

Expanding the Canon: Black Composers in the Music Theory Classroom

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Reviewed by RACHEL E. MANN



Introduction and Overview

In 2019, Philip Ewell's plenary address to the Society for Music Theory and subsequent 2020 article, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," in *Music Theory Online* challenged many in our music theory community to renew efforts to take a hard look at our own curriculums, educational materials, repertoire choices, and learning outcomes. Who or what we teach to our students speaks volumes, and it is well beyond the time to assess what we are really saying in our classrooms. The goal of *Expanding the Canon: Black Composers in the Music Theory Classroom* is to address the lack of representation of Black voices in the core music theory curriculum, and it seeks to correct this failing by offering concrete solutions. The book demonstrates why the expansion and diversification of a canon consisting almost solely of works by European, White, male composers is necessary and provides practical, ready-made lesson plans and teaching materials that incorporate a wide array of repertoire by Black composers. It also encourages readers to expand the canon even further to include popular Black music such as ragtime, jazz, blues, rap, and R&B, and even suggests new approaches to teaching such genres.

Like many collected essays on music theory pedagogy, the book's foreword is written by a senior scholar—here, none other than Philip Ewell—who, along with Teresa L. Reed in her opening chapter contextualizing her lived experience as an African American woman in the field of music theory, remind us why such a book as this is necessary. In "Our Field at Its Best," (chapter 1) Reed describes how she walled off or hid her "native" or "born" musical roots—those developed in the oral tradition of the Black Pentecostal church, "where nothing was notated and everything was improvised"—from her life in the credentialed world of "White, European-focused schools of music, where almost nothing was improvised and everything was notated" (2-3). Her essay reminds us that we do best by our students and colleagues when we

tear down such walls and treat differences in backgrounds and cultures with curiosity and openness.

The following twenty chapters fit into five broad units based loosely on the traditional music theory core curriculum. These include: 1) fundamentals and diatonic harmony, 2) chromaticism and other advanced topics, 3) form, 4) popular music, and 5) twentieth-century music, which will be discussed in turn below.¹ These chapters vary greatly in style, but the common thread among them is the focus on music by Black composers. Some White, European male composers are mentioned throughout, yet virtually no space is given to their works. Instead, each chapter in *Expanding the Canon* drives home the message that every concept we teach in our music theory curriculums can be illustrated using excellent examples composed by Black musicians.

While some of the book's chapters are topical and offer numerous examples by Black composers to introduce a single concept, others focus primarily on a single piece in an effort to teach a given topic. The range and scope of the selected repertoire is quite broad, representing Classical-era composers such as Joseph Bologne (1745–99) and Francis Johnson (1792–1844), Romantic and early twentieth-century composers such as Scott Joplin (1868–1917), William Grant Still (1895–1978), Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912), and George Walker (1922–2018), as well as pop musicians like Stevie Wonder (1950–) and The Weeknd (1990–). Black women composers are also represented with space given to works by Florence Price (1887–1953), Margaret Bonds (1913–72), Julia Perry (1924–79), and Janelle Monáe (1985–), among others. Some composers even receive numerous mentions throughout. For example, works by Joseph Bologne, Francis Johnson, Janelle Monáe, Florence Price, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor appear across several chapters. Beyond musicians, this book celebrates the work of Black poets, Langston Hughes (1901–67) and Maya Angelou (1928–2014).

Expanding the Canon includes supplemental online instructor resources, accessed through the Routledge website, at this [link](#). Once signed in to the Instructor Resources Download Hub, teachers may download a file containing folders of materials designed for 16 of the 21 chapters.² These resources range from notated musical excerpts and copies of full scores; lesson plans with more detail; student worksheets, both with and without accompanying answer keys; surveys and writing prompts; as well as links to recordings, and charts and lists of additional musical examples beyond what is cited in the text and other supplemental materials.

1 In the book's introduction, Hoag also notes where lessons in some units may potentially overlap with topics in others.

2 The materials appear as PDF and DOC files, though not always in both formats for each file.

Each of the chapters of *Expanding the Canon* is relatively short, averaging about twelve pages in length, and, coupled with the online resources, is meant to be accessible for specialists and non-specialists alike. Many of the text's lessons may be taught wholly as presented in the book or can be easily tailored to fit one's classroom needs. Each chapter ends with a list of works cited, which serves as a much-needed bibliographic resource across the entire book, especially considering how little published research exists on much of this repertoire.

The book's lessons and supplementary online materials are appropriate for teaching the undergraduate music theory core, but many of its lessons would also work well in high school music theory classrooms.

I. Fundamentals and Diatonic Harmony

The four chapters of this unit cover concepts ranging from pitch, texture and meter, intervals and cadences, major and minor mode, embellishments and non-chord tones, to small forms and basic T-PD-D-T harmonic syntax. In "Rethinking Music Fundamentals: Centering the Contributions of Black Musicians" (chapter 2), Uzee Brown Jr. focuses on the experience of teaching at a Historically Black College. From the perspective of a veteran teacher of forty years, Brown offers tips and best practices for teaching music fundamentals. Using a "sound first" approach, Brown emphasizes the importance of explaining the "what" and "why" of fundamentals with questions posed to students such as: What is music? What are music fundamentals? What needs to be learned and why? Brown also advocates getting to know students' musical roots—to learn about them in much the same way we learned about Teresa L. Reed in chapter 1.

In chapter 3, Robin Attas offers flexible solutions to making lasting changes in our music theory curriculums, starting with fundamentals. There is a middle ground between incorporating examples of Black composers here and there, and completely overhauling an entire curriculum to enact antiracist pedagogies. The plug-and-play option of diversifying the repertoire by adding new pieces by Black composers in an existing framework is a start in the right direction, but this chapter also makes suggestions for rethinking how we teach pitch, rhythm, and meter, and makes a case for incorporating concepts such as texture. Jan Miyake (chapter 4) introduces fundamentals and diatonic concepts with two pieces by Black composers that present "contrasting soundscapes and windows into two moments of time in Black histories" (29). Miyake draws from works by Rhiannon Giddens and Francis Johnson to introduce

intervals, non-chord tones, closure and cadence, and form. Each individual piece also provides a springboard for discussions about harmony and calls for a closer reading of pitch collections, melismata, and range.

Much like the other authors in this unit, Kristina L. Knowles and Nicholas J. Shea (chapter 5) advocate using a “sound-first” approach by focusing on aural skills and using protonotation. This approach releases instructors from the need for access to scores and disrupts the “overt focus on notation and harmony typical of theory curricula” which is “foundational to classical music pedagogy” but not necessarily appropriate in other styles such as pop (42). By incorporating their proposed strategy of protonotation, the reliance on musical scores becomes less necessary and can actually broaden repertoire faster while also “developing the aural skills necessary to support an increasingly diverse range of musical careers” (42). They first teach students to hear and notate contrapuntal reductions and cadences loosely following Tymockzo’s seven parameters for pitch stability and then use this to teach closure and small forms such as periods, sentences, and SRDC (statement, restatement/response-departure, closure) models.

II. Chromaticism and Other Advanced Topics

The three chapters in this unit focus on modal mixture, syncopation, modulation, and elementary and advanced aural skills topics. Mitchell Ohriner’s chapter on modal mixture (chapter 6) opens with how the topic is introduced in many of the popular core theory textbooks. In pointing out how these introductions are “laden with NEEM [notated, Enlightenment-era European music]-era ideological preferences for the chromatic over the diatonic, the structural over the surface, and the major/minor dichotomy over a more nuanced categorization” (69), Ohriner attempts to dismantle this thinking using works by Black composers following in the NEEM-tradition, including compositions by Betty Jackson King, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and L. Viola Kinney. Ohriner ends this chapter with examples of mixture in popular music by Beyoncé and Stevie Wonder.

In “‘Elite Syncopations’ and ‘Euphonic Sounds’: Scott Joplin in the Aural Skills Classroom” (chapter 7), Amy Fleming approaches the teaching of various elementary and advanced concepts within the aural skills curriculum using the music of Scott Joplin. Drawing from his well-known ragtime music and lesser-known songs, this chapter includes suggestions for singing, rhythm, dictation and transcription, contextual listening, improvisation, and error detection. In the final chapter of this

unit, Alan Reese uses readily accessible music by Black composers to teach diatonic and chromatic modulation. Of particular note is the author's inclusion of a supplemental list in the online materials of about 250 additional modulation examples by Black composers freely available on IMSLP (<https://imslp.org/>), the Composers of Color Resource Project (<https://composersofcolor.hcommons.org/>), and Music By Women (formerly Music Theory Examples by Women; <https://www.musicbywomen.org/>).

III. Form

This unit presents four chapters on jazz schemes, binary and ternary forms (plus a discussion of chromatic harmonies and modulations), strophic form, rondo, and sonata form. In “A Jazz-Specific Lens: Methodological Diversity in the Music Theory Core” (chapter 9), Ben Geyer “critiques the teaching of jazz using an established pedagogical lens, advocating that one should use alternative analytical methods while studying and teaching this music” (3). This chapter focuses on how a jazz-specific mindset and set of tools can be used in the theory classroom and provides a roadmap for teaching an entire unit on jazz.

Horace J. Maxile, Jr., in chapter 10, proposes teaching binary and ternary forms via works by Francis Johnson and Harry Burleigh; this choice of repertoire is significant, as Johnson is considered the first published Black American composer and Burleigh is credited as the first to promote Black nationalistic tenets through music. In chapter 11, Melissa Hoag addresses musical form and extramusical meaning in three song settings of poems by Langston Hughes, composed by Margaret Bonds, Florence Price, and Howard Swanson. In “Teaching Sonatas Beyond ‘Mostly Mozart’” (chapter 12), Aaron Grant and Catrina Kim urge instructors to draw from repertoire by Joseph Bologne, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and Florence Price in order to teach sonata form from a wider chronological span and greater range of composers than Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, arguing that little is gained from teaching formal “norms” drawn from such a limited repertoire.

IV. Popular Music

The unit on popular music has five chapters that offer challenging new approaches to pedagogy and analysis. Zachary Zinser, in “Expanding the Scope of Analysis in the Popular Music Classroom” (chapter 13) advocates for student-chosen repertoire to promote learning that is empowered and engaged because it applies to music which

has already caught their attention and uses techniques that reveal new features of that music. With their instructors learning alongside them, students learn to apply new concepts and frameworks to what can potentially become a very diverse repertoire.

In chapter 14, Cora Palfy artfully explores formal structures and narrative design in two songs by Janelle Monáe. Contributions by David Geary and Trevor de Clercq (chapters 15 and 16, respectively) offer suggestions for lessons that focus on how rhythm in popular music can be used to express meter, musical form, and phrase organization—welcome topics given most theory textbooks’ and curriculums’ overemphasis on pitch and harmony, often at the expense of rhythm and meter. These latter chapters can be used to teach aural skills, hypermeter, and more.

The chapter by Rosa Abrahams on the music of Ester Rada (chapter 17) explores structural shifts—including distinct modal, metrical, timbral, and textural changes between sections—and lyrical variation as aspects of musical narrative. This chapter additionally introduces concepts such as key relationships, metric shifts, Afro Diasporic sound and identity, close listening, embodied experience, and transcription.

V. Twentieth-Century Music

The final unit of the book focuses on twentieth-century music and features chapters by four scholars. In “Inclusivity and the ‘Perfect Teaching Piece’ in the Undergraduate Post-Tonal Classroom” (chapter 18), Cara Stroud offers four new pieces by Black composers for teaching a wide variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century techniques and concepts. Stroud additionally addresses strategies for dealing with the discomfort of moving beyond teaching (and learning) from the “perfect teaching piece,” arguing that such pieces often “unnecessarily limit classroom teaching and further narratives of White supremacy” (217).

Leigh VanHandel provides a close reading of a song by Florence Price that “illustrates a synthesis of western tonal harmony with the vernacular of jazz, popular song, and African American traditions” (236–37). VanHandel’s chapter explores such concepts as advanced chromatic techniques, centric collections, mediant relationships and common tones, and neo- Riemannian analysis techniques. In chapter 20, Owen Belcher presents one-to-three weeks’ worth of material on twentieth-century music. Belcher examines the music of George Walker through a variety of analytical lenses, teaching students that one analytical approach rarely yields all the answers they may be looking for. Belcher provides lesson plans, written assignments and aural skills activities. The final chapter by Kendra Preston Leonard examines the serial minimalist

piece, *Homunculus C. F.* by Julia Perry, a composer whose minimalist pieces predated the work of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young.

General Comments and Concluding Thoughts

Several overarching themes appear throughout this book. First, multiple authors argue that only substituting new and diverse repertoire is insufficient in the quest for truly antiracist pedagogy, but likewise admit that this remains a necessary step in the process. One cannot merely include pieces by Black musicians without also considering the diversity of analytical methods required to examine such music. Many in our field recognize the need to teach from a wider repertoire that includes Black voices and to embrace new theories and constructs that can better explain the many rich styles and genres that have too long been excluded. The chapters on jazz and other popular musics in *Expanding the Canon*, for example, go far to alleviate these concerns, offering numerous suggestions and analytical methods for approaching this repertoire.

Another repeated theme is the concern whether we should only be experts in the classroom. In her chapter on three song settings of texts by Langston Hughes, Melissa Hoag argues that “it is incumbent upon me to fill in the gaps in my training instead of allowing my training to limit what I teach” (126–7). Cara Stroud convincingly explains how in continuing to only teach from the same pieces by European, White male composers that we all learned in college, we potentially communicate unspoken value judgements and false conclusions, something Cora S. Palfy and Eric Gilson describe as the “hidden curriculum in music theory” (Palfy and Gilson, 2018). Stroud acknowledges the discomfort that arises from working with unfamiliar pieces, but also emphasizes that this perfectionist tendency “defeats the larger goal of inclusivity, since there is no way each of us could be experts on pieces about which there is little published work” (224). If we limit ourselves to only teach what we know best, we will never be able to expand the canon to include the diversity of repertoire, materials, genres, and styles that our students—and, frankly, we—deserve to know. Finally, it is also worth questioning our level of “expertise” if we are only comfortable illustrating forms and concepts from a very limited repertoire, using only traditional analytical methods. As Aaron Grant and Catrina Kim point out in their chapter on teaching sonata form beyond “mostly Mozart”:

This consistency comes at a cost. Poundie Burstein (2020), for one, notes that focusing on too few composers distorts one's understanding of history and style. In other words, teaching sonata forms by only three composers gives our students a skewed view of what a "normal" sonata is and the impression that the music of all non-canonical composers is somehow "odd." Furthermore, only studying the works of cisgender, White men continues to reify what Philip Ewell (2020) calls music theory's "White racial frame." Students' perception of this value system can marginalize students, the majority of whom are not White *and* male. To tie both points together, whose norms are we teaching and why? (129)

Of course, while this book is a sorely needed resource, a few minor criticisms are worth addressing. *Expanding the Canon* is composed of short autonomous chapters promoted as lesson plans, and the differences in scope, breadth, contextualization, and more among these chapters are extremely broad. In one respect, this is a good thing: just as no two music theorists are the same, it is to be expected that our teaching approaches and plans would differ. For example, some chapters may be read from beginning to end without needing to consult the accompanying online materials, making the latter clearly supplemental in nature. For other chapters, however, access to the online materials is essential to follow the text. Moreover, some of the online materials offer complete lesson plans—outlines of concepts, skills, student worksheets, and prompts, as well as answer keys for all exercises—providing instructors everything needed for the class. Other chapters are more philosophical in nature and suggest ideas and repertoire choices, while leaving the preparatory work up to instructors. This book is not meant to be read cover-to-cover, and readers will likely pull from chapters based on their curricular wants and needs at any given time.

Additionally, because several authors include supplemental lists or appendices of examples by Black composers featuring the topics, techniques, or styles discussed within a given chapter, this book would benefit from a single appendix (or set of appendices) listing all pieces and topics referenced throughout, rather than distributing this information in the pages of the text and in the numerous folders and files of the supplemental materials. Compositions, then, could be cross-listed so that teachers could quickly find repertoire illustrating multiple concepts. Such appendices could be arranged by topic or composer. Because many specialist and non-specialist educators will potentially use this book as a resource for finding quality repertoire, facilitating this process with an easily-searchable list would be most welcome.

It should also be mentioned that, though this book loosely follows the standard multi-semester music theory core curriculum, only minimal emphasis is given to aural skills, excepting the chapters by Knowles and Shea (chapter 5), Amy Fleming (chapter

7), and certain authors of the unit on popular music. While many authors mention aural skills throughout, even more specific suggestions and plans would definitely be a welcome addition.

Finally, while some element of repetition is inevitable in a book that focuses on repertoire of which very little source material has been published, critical excerpts from Florence Price's letter to Serge Koussevitzky in 1943 appear three times throughout the text (125, 138, and 226), and the second of these is quoted in full, accompanied by external analytical commentary. While this is only a minor editorial quibble, it may actually be worth repeating Price's concern numerous times that—even after 80 years—it is still difficult for composers who are both Black *and* female to be heard. This is why a book such as this is needed.

Expanding the Canon ticks all the right boxes: it provides quality, engaging pedagogy, clear ideas and concrete solutions to a pressing problem, and wonderfully diverse repertoire that deserves more representation in our classrooms. The practicality of this book and its accompanying online supplemental materials enables it to fill the needs of both specialists and non-specialists who teach music theory courses. Additionally, it could be used as a supplement for a graduate music theory pedagogy course and as an important bibliographic resource and body of analytical research on this underrepresented body of music.

Most scholars in our field recognize that exposing and dismantling music theory's White racial frame can only positively impact our discipline. A book such as this, which seeks to expand our canon by introducing more music by Black composers and questioning what topics we choose to teach, is both necessary and long overdue. In conclusion, *Expanding the Canon: Black Composers in the Music Theory Classroom* serves as a significant contribution to the field of music theory pedagogy. By advocating for a more inclusive and diverse representation of composers and musical works, this book challenges readers to reconsider the White racial framework of our music theory curriculums and its potential impact on our students' musical and cultural awareness. This book should be required reading for anyone involved in music theory pedagogy: it inspires crucial conversations about the power and importance of diversity, representation, and inclusion and it calls for reflection on the responsibilities of educators shaping the minds of the next generation.

Note: To avoid any conflict of interest, Rebecca Jemian served as Reviews Editor for Rachel Mann's review of the book edited by *JMTP*'s Reviews Editor Melissa Hoag.

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