile component of movable tiles representing scale degrees, pitch classes, or other musical

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7 Ripley provides a link to [this resource](#) on “Student Leadership Competencies.”

8 Ripley (2024).

9 See details in his faculty bio [here](#), and see also his publications, including most especially *The Oxford Handbook of Public Music Theory* (2021) that Jenkins edited.

10 Jenkins’s materials are available [here](#).

11 Wells’s materials are available [here](#).

elements. Such an approach can reinforce concepts including (but not limited to) scales, intervals, North Indian *rāga*, and complementary hexachords. Although both presenters outlined approaches designed for different populations, each is clearly applicable to collegiate/university settings as well. Further, these two posters collectively demonstrate the value of community engagement through pedagogy, making each a welcome contribution to the conference.

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### Lightning Talks

In a session co-sponsored by the Society's Improvisation and Music Theory Pedagogy Interest Groups, attendees were offered a series of lightning talks on "Improvisation in/as Pedagogy." Topics ranged from jazz pedagogy, through cognition of formal improvisational strategies, to historical improvisation in eighteenth-century pedagogical methodology. The lightning talk is a specialized genre that presents considerable challenges for presenters: given only ten minutes, what presentational strategies will guarantee memorable and usable takeaway materials? The scheduling of seven such talks within a 90-minute session, with introductions and technology transitions, further complicated matters during the session, which felt frantic and hurried throughout. Some of the logistical difficulties could have been alleviated had the organizers collected all audio-visual materials on a single computer rather than transferring laptops and tablets between presenters; additionally, not all presenters were successful in limiting their content or adjusting their presentational style to what could be successfully shared within the allotted time. While many presenters included QR codes on their slides for participants to access for later study, some were flashed so quickly as to render the gesture meaningless.

Stephanie Bilidas workshopped a demonstration of "Teaching the Process of Improvisation through Tap Dance Pedagogy." While it is somewhat risky to ask for audience volunteers within a constrained time slot, Bilidas was successful in bringing the main pedagogical points to the fore: emphasis on self-reflection and immediate repetition can transfer from tap-dance pedagogy to the domain of the aural skills classroom fairly seamlessly.

Nancy Rogers's discussion of "Improvisation, Metacognitive Analysis, and the Music Theory Classroom" provided one of the most successful talks in circumscribing the content to what could be adequately presented within ten minutes. Taking the familiar activity of improvisation within the Schoenbergian sentential paradigm as its basis, the demonstration scaffolded the procedure of constructing the second half of a

presentation, and then an appropriate continuation, while emphasizing discussions of predictability, self-awareness (or lack thereof), and “thinking about thinking” while teaching and enacting improvisation. As a final takeaway, Rogers suggested that we can be assured that we are presenting information and methodologies correctly when the vast majority of our students intuitively know what to do based on that information.

In “Improvisation in the Aural Skills Classroom: Applications of Conversational Solfège,” Ryan Galick presented the ideas of John Feierabend (a former student of Edwin Gordon), and elaborated on a carefully scaffolded methodology by which students can build their aural and music-literacy skills towards improvisation and compositional fluency. The topic clearly required a more expansive format to do full justice to the amount of material, but attendees were referred to the author’s personal website for additional supporting materials.<sup>12</sup> The twelve-step scaffolding offers a helpful framework for designing and introducing a variety of curricular materials, and in a modification of Feierabend’s work, Galick makes a valid claim that it is a mistake to insist on using solmization or rhythmic syllables for real-time improvisational creation.

Two talks emphasized jazz repertoire and pedagogy. In “Intro to Jazz Improv: Achieving Jazz Aesthetic Goals for the Non-Jazz Musician,” Collin Felter insisted that audience members scan the QR code before he began, giving participants enough time to save the code for future reference—well worth the loss of a minute in presentational time! Even so, the presentation moved far too quickly to be absorbed; this was unquestionably a full-length presentation shoehorned into an inadequate time slot. The topic is important, and it is hoped the author will be able to share these materials in more conducive contexts. Ben Geyer utilized jazz pedagogy in non-jazz contexts in his demonstration, “Improvisation Games in Aural Skills: Lessons from Jazz Pedagogy.” Here, he offered heavily scaffolded exercises based on harmonic function theory, but soliciting participants from the audience did not work well within the lightning talk format. Fortunately, his materials were made available to the audience on his personal website.<sup>13</sup>

Two talks presented contrasting approaches to historical improvisatory topics. Philip Duker’s “In Clara’s Footsteps: Scaffolded Exercises in Preluding and Interluding Inspired by Clara Wieck Schumann” resuscitated the historical practice of improvising

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ryangalik.com/auralskills/#twelvesteps>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://bengeyer.com/teacher>.

preludes and interludes, a common procedure in nineteenth-century recitals and salon performances. Duker emphasized the classroom implementation and scaffolding of exercises, discussions, demonstrations, and final performances for a module devoted to this activity. Again, this presentation would have benefitted from a longer time slot for fuller effectiveness, but it was clear that Duker's ideas offer useful strategies in helping students conquer initial hurdles of real-time creation. Charles Weaver and Dani Zanuttini-Frank presented on "Solfeggio for Teaching Historical Improvisation." Basing their approach on eighteenth-century solfeggio exercises and pedagogical materials, their contention is that historical pedagogy offers non-keyboard players a methodology for accessing the eighteenth-century partimento tradition. While this may be so, the presentation itself was focused on demonstrating a variety of historical exercises using the historical syllables, and the pedagogical methods employed were underarticulated.

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### Conventional Papers

Three papers were presented in a session sponsored by the Society's Committee on Disability and Accessibility. The topics are relevant to anyone involved in higher education today: challenges faced by transgender individuals in aural musicianship, the limits and shortcomings of accommodations as provided by ADA officers, and strategies for inclusion related to visually impaired students.

In "Toward Equitable Teaching Practices for Transgender and Genderqueer Aural Skills Students: Voice, Gender, & Belonging," Kellin Tasber and Michael Callahan shared the results of personal experiences as instructors and students, along with the results of a qualitative study of 24 students with Zoom follow-ups for eight of these. The authors' employment of clear slides (with one author who could not be present offering embedded voiced commentary) was effective, and the use of real-time closed-captioning along with the presentation was a model of best-practice inclusive pedagogy. The paper as presented (it was announced as work in progress towards a published version) was exceptionally strong in identifying the considerable challenges that transgender and genderqueer students face in aural curricula that emphasize vocalization, and offered concrete suggestions for accommodations and inclusive strategies. Perhaps the most helpful observations and suggestions were that 1) transgender and genderqueer students are not disabled, but accommodations are an appropriate way to address their needs in aural classes; 2) transgender and genderqueer students are not a monolith, and strategies should be individualized to

particular students' needs; 3) *all* aural skills instructors should be trained in basic vocal pedagogy to better serve students in curricula that have traditionally assessed students' ability to sing accurately and expressively; and finally, 4) voice faculty from one's institution may be able to offer valuable assistance and collaborative opportunities in furthering work with individual students and on curricular considerations.

Evan Ware's paper, "Accommodations' End: Toward Universal Design in Music Theory Assessment," was a wide-ranging and sometimes difficult to follow discussion of the author's attempts to manage the reality of recent increases in ADA-related accommodations for collegiate students. The solutions offered involved a variety of grading strategies derived from research on Universal Design, based on the premise that inclusive design benefits all students, not just those with disabilities. One question lingered after this presentation: how does one distinguish between grading requirements and grading standards within these flexible grading schemes?

In the final paper of this session, "Integrating Inclusive Strategies for Students with Visual Impairments: Examples and Shared Resources from NYU's Curriculum Project," Sarah Loudon reported on best practices implemented at her institution during a recent curricular redesign. Emphasis on how screen reader technology offers interfaces for visually impaired students resulted in concrete suggestions for posting materials using principles of Universal Design. The use of headers in posted slides and handouts, AltText for all visual images, and links to MuseScore files for all musical examples posted are among the suggestions that can be implemented across many institutions and curricula. The presentation also included some brief but informative comments on the translation differences between conventional musical notation and Braille musical notation.

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### **Software-Sponsored Session**

Two major software companies, Artusi and Auralia/Musition, were among the corporate sponsors for this year's conference. Their presence in the main conference registration area, along with publishers and booksellers (including W. W. Norton and Oxford University Press, two major publishers in the area of music theory pedagogy), was felt throughout the conference. Auralia/Musition additionally offered a dedicated session entitled "Integrating Global and Popular Music Into the Theory Curriculum." The topic is clearly relevant to the many institutions wrestling with ways to create a more inclusive curriculum that addresses our students' backgrounds and musical interests. The 90-minute session offered presentations by Adem Birson and Trevor

de Clercq, each of whom provided numerous examples of their own curricular materials created in collaboration with the Auralia/Musition software designers. Both presenters made strong cases for the platform, which included a wide variety of expository and assessment methodologies and quiz materials, including ear-training oriented exercises (both dictation and performance), and multiple-choice and short answer questions.

Adem Birson's presentation emphasized a broadly inclusive approach to curricular design: by organizing one's course around theoretical topics (Scales, Rhythm, Instrumentation, Form), it becomes possible to insert units on music from global cultures and to discuss meaningful theoretical concepts within and across those musical repertoires. Birson also discussed the benefits of collaborations with guest lecturers and performers that can be incorporated into one's instruction of these units.<sup>14</sup> Among the many benefits of the curriculum described here is the repeated observation from students that they felt seen when music of their own cultures was included in the curriculum.

Trevor de Clercq's presentation doubled as an advertisement for his new textbook, *The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody, and Form in Commercial Songwriting* (New York: Routledge, 2024). The materials and curricular choices presented here clearly meet a market demand that has long been left out of traditional music theory curricula, and de Clercq defines learning goals with a strong emphasis on basic keyboard facility, rhythmic skills, and an understanding of musical form, with pitch organization placed in a supporting background position.

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## Workshop

Perhaps surprisingly, a pedagogical highlight of the conference for one of the co-authors of this review was his participation in Megan Long's Peer-Learning Workshop, "A Toolkit for Analyzing Late-Sixteenth Century Polyphony." In the three-hour session, participants went back to school, as it were, engaging with the material as students under a truly inspired and successful instructor. Beginning with hexachordal solmization (or movable-Ut), participants learned to assign syllables and recognize analytically cogent associations based on the hexachordal system and its relationship to musical range and to points of imitation at the fifth above or below, as well as to

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<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, this may be dependent on local availability, but Zoom and other live streaming platforms may also provide opportunities for such collaborations in locations where in-person presentations are not possible.

invertible counterpoint at the octave, tenth, or twelfth. Through a combination of expository presentation, group discussion of scores and readings, paired participant discussions followed by group reporting, and guided singing, the content was perfectly calibrated to the available time. Additionally, Prof. Long incorporated carefully placed commentary on how to implement these methods in a variety of pedagogical contexts, including undergraduate core aural skills, 16th- century counterpoint class, and advanced analytic seminars.

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