

Open Music Theory *Version 2*

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Reviewed by VICTORIA MALAWAY



In its description, [*Open Music Theory Version 2*](#) purports to “serve as the primary text and workbook for undergraduate music theory curricula,” and in addition to presenting standard tonal harmony and post-tonal theory topics, it includes fundamentals, form, jazz, pop, and orchestration, using a wide range of musical examples. As an open educational resource, the book is free to access and available to anyone with an internet connection. It contains all necessary ancillary materials in its native online format, in contrast to standard print textbooks, which are costly and may require additional supplementary materials more cumbersome to access. Special features include multimedia material, comprising video, audio, and interactive H5P content, along with an anthology and an extensive collection of downloadable worksheets in a variety of formats. An additional benefit is the instructor community the authors set up on Humanities Commons, which provides access to source syllabi, answer keys, supplemental assignments, sample exams, and a discussion board.

As of July 15, 2023,¹ *Open Music Theory Version 2* features eleven large parts: (I) Fundamentals, (II) Counterpoint and Galant Schemas, (III) Form, (IV) Diatonic Harmony, Tonicization, and Modulation, (V) Chromaticism, (VI) Jazz, (VII) Popular Music, (VIII) 20th- and 21st-Century Techniques, (IX) Twelve-Tone Music, (X) Orchestration, and (XI) Rhythm and Meter.

Part I, “Fundamentals,” provides more thorough treatment of rudimentary concepts than many standard theory textbooks designed for undergraduate music theory curricula. This part alone would serve well as a primary textbook for most

¹ While the authors do not edit the content during the standard academic year so instructors can craft their syllabi trusting the content will not be altered while in session, *Open Music Theory Version 2* is an ongoing work-in-progress, with new chapters under development every summer. This review reflects the content available as of July 15, 2023.

fundamentals classes. Unexpected highlights include a chapter titled “The Basics of Sight-Singing and Dictation,”² which explains what ear-training activities entail and introduces relevant concepts like protonotation (and provides links to external resources for practicing these skills). Another chapter, titled “Other Aspects of Notation,” includes information on dynamics, articulations, tempo, structural symbols, and stylistic periods.

Part II, “Counterpoint and Galant Schemas,” presents central concepts related to counterpoint (consonance, dissonance), practical instruction on species counterpoint, and chapters on fugue, ground bass, and Galant schemata. The assignments at the end of the fugue chapter and chapters on Galant schemata depart from the downloadable formats provided in the previous chapters and instead appear as text within the chapters. The assignment content seems equally pedagogically effective, but instructors expecting to have all assignments available in a variety of formats may be disappointed. Still, instructors may easily copy and paste the online text of these assignments if they wish to create their own .pdfs or content in other formats.

The chapters in Part III, “Form,” begin with small-scale formal concepts related to European baroque, classical, and romantic music, and later build to form at the level of the piece, with individual chapters on binary, ternary, sonata, and rondo form. Some chapters in this part, such as “Foundational Concepts for Phrase-Level Forms” and “Formal Sections in General,” do not provide assignments, departing from the precedent previous chapters set. Users wishing to engage form in genres outside of the European classical tradition will have to skip ahead to Part VII, “Popular Music.” There may have been a missed opportunity here to integrate AABA form, strophic form, and verse-chorus forms into Part III, especially since AABA and strophic forms appear in European classical and romantic music, but the topics do receive coverage later in the textbook.

Part IV presents diatonic harmony concepts, applied chords, and modulation to closely related keys, with a strong emphasis on four-voice part writing related to European classical practice. Assignments at the end of each chapter require students to complete four-voice part writing and harmonic analysis of score examples. Users wishing to learn about diatonic harmonic systems, secondary dominants, and modulation in music other than European classical and romantic traditions will have to skip ahead to separate parts on jazz and popular music (Parts VI and VII). While this organization is optimal for curricula focused on European classical music practices,

2 Although *Open Music Theory Version 2* does not include dictation materials, two chapters on sight-counting and sight-singing examples are currently in development.

instructors working with curricula that engage a wider set of harmonic practices and genres in their diatonic harmony courses will have to consider sequencing alternatives, as content from Parts IV and Parts VI and VII would need to be combined or studied simultaneously.

Part V, “Chromaticism,” introduces chromatic harmony topics covered in most theory textbooks, beginning with mode mixture and concluding with altered and extended tertian chords, with an additional chapter on Neo-Riemannian triadic progressions. Of all the content in *Open Music Theory Version 2* in its current form, Part V is the least complete. Instructors wishing to adopt this text for chromatic harmony classes will need to supplement with additional materials. Assignments in Part V emphasize four-voice part writing, including figured bass realization, some chord spelling, and musical analysis. Most examples come from European classical and romantic traditions. Some chapters in Part V do not have assignments posted yet. Instructors wishing to assign exercises related to this content will have to create their own worksheets or borrow from other sources. Content for other chapters in Part V, such as “Reinterpreting Diminished Seventh Chords” and “Parallel Chromatic Sequences,” has not yet been created.

Part VI, “Jazz,” introduces a host of concepts central to jazz and other popular genres, including swing rhythm, chord voicing and voice leading, chord-scale theory, and harmonic topics, such as ii – V – I progressions, embellishing chords, chord substitution, and blues harmony. Most chapters within this section are eloquently and succinctly written, with compelling examples, sources for further reading, and worksheets. Only one chapter, titled “Chord-Scale Theory,” within Part VI does not yet have any assignments. Although there may not be quite enough depth here to satisfy a separate jazz theory sequence specifically geared for a jazz curriculum, standard music theory instructors, especially those teaching students who do not play jazz, wishing to introduce concepts central to jazz music will find Part VI useful.

Part VII, “Popular Music,” engages topics relevant to studying popular genres, including chapters on rhythm and meter, melody, and form, as well as eight chapters dedicated to harmonic schemata used in a variety of popular genres. Some content in Part VII appears to be incomplete or in progress, but overall, most of the prose and examples in this section are grounded in the latest scholarship in pop music theory, effectively curated for an undergraduate audience. Additional references for further reading could be incorporated into the chapter titled “Introduction to Form in Popular Music,” namely Covach 2005 (an excellent basic primer for undergraduates), as well

as Nobile 2020 (a more thorough, yet still accessible resource).³

Focused on solely on pitch aspects, Part VIII, “20th- and 21st-Century Techniques” contains chapters on pitch and pitch classes, integer notation, interval classes, set classes, interval class vectors, diatonic modes, and pitch collections. It also features two chapters specifically engaging analysis, titled respectively “Analyzing with Set Theory (or Not!)” and “Analyzing with Modes, Scales, and Collections.” Similarly, Part IX, “Twelve-Tone Music” focuses on pitch-related serialism, with a brief mention of total serialism in its final chapter. The assignments in Part IX appear only as prose within the chapter and are not downloadable in multiple formats. Instructors wishing to engage parameters outside of pitch, as they relate to 20th- and 21st-century music, will have to supplement Parts VIII and IX with outside sources.

Part X, “Orchestration,” offers three chapters engaging some core aspects of orchestration, including strategies for successive orchestration choices and the effectiveness of simultaneous combinations of instrument groups, along with a chapter titled “Transcription from Piano” that demonstrates how to orchestrate a piano score. Instructors will need to supplement this section with a primer on instrumentation, assuming that most students will not know instrument ranges nor how transposing instruments work.

There are just a few drawbacks to adopting *Open Music Theory Version 2* as a primary textbook. Some embedded audio examples created with MIDI lack musicality associated with human performance. As the textbook has seven co-authors, the style of writing and musical engraving varies from chapter to chapter depending on who wrote the content. But what the book lacks in consistency of voice and style, it makes up for in its wide-reaching breadth of content. Where the lack of consistency feels most problematic is in terms of the unavailability of some assignments in multiple downloadable formats, or where some chapters are yet incomplete. These inconsistencies will cause a bit more work for instructors wishing to adopt *Open Music Theory Version 2* as their primary textbook in its current form. The authors revise the text every summer so we can look forward to additional content in future academic years. In fact, while writing this book review, the content of *Open Music Theory Version 2* expanded, and I imagine that much of the missing content will be added, making the criticisms here no longer relevant.

Additionally, the placement of Parts VI and VII, on jazz and popular music

³ See Covach, “Form in Rock Music: A Primer,” in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis* (2005, 65–76) and chapters 5–8 of Nobile (2020).

respectively, following sections engaging traditional music theory content (with generic names, like “Form” and “Chromaticism”), may give an unintended message that these topics are separate, perhaps even marginal or ancillary, in contrast to the topics in Parts I–V that center European baroque, classical, and romantic music. Some opportunities for integration include introducing chord symbols (currently the second chapter of Part VI, “Jazz”) much earlier, in Part I, “Fundamentals,” after the chapters on triads and seventh chords, as many students find chord symbols more intuitive than figured bass and Roman numeral systems, which are already introduced in Part I. Similarly, content on rhythm and meter within Part VII, “Popular Music,” is appropriate for Part I, and chapters on AABA form, strophic form, and verse-chorus form, would work well earlier in the book, in Part III, “Form.” That said, as of its July 2023 revision, *Open Music Theory 2* offers a new feature (Part XI, “Rhythm and Meter”) that cross-lists rhythm and meter chapters from among the various parts of the book, helping to bring together these related concepts. Although no one system of organization will please everyone, and sequencing adaptations are often necessary for any curriculum adopting any textbook, we must realize that the order in which we present material and how we name the content reveals implicit value systems we hold, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

In the introduction of the book, the authors write that they have “carefully selected music examples to represent people of diverse races and genders.” They do not explicitly specify aims to diversify musical examples with regard to other intersectional aspects of identity, such as considering class, disability, socio-economic status, nationality, or sexual orientation. While not all parts of *Open Music Theory Version 2* are able to represent composers of “diverse races and genders,”⁴ taking Part I, “Fundamentals,” as a representative sample, we find its chapters feature a total of 21 musical examples, with the greatest racial and gender diversity represented in terms of performers and less diversity represented in terms of composers/songwriters. Of the performers included in this sample of examples, three are female, 12 are male, three are multi-artist collaborations with mixed genders, three are rendered in MIDI, and six of the performers are likely persons of color.⁵ In terms of composers or songwriters represented in this sample of examples, only one is female (Louise Reichardt), 19 are

⁴ For example, the examples in Part II, “Counterpoint and Galant Schemas” are stylistically limited to European 16th- and 18th-century music and thus do not offer diverse representation of different identities.

⁵ I have used biographies and other publicly available evidence to determine to aspects of individuals’ identities, as they relate to gender and race, reported here.

male, and one represents a collaborative songwriting team of mixed genders. Four composers of color (all male) are featured among Part I's 21 examples. Laudably, the examples in Part I span an impressively wide range of styles—with three examples each representing classical music and neoclassical music respectively, two examples each representing pop, baroque, and romantic music respectively, and one example representing each of the following styles: band music, pop/rap, rock, American folk, Turkish classical, traditional Irish, English folk, jazz, and Broadway. So, while there is still room for greater inclusivity particularly in terms of composers' identities represented, this sample of examples shows healthy diversity in terms of styles represented, as well as some diversity in terms of performer identities represented.

In my view, the advantages of *Open Music Theory Version 2* outweigh its shortcomings. First and foremost, it is available at no cost to students. Second, created natively as an online resource, it is fully accessible on multiple platforms, including mobile phones, tablets, and computers. In addition to the online platform, users may download its content in a host of additional formats, including .epub, digital and print .pdfs, .html, .xhtml, .xml, .imsc, and .odt. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 license, instructors may easily and freely incorporate the materials from *Open Music Theory Version 2* in their classes, either as a supplement to preexisting materials already in use, or as the primary textbook. Third, for instructors wishing to adapt some content without necessarily using it as a primary text, this resource provides a treasure trove of high-quality material, authored by an impressive collective of experienced pedagogues and informed by the latest relevant scholarship. With native online content that may be copied and pasted without hassle, along with ancillary materials available in multiple file formats, instructors will find the content easy to adapt to their institutions' online learning management system or to incorporate into their own customized documents.