

Musical Theory for Musical Theatre

by John Bell and Steven R. Chicurel
Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008. 117 pages + xiii.

***Music Theory Through Musical Theatre:
Putting it Together***

by John Franceschina
New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 452 pages + ix.

***Music Essentials for Singers and Actors:
Fundamentals of Notation, Sight-Singing, and Music Theory***

by Andrew Gerle
Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Books, 2018. 315 pages + xii.

Music Fundamentals for Musical Theatre

by Christine Riley
New York: Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020. 286 pages + vi.

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Prior to 2008, there were no music theory textbooks devoted exclusively to the unique needs of musical theatre students.² Generally, if a program catered to musical theatre students at all, they were co-enrolled into theory and aural skills courses with other music majors, learning sonata form, alto clef, and other topics of little relevance to the professional demands of a musical theatre performer. In response to a surge of new musical theatre programs—and music theory and aural skills classes devoted exclusively to musical theatre students—a new market has emerged for textbooks that cater to these courses. We review four textbooks aimed at addressing this new market, presenting our discussion chronologically by year of publication. By assessing

1 In true theatre fashion, writing this review has been an emphatically collaborative process. We thank the editorial team for introducing us and suggesting we work together on this project. It has been a real gift to write as a trio, an ensemble with a decidedly diverse range of experiences and expertise. Guided by a common love of pedagogy and musical theatre, writing together seemed like a microcosm of the collaborative processes we missed most from the absence of live theatre throughout the pandemic. At a time of deep sorrow and challenges, it was a beautiful reminder of the revitalizations made possible through music and theatre.

2 Some recent textbooks meant for courses with a focus on acting through song contain a chapter introducing music notation and musical terms. These include Church (2019) and Deer and Dal Vera (2021).

the relative strengths and weaknesses of each volume, we provide a summary of the progression of a new, emerging specialty, which changes rapidly in parallel with the needs of a dynamic industry.

Overview

Our chronological presentation spotlights each title's claim as a landmark corrective. "Music Theory" appears in the first two titles: Bell and Chicurel (2008) claim the inaugural volume dedicated to the subject, while Franceschina asserts an approach centered on more holistic music-theatrical values (hence, *through* instead of *for* musical theatre). The more recent texts by Gerle and Riley eschew "Theory" for "Essentials" and "Fundamentals," respectively (and Gerle specifies his audience: "Singers and Actors"). These subtle shifts among the four titles reflect a shared observation about theory and skills courses' undue emphasis on Western common-practice art music in American university music curricula—undue, that is, for musical theatre students, who do not have the "time" (Riley, 1) for a "general" (Gerle, 1) approach. All of these texts include a foreword or initial chapter defending the virtues of becoming musically literate and developing musicianship skills. The fact that all authors felt compelled to legitimize what music theory has to offer speaks volumes about how music theory is perceived outside our monastic walls, and serves as a reminder that our continued relevance relies on breaking down barriers, which is a central aim of these texts.

Compared to other bachelor's degree students, musical theatre students have specific, unique needs reflecting the variety of vocational pathways into and available within the industry. This variability, combined with a dearth of musical theatre educational pedagogy, has resulted in a wide assortment of approaches, manifested by a variety of institutional degrees, from B.A. degrees housed within theatre, humanities, or communication departments, to B.F.A. degrees housed within conservatories of music. Regardless of setting, however, the musical education for musical theatre performers tends to be compressed in order to grant adequate time to acting, dance, and general theatre arts requirements. Condensed instructional time for music has generally required the paring down of content and skills to the bare necessities required for a working performer. In addition, the rapidly diversifying musical theatre industry presents an expanded need for professional practitioners from varied backgrounds. These parallel trends have resulted in a more inclusive cohort of aspiring musical theatre performers who have received less formal musical training during their formative years.

As musical theatre programs tend to be intensely focused on preparing students for their industry, it is essential for a textbook to provide a practical, skills-based curriculum supporting the following learning objectives:

- The development of fast and accurate sight-reading skills (mostly treble clef) for auditions and changes made in rehearsals.
- Facility with lead sheets and vocal scores to maximize limited rehearsal time.
- The acquisition of strong rhythm and ensemble skills, singing alone and/or with multiple parts and with either piano or pit accompaniment, while also acting and dancing. Rhythm needs to be entrained, embodied, and automatic to permit the cognitive bandwidth for integrated performance.
- Awareness of and ability to make interpretive decisions relating to language emphasis, syllabic stresses, and notated rhythms.
- Fluency with harmonic progressions, modulation schemes, and forms influenced by popular music, especially from the 1940s to the present day. Specifically, they need to be able to:
 - Read popular chord notation in lead sheets.
 - Modulate freely to distantly-related keys (e.g., “pump-up” modulations are much more common than progressions to the dominant!).
 - Be fluent with voicings of extended tertian, sus and added-note chords.
 - Follow vocal scores with multiple strophes, endings, and D.S. and D.C. markings.

In addition to these fundamental musicianship skills, musical theatre students need analytic tools to understand how music combines with lyrics, choreography, set, and costumes to inform character and narrative development of the show.

Our Criteria

One central criterion we considered is the extent to which these textbooks permit integrated practice in music literacy and song interpretation. This is not a simple or straightforward question, as the musical theatre canon is both additive and progressive in nature; Golden Age classics, sung in a “legit” style, are revived alongside an ever-expanding catalog of new works, from *Fela!*’s West African pop rhythms to *Bright Star*’s bluegrass improvisation. Today’s musical theatre programs should cultivate practitioners who possess not only an understanding of historical precedent, but also an ability to perform songs inspired by oral traditions with the appropriate spontaneity.

- Some additional criteria we used to compare the texts included:
- Accessibility to beginners without extant knowledge of written notation.
- A wide variety of musical excerpts, representative of rapidly-diversifying undergraduate cohorts.
- A scaffolded process, supporting gradual synthesis between aural skills, notation, and keyboard skills.
- A user-friendly graphic layout and design.

Bell/Chicurel, *Music Theory for Musical Theatre* (2008)

Written to address a problem in the training of actors and singers, in which students focus primarily on lyrics as the main means of dramatic expression in musical theatre, the authors aim to elevate music analysis as an equal tool for understanding dramatic narrative. It is a bold mission for a slim, 100-page text, especially one that begins with musical rudiments and does not assume musical literacy at the outset. The book is divided into three parts: Part 1 introduces music fundamentals, such as intervals, scales, key signatures, circle of fifths, chord qualities of triads; Part 2 includes essays in music analysis, offering models of song interpretation and demonstrating how musical analysis can enrich dramatic performance; Part 3 provides exercises to reinforce the concepts in Part 1.

Written in 2008, Bell and Chicurel refer to a “dearth” of writing about the music of musical theatre in their introduction as the primary motivating factor for their book. Although there were several landmark works that included music analysis of musical theatre in print by 2008 (i.e., Banfield’s *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* [1993], Forte’s *The American Popular Ballad* [1995], Block’s *Enchanted Evenings* [1999], Knapp’s first volume of *The American Musical* [2005], and Swayne’s *How Sondheim Found His Sound* [2005]), none of these earlier books address musical literacy, nor do they provide explanatory pedagogy that would lead to the analytic insights discussed in these books. Consequently, Bell and Chicurel’s text was a watershed volume that became the standard of comparison and model for later texts.

Although the stated intent of the authors is to focus on practicality, the text frequently includes unrelated content of limited practical value to musical theatre performers. For example, just a few pages after introducing the concept of harmony, the authors discuss chord inversions with respect to figured bass (19–20). Not only is this inappropriately complex for an introduction to harmony, but figured bass is also not a high priority for musical theatre. Similarly, it is not essential for musical

theatre students to know French or Italian words for non-harmonic tones, such as the *échappé* or *cambiata*. In addition, throughout the rudiments chapter, there are repeated incidences of haphazard pedagogical organization. For example, shortly after identifying note names on a pictured keyboard, there is a discussion of incomplete 13th chords. When introducing passing tones, the example provides a melody without chords or chord labels. It is very difficult for a student to learn about non-harmonic tones without the harmonic support provided (Figure 1.51, 29)! Applied dominant chords are introduced before the dominant seventh. However, the most significant pedagogical problem with the text is its meager incorporation of rhythm. In the entire text, only two pages concern rhythm specifically, and these consist of an overview of note durations and rests. Even so, within these two pages, 6/8 meter is incorrectly identified as having 6 beats. At best, Part 1 of this text could function as a review for those with an extant, rudimentary knowledge of music theory, and could be beneficial to a student wishing to “change gears” to musical theatre. However, without accompanying praxis, most students in current musical theatre programs would not be able to master fundamental concepts of pitch, rhythm, meter, or harmony without supplementary material.

The best feature of this text is its second section (“Part 2: Essays in Musical Analysis,”) consisting of four analytic essays that model how music analysis can inform character development and dramatic narrative. The four songs examined are: “Ol’ Man River” from *Showboat* (opened 1927); “Just a Housewife” from *Working* (1977); “Love, Look Away” from *Flower Drum Song* (1958); and “Stars and the Moon” from *Songs for a New World* (1995). Unfortunately, these analytic essays assume much more knowledge and fluency than could be attained by working through the rudiments chapter. Additionally, this chapter is hindered by editorial oversights: in the first essay, measure numbers in the prose do not coordinate with the measure numbers in the provided example; there are no annotations or chord symbols provided in this example, rendering it difficult for a student to follow. One of the first analytical acts that Bell and Chicurel complete is dividing “Ol’ Man River” into phrases—but they do so implicitly, assuming a student has internalized the single mention of eight-bar phrases in the dense prose on song form four pages earlier. Similarly, discussion of the modulation in the song’s third phrase would be beyond the recognition of most students who needed the rudiments chapter. The graphic layout of this example obscures the modulation: there are no double bar lines, no key signature changes, and no annotations in the example. The few pages where modulation is mentioned in the rudiments chapter do not prepare a student to recognize this modulation. The

scaffolding that should guide a student from the rudiments of Part 1 to the analytic insights of Part 2 is entirely absent, and is a pervasive problem in this section.

Part 3 of the book is intended as a workbook, providing exercises for students to practice the concepts outlined in Part 1. However, there is an insufficient number of exercises (13 total) to achieve the stated learning objectives. Inexplicably, one of the exercises asks students to notate enharmonic equivalents of given pitches, which does not correspond to any practical discussion in Part 1.

It is admirable that all examples are taken from musical theatre literature so that students correlate concepts with actual music. Yet, students would need intermediate to advanced piano skills to realize the examples. Going back to the discussion of inversions (20), the example shows chordal inversions without any analytic notation, includes 6-note harmonies, rolled chords, and different fingers of the same hand performing different rhythms (i.e., one finger on a sustained middle pitch, while rest of the hand plays moving three-note chords.) It is unrealistic to expect someone who did not know note names to be able to locate the inverted chords, never mind play them. Musical examples contained in the text are an odd assortment, primarily representative of a Golden-Age aesthetic. “Chop Suey” is the first music example—with a descending chromatic scale fragment (after readers have only seen an *ascending* chromatic scale)—and then two *more* songs from *Flower Drum Song* appear, all within the first twenty pages. One helpful contribution of the text was the inclusion of several full songs, including Jason Robert Brown’s “Stars and the Moon” and Craig Carnelia’s “Just a Housewife,” both of which demonstrate theoretical concepts within practical contexts, with an emphasis on dramatic interpretation. However, the dearth of musical examples performed by characters of color, with the exception of Kern’s “Old Man River” and “Love, Look Away” is notable by today’s standards.

Overall, as the first text dedicated to teaching music analysis to musical theatre students, this book has served an important role. It has launched a pedagogical philosophy that inspired later textbooks: that music analysis (and the music theory that supports analysis) helps build musicianship and an understanding of character and story. With its intended focus on practicality, all concepts and examples are grounded in the literature of musicals. Unfortunately, intention and implementation are at odds with one another in this book.

Franceschina, *Music Theory Through Musical Theatre* (2015)

This text adopts a language-through-immersion approach, providing a thorough context for practitioners to view their role. In the introduction, the author recognizes the need for a more comprehensive musical theatre volume (415 pages of instructional content versus Bell & Chicurel's succinct 100) and invites students to deconstruct harmonic, melodic, and structural decisions as a component of the "dramatic entity in performance" (1). Despite Franceschina's claim to the contrary, unfortunately, many musical theatre majors do expect music directors to teach them their parts. With the help of this text, students can better challenge themselves to be more independent and to find compelling musical details even from the start. Students are encouraged to engage with music holistically, as an important subtext or reflection of a lyric.

The book is divided into three sections: The Lead Sheet (introductory study of notes, rests, rhythms, time signatures, scales, key signatures, modes, enharmonic notation, and intervals); The Arrangement (harmony, Roman numerals, counterpoint); and The Performance (analysis of representative musical theatre composers and songs). There is also a companion website with sound files, although all excerpts are computer-generated MIDI files. The organization of the book elegantly captures a complete musical environment that a theatre performer is most likely to experience, and allows Franceschina to demonstrate how a lead sheet can provide an incredible amount of musical information. Every time a melodic or harmonic technique is introduced, there follows a section called "dramatic use" of the technique, not only showing a few examples of the chord or idea in musical theatre, but also a nuanced analytic discussion of its implementation with respect to the lyrics and story of the musical. Many of the analytic deep dives feature songs by the author—which seems a bit self-serving—but since excerpts are acknowledged only by show and title, the vainglorious self-referencing is oblique.

The prose, directed towards both graduate and undergraduate students within traditional conservatory settings, is dense—at times even impenetrable. For example, in the paragraphs describing added-sixth chords, "The vii^{o7}, normally a dominant function, becomes a ii⁶ sharing three notes of the subdominant sixth chord (F, A, D) while still maintaining the three tones of the dominant seventh chord (B, D, F) . . . First inversions of the ii⁷, iii⁷, vi⁷ and vii^{o7} do not automatically become sixth chords but may function as inversions of their original diatonic functions" (154). In the book's introduction, Franceschina suggests how to divide the chapters over a four-semester curriculum, but most musical theatre programs have only two semesters

of classes devoted to musical training. Throughout the book, the comprehensive nature of topics wildly exceeds the needs of the practitioner, especially for the stage of learning assumed at each point in the text. Arguably, musical theatre students do not need to know the etymology of the modern-day metronome (36), or details about dominant-functioning *iii*⁷ chords (145). And, similar to the Bell/Chicurel text, there are problematic pedagogical and scaffolding issues:

- The first examples of compound meter include syncopations, subdivisions, anacrusic entrances, and changing meters.
- The introduction to augmented and diminished triads shows these chords starting on a tonic note, divorcing chord type from harmonic function.
- Modes appear in both medieval music theory and 1970s funk, but they do not correspond one-to-one as Franceschina seems to claim.
- Double dots, breves, double accidentals, 64th rests, augmentation/diminution (the last of these without any visual examples) all appear in the first ten pages of a chapter titled “Basic concepts.”
- A book that combines figured bass and added-sixth chords will inevitably cause mayhem when using just the number “6” to indicate the latter with Roman numerals.
- In the Arrangement unit of the book, concepts of phrasing are discussed, but there is no pedagogical scaffolding within the text to get a student to develop towards the analytic sophistication of the models.
- When Franceschina introduces inversions, his first example is printed on a grand staff, but he only considers the notes in the upper voices; he does not guide students in how to determine an inversion for a harmony written on more than one staff (106).

Generally, the speed at which early concepts are introduced may better serve populations looking for enrichment rather than an introduction. On the other hand, there is a slow-down and curious emphasis on counterpoint (68 pages), which eclipses the chapter on chromatically-altered chords (23 pages), arguably a much more pertinent and essential topic for musical theatre.

It is notable that Franceschina was the first author of a text for musical theatre students to include aural skills. There are exercises that combine scale degrees, solfege symbols (provided), and drills singing triads and seventh chords. Students are encouraged to play and sing diatonic melodies at the piano and to explore both *la*-based and *do*-based systems for minor modes. However, there are nowhere nearly enough ear-training exercises for the development of skills needed for the exercises, and the text encourages adverse aural-skills strategies. For example, the primary means for promoting sight-

singing skills is to identify intervals from characteristic uses in songs. There are long lists of songs that feature each interval, with no consideration of where the interval falls within the scale or its harmonic implication. There is almost no pedagogy of rhythm, except in the first unit that introduces basic information on reading rhythmic notation.

For a book published fairly recently, there is a distinct lack of cultural awareness. For example, in the introduction Franceschina makes a case for humans' "innate" responses to music (2), citing a specious essay titled "Music and the Brain"; all of the scholars he mentions who have "guided" his project are white men (4); among the shows in Franceschina's "diverse" sampling (4), lyricist Betty Comden is the only writer who is not a white man. The author's explanations for music-theoretical concepts are also ahistorical: "The 'one-and-a' beat of compound meters inspired composers to look for ways to integrate it into simple meters . . . to solve the problem, tuplets were invented" (28); "composers of Western music found the harmonic minor scale to be limiting melodically and urged the development of a melodic minor scale" (52). Although the text includes a prolific array of excerpts, it is assumed that students will have some degree of familiarity with pre-Golden Age and Golden Age repertoire, which is increasingly unlikely.

Similarly outdated is the problematic language describing how predominantly white composers of musicals add "ethnic flavor" (64) or evoke "exotic" geographic locales (158) through the use of modes or whole-tone scales. For example, Phrygian mode is described as adding "a certain exoticism" to a broad range of "non-Western melodies," such as those featured in the "Gypsy musical" *Bajour* (64). Similarly, "Ease on Down the Road" from *The Wiz* is provided as an example of Dorian mode, when African-American funk tradition would likely claim broader origins (63). Although some jazz associations of these scales are mentioned, no composers of color besides Charlie Smalls are cited. Additionally, Sondheim, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Rodgers and Hammerstein are cited as examples of "Eastern traditions" (See: "Miya Sama" from *The Mikado*, p. 71; "A Puzzlement" from *The King and I* as "suggest[ing] the tonality of Siamese music" 371–75), while the South African-inspired "Hasa Diga Eebowai" from *The Book of Mormon* is cited as an example of fourth-species counterpoint (197)! Certainly, this tendency to label any musical style outside of the Western concert tradition as exotic is an unfortunate artifact of pedagogical traditions, usually invoked when introducing music by Debussy, Ravel, or Stravinsky. However, these examples encourage students to consider these works primarily through a Eurocentric compositional lens. Six years after the text's original publication, a more culturally responsive (and specific) discussion of these tools is warranted—a hopeful opportunity for a second edition.

On the other hand, this book provides some of the richest exemplar analyses of musical theatre selections in print, and effectively categorizes Bernstein/Sondheim and Lloyd Webber/Brown/Finn into more classically influenced and “new-wave” contemporary camps, respectively. For all analyses in Part 3, a helpful template guides the analytic discussion, exploring how music: 1) creates a mood or tone, 2) identifies a character, 3) informs subtext, 4) establishes geographic locale, 5) creates emphasis, and 6) establishes a rhythm of the dramatic event. Considerations of how musical style and context influence musical meaning are especially nuanced, especially the influence of rock after the 1960s, where, for example, chordal sevenths (and higher extensions) are described as embellishments, not tendency tones to be resolved, and parallel progressions derived from rock guitar barre chords create drive, not aberrant functional lapses. For classes dedicated to musical theatre songwriting and composition, this text is, as of this writing, the gold standard. It incorporates elements of acting, performing, and composing within the broader history and stylistic conventions of Western classical and folk music. For similar reasons, this volume would also be best for aspiring coaches and collaborative pianists.

Gerle, *Music Essentials for Singers & Actors* (2018)

Published by Hal Leonard Books—a trade publisher—*Music Essentials for Singers & Actors* succeeds in its intention to be a practical manual for the pre-professional, written in an informal, accessible tone with excellent pedagogical scaffolding throughout. Gerle’s well-established, personable brand as an educator and coach emanates throughout the prose.³ The detailed, text-based explanations are clearly intended for beginners, and the author’s colloquial voice combined with classroom- and studio-tested mnemonic devices are effective—from “hat” and “hole” rests to a summary of his own recommended analytical markings for contour and phrasing. Of the texts, we found Gerle’s the most accessible reading experience on several fronts. The first is visual: the bolded terms for musical vocabulary are easy to spot on the page. The second is the dedicated approach to making connections to musical theatre at every turn, from chapter/section headings to guiding the reader through understanding what to expect when looking at an actual musical theatre score. While it is casual in tone, the wording is precise; the level of detail in each section evinces several rounds of careful organizational thought.

3 See Gerle (2011).

Whereas the earlier texts seem more geared towards music theory as an interpretive lens for how music participates in character and story building, this text is more focused on developing musicianship skills. Gerle encourages performers to think analytically even when they are not negotiating formal music notation—a refreshing shift. His first chapter does not include any notation, but asks readers to consider the dramatic effect of silence in “Simple Little Things.” The practical disposition of this book is noted in topics not covered in the others, such as finding initial sung pitches and navigation of vocal scores.

Unlike the other texts, this book opens with, and gives equal attention to, the development of rhythm skills. The first four chapters focus exclusively on rhythm, noting correctly that accurate rhythms are more important than accurate pitches when working with an accompanist, ensemble, or pit orchestra. In addition, more time and discussion is devoted to fundamental reading skills, introducing concepts slowly and strategically. For example, when introducing meter signatures, Gerle first describes beats using language by referencing well-known musical theatre songs, then introduces quarter-note notation and bar lines, and finally 4/4 and 3/4. In comparison, Bell/Chicurel devote only two pages to rhythmic fundamentals, simultaneously presenting 3/4, 5/2, and 6/8 meter signatures.

At the end of each unit, Gerle provides sufficient exercises and examples for students to practice the skills covered. Answers are provided within the text for written/notation questions, and the online player provides answers for the aural exercises. It is very helpful for students to be able to check themselves with exercises that are pedagogically appropriate to their level. The online supplementary materials are also more robust than the other texts, providing access to a library of online resources. For every example in the text’s website, there is a “Playback+” interface that allows a student to play the excerpt at different speeds, pitch levels, and balance (Left-Right) levels. In addition, students can download the sound files and loop portions of them within the player. The examples feature the author singing and playing the piano, providing set-up (“Here’s the tonic, let’s warm-up singing the scale, now sing the example,”) and answers to exercises.

To help students develop a coherent sight-singing strategy, Gerle provides an analytic template to follow when learning new songs, called “1-STARRT.” Each character in the acronym reminds students what to consider first. For example, the “1” refers to identifying tonic; the first “R” refers to repetitions, for which sight-singers often overcorrect when they are fixating on the motion from one note to the next. Gerle’s practical experience in working with singers lends to an intuitive approach, allowing

the salient features of a musical passage to dictate the suggested pedagogical tool. For example, musical theatre performers are more accustomed to tracing the contour of notes on the staff before interrogating information about clef and key signature. In short, Gerle meets a typical musical theatre student at their level before motivating them to understand the larger picture.

Unfortunately, all of the texts we reviewed use interval identification and recognition as their main sight-singing strategy. Gerle is no exception, and not only is there an entire chapter devoted to this technique, but there is also an extensive index at the end of the book consisting of intervals and examples from songs. This intervallic strategy, which is unfortunately pervasive, requires cognitive heroics: removing oneself from the present musical context, audiating a completely different song, and then returning to the original melody, all the while hoping that the interval in question is in the same place in the scale in both melodies, (i.e., *sol* to *do*, rather than *do* to *fa*). It is much more musical and effective to navigate leaps within melodies as part of harmonic function or scale-degree relationships. Gerle provides additional strategies in a later chapter (Chapter 10), suggesting the use of notes from the tonic chord as anchor pitches, and considering chromatic notes as passing or neighboring notes that resolve to diatonic scale degrees.

Although the underlying pedagogy and scaffolding of Gerle's text reflect dramatic improvements over the previous texts, there remain aspects of the book that undermine its efficacy. The pacing can be a bit uneven; Chapter 9 feels especially dense in content, covering not only triplets, compound meter, and swing, but also irregular and shifting meters. (Given how often swing is employed in the genre, it is surprising that it is not included in the other books, except for a single paragraph by Franceschina). Unfortunately, all of the 1-STARRT examples (i.e., the examples demonstrating the summative application of concepts learned up to that point) are in major keys, despite the preceding chapter on minor modes. And, the discussion of song form is in prose without any examples of AABA form—what Gerle refers to as “the most common structure for Tin Pan Alley and many Broadway songs” (223).

Riley, *Music Fundamentals for Musical Theatre* (2020)

The Riley text features strategic layering of written and aural skills with deliberate pacing, and alternation of manageable amounts of new information with practical exercises. Small details such as enlarged keyboards, which are nearly the size of regular pianos, and strategically formatted content make for an appealing, inviting overall

design. In an effort to reduce overall cognitive load, modules are gradually paced to account for complexity. For example, she presents clockwise sharps on the circle of fifths first, rather than providing all 15 keys at once; and, intervals are introduced gradually over the course of four chapters, rather than Gerle's four pages. Even for the simplest of concepts, Riley offers students a clear methodology and application of principles in action. For example, there are half a dozen examples of counting note names to identify intervals, allowing students to follow the procedure until the pattern becomes ingrained. Rarely is more than a short paragraph of prose included at a time, interjecting each new concept with score examples, written exercises, and, perhaps most critically, instructions on how to recreate the example kinesthetically, either through movement or at the keyboard.

Although Riley makes many effective choices in how she structures her text within chapter segments, the pedagogical rationale for grouping certain sub-topics within common chapter headings is unclear. Sometimes, the assorted topics within a chapter work well together, combining elements of different musical parameters in a way that simulates how they would be encountered in real music. For example, Chapter 9—which includes ties, dotted notes, 2/4 and 3/4 meters, and song analysis—touches on each combination as a unique musical task, precisely as they might appear in the rehearsal room. However, in chapter 13—which includes minor, diminished, and augmented triads; cut-time; and chromatic solfege—the combination seems like a jumbled assortment, despite each individual topic being an extension of a preceding lesson. Similarly, there are rhythm exercises in Chapter 15, a chapter devoted exclusively to inversions of triads.

One of the major strengths of the text is Riley's effort to conclude every learning module, from identifying whole- and half-step scalar passages onward, with a formative exercise in song analysis. Although Bell and Chicurel, Franceshina, and Gerle delay analytic examples as capstone, summative activities within their respective books, Riley opts for spiral scaffolding, returning to given songs on multiple occasions as students' mastery increases. This allows students the reward of applying learned concepts immediately to real-world tasks, organically stoking student motivation. For example, she introduces harmonic progression through the chorus to "Santa Fe" from *Newsies*, first, with each harmony reduced to a block triad in Chapter 14, then with the accompaniment fully notated—including suspensions and seventh chords—in Chapter 17. Unfortunately, not all of the excerpts provide adequately rich opportunities for practice; for example, in an exercise asking to find and label sixths and sevenths in the first phrase of "Close Every Door" from *Joseph*, there is only a single interval for

students to identify after Riley's provided annotation. Hopefully, future editions of the text will permit expanded praxis, with a great emphasis on introducing musical concepts through literature at all stages of learning.

While Riley is not as procrustean in the topics she covers as Franceschina—none of the topics seem outright unnecessary—the book seems organized by the fundamentals of *music notation*, rather than musicianship. From the beginning of Chapter 1: "Music is written on a **staff**" [emphasis Riley's]. Sections labeled "Performance tips" and "Helpful hints" seem like incidental asides, rather than integrally tied in within the larger learning module. Once more, rhythm is treated as a secondary parameter in relation to pitch. Riley's explanation of triplets—one of the most common rhythms in musical theatre—is problematic. Riley uses numbers for the beats within a measure and "trip-let" for the second and third attacks of triplet figures. This works fine for eighth-note triplets in a simple meter; however, she uses the same system in a 4/4 measure with quarter-note triplets, which disguises the syncopation across beats. While Riley briefly mentions that "The quarter note triplet feels a bit like syncopation" (p. 131), the use of identical syllables for triplets of different duration confounds how to feel, hear, or perform the distinctions between them. Similar to Bell and Chicurel, Riley's explanation of compound meter also incorrectly identifies meter signatures showing beats in the top number (e.g., six beats in 6/8 measure), and incorrectly identifies the eighth-note as the beat in all compound meters.

The disproportionate emphasis on melodic notation also compromises the attention devoted to harmony. Similar to Franceschina, Riley introduces augmented and diminished triads spelled from the tonic, rather than situating chord qualities with their harmonic functions. Harmonic concepts are introduced without context for why they might be important for a musical theatre student to know. For example, chapters 15 and 16 introduce inversions of triads without any discussion of any musical examples. Instead, there are pages of exercises on the labeling, identification, and notation of various triads in different inversions, devoid of any association with a needed skill or reference to songs. There is a similar problem for the introduction of V^7 chords (which, oddly, follows triad inversions) and other diatonic seventh chords. Once more, there are pages of exercises for spelling and identifying chords in various keys, without any mention of how these chords function within a phrase, or the tension of a seventh towards resolution, resulting in an especially unmusical presentation of harmony.

This text provides a wealth of musical examples, listing dozens beyond the many already included as excerpts. However, it does take Riley until p. 24 to cite her first

song. Up until that point, this could have been a textbook for any undergraduate course introducing music literacy. Commendably, many of the examples are pieces of contemporary literature, increasing the likelihood that students will synthesize content with a song already known, as well as pieces originally performed by BIPOC artists. As the text progresses, these excerpts expand to allow students to experiment with accumulated tools, with the final chapter prompting students to consider orchestral arrangements in their analyses. Some of the examples are curiously chosen or labeled, however. “Summer Nights” from *Grease* appears in a chapter on “V of V chords,” and indeed it contains a V^7/V before a half cadence. Yet the chord before that V^7/V is itself an applied dominant (on the word “drowned”), a combination that could easily confuse a student just beginning to understand secondary functions (187). And “I Got Rhythm” from George and Ira Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy* (1930) has several extended tertian sonorities, syncopated against a steady bass—musical characteristics that confound an exercise in identifying qualities of seventh chords (231).⁴

Although there are excerpts from the literature throughout the book in the explanatory sections of each chapter, almost all of the practice exercises provided for students are self-composed melodies and rhythms. These exercises are tailored to the materials in the unit, yet they are not steeped in the literature of musicals. When activities are focused only on abstract exercises like these, it is easy for students to lose motivation or to see the relevance of their learning to their profession. Gerle, on the other hand, grounds nearly every activity in a song from the literature. As the complexity of the materials increases throughout the book, Riley’s practice melodies and rhythms become more contrived and divorced from the stylistic contexts students are likely to encounter in their careers.

4 This is one of two songs by the Gershwins within the text, and both originate in the 1930 musical *Girl Crazy*. Riley, however, labels them as coming from *Crazy for You*, a 1992 “revisal” of *Girl Crazy* that won the Tony Award for Best Musical. Some readers of Riley’s text have likely participated in productions of *Crazy for You*—and given how rarely musical comedies from the 1920s and 1930s are performed today, the same cannot be assumed of *Girl Crazy*. But Riley’s labeling is incidentally ahistorical: there is no other context in the book to indicate that George and Ira Gershwin collaborated in the first half of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

With varying degrees of success, each of the four reviewed textbooks satisfies the long-overdue need for an undergraduate music theory textbook designed exclusively for musical theatre majors. All have a stated goal of developing practical musicianship and interpretive skills for an aspiring theatre professional, an impressive ambition for textbooks that begin with notation literacy and aspire to the chromatic and rhythmic intricacies of composers ranging from George Gershwin to Adam Guettel. Even instructors who do not teach sections composed exclusively of musical theatre students are likely to find each textbook useful in discrete contexts, depending upon relative goals of accessibility, incorporation of popular styles, and appeal to students' perception of relevance to their development as musicians. Based on what these books have in common, we offer some thoughts on how they might contribute to a range of degree programs and curricular priorities, as well as what needs could be met by a future publication.

Each text begins with elements of music notation, and ends with capstone interpretive analyses of Broadway songs. The two earlier textbooks, Bell and Chicurel (2008) and Franceschina (2015), are guided by a spirit of advocacy in placing music on equal footing with other elements of theatre performance; intriguingly, the latter author advocates for generally destabilizing the hierarchical conception of music as subtext to lyric. Franceschina also emphasizes the importance of fluent music-making in professional musical theatre settings—a context that is front-and-center in both Gerle's *Essentials* and Riley's *Fundamentals*. With this in mind, Franceschina has the broadest potential audience, including performers and composers in classical conservatory programs. (While Bell and Chicurel's book is ostensibly directed at theatre-makers, this *potential* audience of Franceschina's seems to be the *most appropriate* one for Bell and Chicurel). On the other hand, Gerle's text, which goes deepest into topics of rhythm and meter and the materiality of musical theatre scores, is best for student actors seeking confidence and mastery of tools they will need in day-to-day performance work. Gerle's calculated scaffolding shines through in how he introduces topics at a deliberate pace, relates them to subjects students have already encountered, and avoids front-loading exceptions to "rules." Riley's foregrounding of notation detracts from similar goals, but a broader collection of musicianship exercises may offer more flexibility in the classroom (including possible integration with a keyboard skills curriculum, which is only fleetingly addressed in the other textbooks).

Each book advertises a wide chronological breadth of examples from literature. In practice, Franceschina reaches the farthest back: *The Black Crook* (1866), an extravaganza that incorporates characters and stories from *Der Freischütz*, is the earliest in his text, alongside dozens of early 1900s operettas and musical comedies, while excerpts from *No Strings* (1970) and *Annie* (1977) are labeled “contemporary”—accurate by comparison, but unhelpful for students seeking to work in a truly contemporary professional environment. Given their later publication dates, it is not surprising that Gerle (*Dear Evan Hansen* [2017]) and Riley (*First Date* and *Big Fish* [both 2013]) include the most recent examples.

Riley’s book is the least expensive, with Gerle’s a close second (both are well under \$40 in paperback). Franceschina’s text is around \$40 for an ebook version and slightly more for paperback; surprisingly, Bell and Chicurel’s volume, by far the shortest, is also the priciest at over \$50. For online exercises and audio clips, we found Riley’s useful, and Gerle’s compelling—particularly because both authors performed their own audio excerpts instead of relying on MIDI recordings.

As each text informed its successor at the time of publication, future texts will have the benefit of their forebears’ trial and error. Our collective experience working with diverse populations of musical theatre majors suggests that future resources may wish to incorporate the following:

- More emphasis on rhythmic pedagogy and ensemble singing.
- Inclusion of additional improvisation and composition exercises to encourage higher-level learning, even within the time constraints of two semesters.
- Adoption of best practices in sight-singing pedagogy, eschewing intervallic approaches in favor of solid grounding in scale-degree and harmonic tonal functions.
- More robust online resources, allowing students to hear full (non-MIDI) accompaniments of melodies as they sight-sing.
- In addition to pre-Golden Age and Golden Age song forms (AABA, etc.), guide students in how to recognize and identify complex song forms idiomatic to contemporary musical theatre repertoire.
- Address the dynamic nature of the musical theatre genre, which continually expands to incorporate new compositional methods and interpretive influences. For example, it may be prudent to compare original and revival orchestrations/vocal arrangements.

Because theory and musicianship texts reflect and shape the music students engage with, it is worth mentioning that these textbooks largely reflect narrow and traditional conceptions of a musical theatre canon. Bell and Chicurel’s analytical essay on “Ol’

Man River,” for instance, opens grandiloquently, with evaluative statements about not only *Show Boat*’s significance as a musical and Kern’s “mastery” as a composer, but also distinguishing “‘tunes’ for the sake of entertainment” from the “art form” of the “musical play”—all arguments beyond the bounds of exploring a single song, and an unhelpful model for a student learning how to write about the music of musical theatre. In terms of in-text discussions of literature, even Frederick Loewe, composer of *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Camelot* (1960), gets one printed example (compared to Richard Rodgers’s 43—mirroring Loewe’s precarity in histories of the Broadway musical).⁵ Fats Waller and Charlie Smalls are the only black composers with music examples in any text, which reflects the oft-voiced caution that simply including popular music in the music theory classroom is a surface-level gesture toward inclusivity; in this case, it is all the more troubling, given both the influences of American popular music on Broadway musical theatre and the lengthy, well-documented history of black musical theatre-makers.⁶ Musical theatre textbooks in the world of music theory present a wonderful, exciting opportunity to confront the issues that have bogged down theory pedagogy in institutions that prioritize Western art music; so far, no text has offered a fresh path. Representation in selected examples would create a more welcoming learning environment, and would invite all musical theatre students to transfer skills among a variety of musical and aesthetic worlds.

[Appendix](#): a list of every printed music example in Franceschina, Gerle, and Riley’s texts (the printed examples in Bell and Chicurel are listed in order in their book). Any songs with excerpts in multiple texts—sixteen total, either for the same topic or for different ones—are highlighted in red.

5 See McHugh (2012).

6 On this subject, see for example Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theater: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989); Thomas Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1989); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2013); Matthew D. Morrison, “Blacksound,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*, edited by Tomás McAuley, et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 555-78.

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