

Review of *Music Theory for Beginners*, by R. Ryan Endris

BY NICOLE E. DiPAOLO

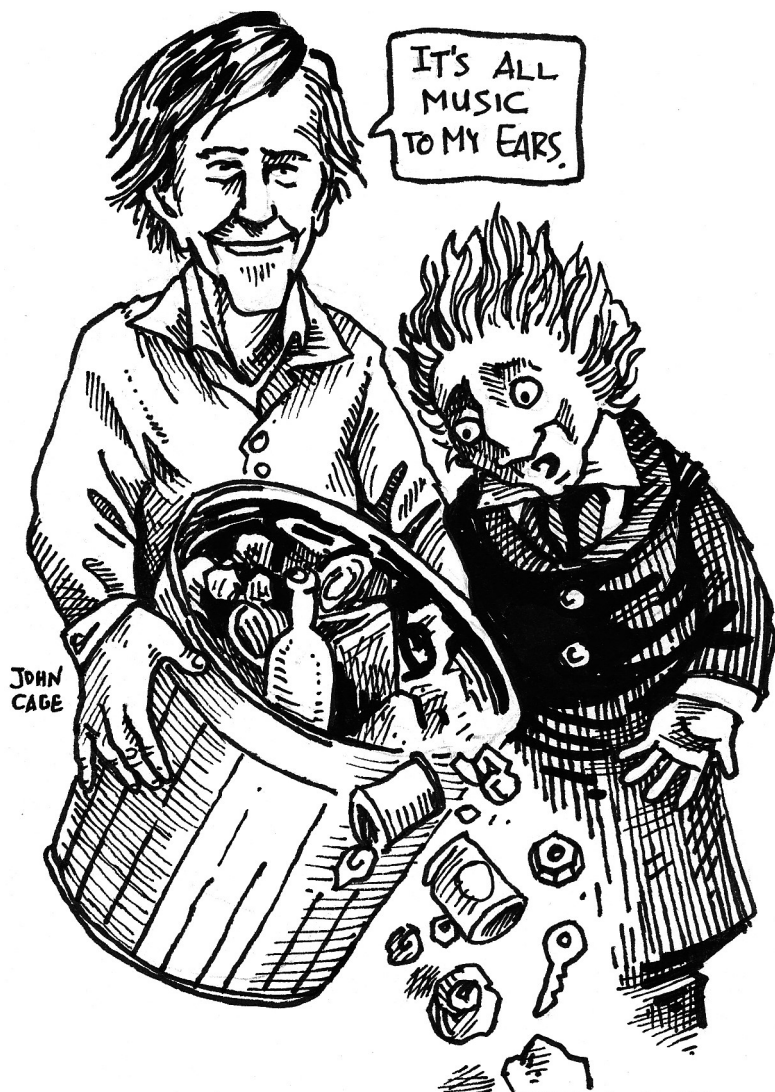
R. Ryan Endris's *Music Theory for Beginners*, a "Documentary Comic Book" that is part of the graphic nonfiction series published by For Beginners LLC, is rather unusual among music theory texts in that it is not specifically designed for use in the undergraduate music theory classroom.¹ As its preface states, "*Music Theory For Beginners* was developed for anyone interested in learning to read and write music....Whether your goal is to gain a cursory understanding of music, become fluent in reading music again, or start composing your own music...anyone can pick up this book and instantly start learning about—and understanding—music theory" (xi). Thus its style, design elements, and supporting materials diverge in various ways from what is normally seen in a college fundamentals textbook, though most of its content is quite standard for a fundamentals course, opening with the basics of staff notation and working up to dominant seventh chords. Endris includes some interesting additional content generally absent from fundamentals courses, such as introductions to the blues scale, octatonic and whole tone scales, and a brief survey of large-scale forms.

Among this book's distinguishing features is that it is a graphic nonfiction text, so it contains a good deal more illustrations than a traditional text. The illustrations, by Joe Lee, are whimsical and witty black-and-white sketches, often depicting Beethoven with a few other composer cameos; almost all refer indirectly to concepts presented in the text on that page but do not themselves deliver essential content. Example 1 shows two illustrations reprinted from pages 14 and 25, respectively.

¹ R. Ryan Endris, *Music Theory for Beginners* (Danbury, CT: For Beginners, 2015).



Example 1.a. Illustration from Chapter 2: Meter, The Framework for Rhythm, p.14



Example 1.b. Illustration from Chapter 3: Notation Pitch (and What Pitch Is), p. 25. Both illustrations are reprinted with permission from *Music Theory For Beginners*, by R. Ryan Endris, illustrated by Joe Lee, For Beginners LLC, Danbury, CT, © 2015.

Alongside the main text, each chapter includes a number of historical asides in grey boxes, ranging from background information on various composers to helpful hints that solidify the concepts being taught. Important terms appear in boldface and italics throughout the text. Additionally, while the book does not explicitly aim to teach aural skills, Endris often invokes the readers' listening experiences directly and asks them to seek out a particular piece, calling attention to one or more of the ideas being discussed.

This book's unique layout, of course, obliges some compromises. In the interest of concision, some topics are not explored in as much depth as they would be in a traditional text; for example, the notation chapter does not cover more advanced aspects of notation (such as note values smaller than 16th notes and C clefs). Endris presents many terms and definitions in a sentence or two, and only a single graphic or musical example accompanies the majority of concepts presented. In addition, no exercises are included as part of the text. Overall, the text is divided into five units, with two or three chapters per unit.

UNIT I: Rhythm, Beat, Tempo, and Meter

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a thorough grounding in rhythmic and metrical notation. Following a relatively lengthy background discussion on rhythm, tempo, and beat, Chapter 1: The Building Blocks of Rhythm, dedicates a very brief two pages to presenting the various note values and their rests, ranging from whole notes to sixteenths. Chapter 2: Meter, the Framework for Rhythm, covers both simple and compound meters, time signatures, bar lines, syncopation, and ties. (A small typo, however, appears on page 10: simple meters divide the *principal* beat, not the *principle* beat, into two.) Again, the concepts are presented quickly and succinctly, ideal for review or for a strong student.

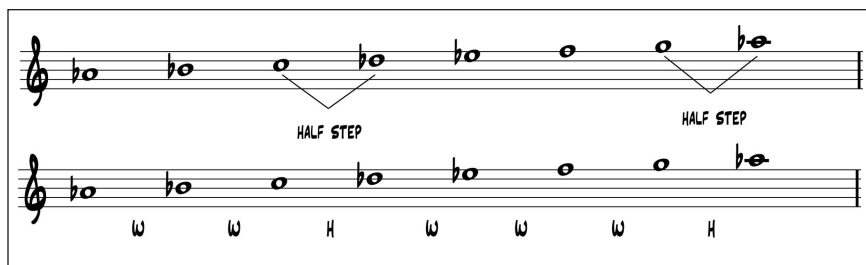
UNIT II: Musical Notation

Chapter 3: Notating Pitch (and What Pitch Is), dives into staff notation, initially setting aside rhythm to focus on pitch. Endris relates the letter names, as well as whole and half steps, to positions on the keyboard (as in figure 3.3). Some instructors might consider this a crutch; however, particularly for singers who cannot visualize pitch relations on their own instruments, a visual aid like

the keyboard can be enormously helpful in developing written and aural skills. Accidentals, enharmonics, and intervals are also defined briefly; the last two pages then introduce the treble and bass clefs as well as ledger lines. C clefs do not appear in this chapter, so a student preparing for placement exams or graduate work in music would need to make a note of this and find other sources for C clef practice. Chapter 4: The Evolution of Musical Notation, steps away from fundamentals to provide a historical overview of music notation from its development in ancient Greece through the Middle Ages. At seven and a half pages long, it constitutes a brief survey, but its mention of Pythagorean tuning, neumes, and mensural notation (among other ideas) invites interested readers to explore these concepts in greater detail.

UNIT III: Scales and Keys

Chapter 5: Major Scales and Keys, will be the most logical starting point for readers already conversant with notation. The chromatic scale is introduced first, and the discussion quickly moves to major scales, for which Endris emphasizes the importance of semitones and their locations within the scale, again with the keyboard as a visual aid. A discussion of key signatures and their function flows organically, for example, as when Endris demonstrates how one must add four flats to preserve the pattern of whole and half steps in the A-flat major scale as reflected in his figure 5.5 (see Example 2).



Example 2. Building an A-flat major scale; figure 5.5, page 44, reprinted with permission from *Music Theory For Beginners*, by R. Ryan Endris, Illustrated by Joe Lee, For Beginners LLC, Danbury, CT. © 2015

The rest of the chapter is devoted to key signatures and the circle of fifths. Endris includes the best-known “tricks” for identifying major key signatures (that the last sharp is always the leading tone and the penultimate flat is always the tonic), a valuable addition because these “shortcuts” encourage analytical understanding over rote memorization.

Chapter 6: Minor Scales and Keys, defines relative and parallel major/minor relationships while introducing scale degrees. The rest of the chapter discusses each form of the minor scale, concluding with a very important observation, one often lost in traditional fundamentals pedagogy: “[Natural, harmonic, and melodic] are just that—variants of a single minor scale” (57). Chapter 7: More Scales, diverges a bit from a traditional fundamentals text in that it introduces the major and minor pentatonic scales, the blues scale, the whole-tone scale, and octatonic scales.² Again, Endris privileges intervallic content as a means of identifying these scales. Interested readers will find plenty of material to explore further, as this chapter’s historical asides point to a number of composers and genres including Tchaikovsky, Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky, and New Orleans jazz.

UNIT IV: Intervals and Harmony

Chapter 8: Intervals, first defines interval types and then lists them by the number of semitones they span. Acknowledging that counting half-steps is unwieldy for larger intervals, Endris then demonstrates how diatonic intervals relate back to the tonic within the major scale. This chapter also defines compound versus simple intervals and includes a chart of all simple intervals and their inversions. Chapter 9: Sweet, Sweet Harmony, moves immediately into triads, their qualities within the major and minor scales, inversions, and Roman numeral labeling. A small detail, but one that I appreciate, is that all but the last example in this chapter are given in keys other than C major. The last two pages of this chapter discuss dominant 7th chords. Curiously, Endris stops here with the topic of 7th chords, noting in the chapter’s last paragraph that many

² Unlike most theory texts, which identify three octatonic scales based on pitch class content, Endris categorizes octatonic scales into two categories: those that begin with a half step, and those that begin with a whole step. Unfortunately, incorrect notation in Example 7.7 obscures this definition.

other types of 7th chords exist but are beyond the scope of the book. Given that most fundamentals classes also include major-major, minor-minor, diminished, and half-diminished 7th chords, it might be helpful to expand Chapter 9 into two new chapters and include all the common types of 7th chords in the latter one.

UNIT V: Putting (Music) Theory into Practice

The book's final unit, spanning chapters 10–12, touches on the concepts of tonality and tonal syntax, melodic motion, and larger forms. Chapter 10: Writing Harmonies, does not actually ask the student to write a progression; instead, it opens by discussing, at some length, the idea of tonality and how tonic and dominant functions interact within it. Endris illustrates this with “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Most impressively, at the end of the chapter, Endris includes two versions of something similar to Laitz's Phrase Model, outlining the typical order of diatonic harmonies within a progression.³ Enris's version doesn't include multi-chord prolongations or expansions as Laitz's does; nonetheless, Enris's version should be enormously useful for songwriters and anyone else composing in a tonal language.

Chapter 11: Writing Melodies, is comparatively brief, but it introduces some important topics, including range, tessitura, conjunct/disjunct motion, and motive. Endris loads more weight onto the final chapter—Chapter 12: The Syntax of Music—covering a nearly dizzying array of terms: cadence types, period structures, binary and ternary forms, and most ambitiously, sonata form (a topic many fundamentals courses will not touch). It is most likely that readers will find themselves needing to spend much more time with this chapter than with those in the earlier units. During the discussion of half cadences, Endris quite nicely reintegrates Ch. 10's “Mary Had a Little Lamb” example. Within the rest of the chapter, I would have liked to see a musical example for period structure as well and references to specific pieces—if space limitations prevented the inclusion of actual examples—that employ unambiguous binary, ternary, rounded binary, and sonata designs.

³ Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 273ff.

IMPRESSIONS AND POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

In some ways, I found *Music Theory for Beginners* difficult to evaluate, given that I am more accustomed to classroom teaching and systematic tutoring and, of course, this book is not designed for that environment. With that in mind, I believe this text accomplishes exactly what it has set out to do: provide an overview of the important concepts within rudimentary music theory in a concise and approachable manner. Its concision and engaging style are clear strengths. In addition, the numerous historical tidbits and nonstandard concepts (like the various scales in chapter 7) invite further research by providing just enough information to pique readers' interest. Popular music is referenced throughout the book, which allows the text to engage a wider variety of musicians than a standard text might. The illustrations are entertaining and the glossary is handy enough to find a place in many a first-year music student's exam notes.

Independent readers who desire further reinforcement or practice with a particular concept will need to consult alternative sources, some limited suggestions for which Endris helpfully lists under in a Further Reading section (starting on page 115). Another potential disadvantage for anyone studying music theory without an instructor (with this book or otherwise) is that aural skills development usually falls by the wayside. While Endris often urges readers to seek out and listen to specific pieces or passages, and most examples are laid out so that they can be played through easily at the piano, students with less developed audiation skills (or keyboard skills) may require more drilling before they can master all the content in the later chapters. One possible solution—not sacrificing the book's appealing brevity—would be to build a companion website with additional examples, which might include audio and perhaps some interactive skill-building games.

As with each of the numerous volumes in the *For Beginners* series (including a second volume authored by Endris, *The History of Classical Music for Beginners*), this text is aimed at lay readers rather than college-level music majors. For such an audience of lay readers, traditional college textbooks—even a fundamentals text that assumes no previous knowledge—may not be ideal, since these texts tend to rely more on classroom-based group exercises, graded homework assignments, and bullet-point lists that lend themselves more readily to PowerPoint presentations than to

prose. Endris's conversational, yet intelligent, delivery seems more navigable for the interested reader who does not have an entire semester to devote to studying introductory music theory in a formal classroom setting. As such, one potential market for this text is the recreational adult student of piano or another instrument. The often childish "piano theory" workbooks bundled into most mainstream piano methods do not always connect with teenage and adult students, but some of the better-known college textbooks (such as the otherwise excellent Aldwell/Schachter and Laitz texts) tend to be too dense and comprehensive for their needs.⁴ (Laitz, for example, covers almost everything in Endris's book within the first six out of thirty-seven chapters. The Laitz text's sheer size and scope are its strengths in the standard theory classroom, allowing students to profit from it for several semesters; however, it could easily overwhelm a recreational reader or someone who simply lacks the time to work through thirty-seven chapters.) Additionally, *Music Theory for Beginners* may appeal to the incoming graduate student or former music student in need of a quick refresher on the basics. Outside of the academy, this book would be a welcome addition to church music libraries, particularly those who recruit choristers from the community and may be working with widely divergent levels of music literacy. Instrumental and vocal music instructors seeking to refresh their own theory knowledge quickly would benefit from this text as well, particularly if they find themselves needing to prepare students for the MTNA, RCM or ABRSM written theory assessments. High school-age musicians looking toward university/conservatory degrees in music, or even simply AP Music Theory, will also find this book a manageable and even enjoyable summer read.

Though it is not intended to be a classroom-ready text, it is certainly possible that some instructors might find this book's concision appealing for the purposes of a brief survey, perhaps in the non-major or musical theatre major theory classroom. Should Endris and the publisher choose to build a companion website with additional examples, exercises, links to audio recordings, and the like, this book could gain even greater utility within the classroom setting.

⁴ Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 4th ed. (New York: Schirmer, 2010); Laitz, *The Complete Musician*.

CONCLUSION

Music Theory for Beginners is an excellent resource for the amateur or student musician seeking a quick, pedagogically sound review of written music theory basics. This book occupies an important market niche. It does not claim to take the place of a comprehensive traditional undergraduate theory text in the vein of Laitz, Kostka/Payne/Almén or Aldwell/Schachter; nor is it as thorough in its treatment of each topic as a classroom-ready fundamentals text like the one by Straus, with its thirty-five lessons and five self-tests.⁵ Instead, Endris's book taps into a more diverse market with which few music scholars have engaged. Instructors who often work with nontraditional students or teach outside the music theory classroom will welcome this nontraditional text.

⁵ Laitz, *The Complete Musician*; Stefan Kostka, Dorothy Payne, and Byron Almén, *Tonal Harmony*, 7th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013); Aldwell and Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*; Joseph N. Straus, *Elements of Music*, 3rd edition (New York: Pearson, 2012).



