

Explorations in Music Theory: Harmony, Musicianship, Improvisation

by Dariusz Terefenko and Benjamin Wadsworth.
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REVIEW BY SEAN R. SMITHER

The pedagogical orientation of this new textbook by Dariusz Terefenko and Benjamin Wadsworth is highlighted in its telling title: *Explorations in Music Theory: Harmony, Musicianship, Improvisation* (henceforth *Explorations*) purports to build music-theoretical knowledge and musicianship skills by fostering a sense of exploration in its readers, particularly through an emphasis on improvisation and other forms of active music-making. Although it shares many similarities with other undergraduate music theory textbooks, including a focus on works of the Western canon, a mostly traditional sequencing of topics, and an extensive companion workbook,¹ instructors who are interested in linking the development of music-theoretic knowledge with practical musicianship skills may wish to give some consideration to this new text for its streamlined, inquiry-driven format, its many well-designed activities and exercises, and its fresh focus on improvisation.

As with most undergraduate music theory textbooks, *Explorations* features a heavy emphasis on pitch relations and form, and a comparative lack of attention to rhythm and meter, timbre, meaning, and other dimensions of musical experience. But if the information covered feels familiar to instructors, the approach through which that information is conveyed is distinctive. Even at the outset, an emphasis on active student participation is central. Across the book's forty chapters, students are frequently asked to sing or play short exercises, and most pages feature some kind of activity with which students can interact. The difficulty of these exercises varies considerably: Some lessons and exercises (usually marked "intermediate" or "advanced") may prove quite challenging even for students who have had extensive preparation,² but many

¹ Physical textbooks with which *Explorations* competes include the most recent editions of Burstein and Straus (2025), Clendinning and Marvin (2021), Kostka and Almén (2024), Laitz and Callahan (2023), and Holm-Hudson (2017), while competing digital textbooks include Geyer (2021), Gotham et al. (2021), and Hutchinson (2017).

² This is particularly an issue in the earlier chapters of the book; the difficulty of exercises marked "advanced" seems to ease as the book progresses.

others are approachable and feature careful scaffolding designed to enable students of varying skill levels to engage with sophisticated musical ideas and procedures. The authors also frequently emphasize the importance of memorization and practice, with exercises specifically designed to build and test memorization and practice skills helping to ensure that students internalize the concepts they encounter throughout the book. There is a light commitment to movable-do *solfège* throughout *Explorations*, but it appears seldom enough that instructors who wish to use a fixed-do system or avoid *solfège* altogether can largely ignore the few places where it is used.

In the book's "Preface to Students," the authors emphasize that "music theory is not a system of unalterable 'facts,' but a historical tradition of skills that you practice and learn" (xiv). This important insight is reinforced throughout the textbook. Students are frequently asked to consider their own subjective responses to musical phenomena and to consider to what extent the music-theoretical tools to which they are introduced adequately describe and capture the way they experience those phenomena. The book also explicitly historicizes the theories students learn about through brief "Historical Minutes" that appear toward the ends of chapters. These vignettes typically present a writer from the history of Western music theory and explore aspects of their theories that are relevant to the subject of the chapter. While these readings are mostly optional, they help to highlight the always-provisional nature of music theory by illustrating how theories have changed over time and are the products of centuries of continuous dialogue around certain music-theoretical topics.³ They also feature some of the most distinctive content the book has to offer, with highlights including contextual readings on melodic diminutions, *partimenti*, and a variety of different theorists' accounts of the rule of the octave.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of *Explorations* is its strong emphasis on improvisation. In their "Preface to the Instructor," the authors make a case for including improvisation in the theory classroom, even in contexts where it may not be expected. "We ask for your help in reviving improvisation as a practice in Baroque and Classical music, and not only jazz, rock, or pop," they write, arguing that "improvisation

3 Although these sections are optional, information from the "Historical Minutes" is occasionally incorporated into the main text. A notably problematic example of this is when Riemannian function theory is introduced in a "Historical Minute" at the end of Chapter 6 on triads (111), only to appear in the main text of Chapter 7 (122–23) as seventh chords are introduced. This could cause confusion for students that did not cover this labelling system, doubly so because tonic, subdominant, and dominant function-classes are introduced in a fashion more typical of American music theory in Chapter 9 (159) without differentiating how these new categories derive and, importantly, differ from the Riemannian notation introduced earlier.

is vital in training a musician to think faster, in time, and ‘on their feet’” (xviii). While there are many assignments and exercises that incorporate varying degrees of improvisation, the “Improvisation Labs” that are featured throughout the book serve as the main sites for this revival. Most chapters feature either an “Improvisation Lab” or occasionally a “Composition Lab” at the end of the chapter, the topic of which is usually related to the content presented in that chapter, and particularly to the Historical Minutes of the chapter (which usually directly precede an Improvisation or Composition lab).⁴ These labs are carefully scaffolded to help students with little experience in improvisation develop the skills and experience necessary to fluently improvise. Even if students do not take the time to develop these skills, they will nevertheless benefit from following along with the Improvisation Labs, which help to develop musical imagination and provide an important glimpse into the provisional nature of musical structure and the diverse creative processes and ways of knowing that underlie various forms of music-making.⁵ Although the authors recognize that not all classroom environments afford the opportunity to make the most out of these exercises, they stress the importance of exposing students to this material, suggesting that improvisation exercises be converted to composition exercises if they prove too difficult to implement otherwise.

A brief explanation of the very first Improvisation Lab in the book will prove useful to demonstrate the kind of scaffolding typical of the improvisation exercises in *Explorations*. Following a Historical Minutes reading on Diego Ortiz’s *Trattado de Glossas* (17) in which students examine excerpts of melodic diminution from Ortiz’s treatise, play or sing through them, and analyze them via group discussion, the Improvisation Lab on melodic diminutions (18–21) provides a thoughtful progression of activities to guide students toward melodic improvisation. First, ascending and descending fourths and fifths are filled in through diatonic passing motion. Then, unisons are embellished using diatonic double neighbor motions. Finally, ascending and descending thirds are embellished using combinations of neighbor and passing motions. In each case, multiple examples are provided so that students can get a feel for the melodic possibilities afforded by these relatively limited motions. In the exercises that follow, the authors provide a melodic skeleton in half and whole notes consisting

4 Thirty-two of the book’s forty chapters feature Improvisation Labs, with some chapters featuring two. Many of the chapters that do not feature Improvisation Labs nonetheless contain exercises that are improvisation-oriented.

5 For more on the relationship between music-theoretical knowledge and improvisation, see Goldman (2016).

only of motion in thirds, fourths, and unisons and ask students to experiment with filling in the skeleton. First, a full sample realization is provided so that students have a model of what they are aiming for. Following this, only one bar of realization is provided before students are left to continue embellishing the provided skeleton on their own using the diminutions they have encountered thus far. This lab, marked “advanced,” may admittedly be challenging for students who are just learning to read Western notation (the topic of Chapter 1), but students can always return to these labs later on once they have become more familiar with the concepts involved. As the authors note, “our Improvisation Labs contain many ‘pre-improvisation’ activities that get students composing and practicing rote patterns . . . By warming up with these patterns, eventually the improviser loosens control over the exercise, resulting in a creative and less predictable improvisation” (xviii). Given the ample improvisational opportunities the book provides, dedicated students will no doubt be able to use these exercises as effective springboards for developing improvisational skills.

Another noteworthy choice the authors make is to place relatively little emphasis on part writing. In their “Preface to the Instructor,” the authors explain this decision: “We do not wholeheartedly endorse SATB part writing, nor do we abandon it. Instead, we view part writing as a necessary way station to model composition, in which a student must control the counterpoint of the implied outer voices while animating it using various textures and melodic-motivic ideas” (xvii). This perspective leads them to introduce part-writing in keyboard style first (emphasizing the practicality of playing, hearing, and exploring voice-leading at the keyboard) before later introducing chorale-style SATB writing with a nod toward string quartet composition. Overall, the balance the authors strike works well for their stated purposes. Basic part-writing guidelines are introduced in Chapter 9, but relatively little space is devoted to explaining them, leaving it up to the instructor whether to dwell on part-writing rules and exercises or to focus on other methods of learning, particularly analysis and improvisation. Especially notable is how seldom part writing is used to assess student knowledge. Although there are plenty of opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of voice-leading procedures in both the textbook and the accompanying workbook, part writing is not used as the default means of assessing harmonic knowledge more generally, and both the textbook and workbook are more varied and dynamic because of this decision. Instructors who are looking to cover species counterpoint or contrapuntal genres in detail will need to supplement the text, however, as these topics are mostly absent; the book features only brief introductions to cantus-firmus writing and first-species counterpoint (including an Improvisation

Lab focusing on first-species duets), and a chapter on formal procedures in fugue writing; other facets of contrapuntal composition, improvisation, and analysis are jettisoned entirely.

Outside of these idiosyncrasies, the sequencing of topics in *Explorations* is comparable to competing textbooks and features a linear progression that broadly follows a chronological path through Western music history. The book is divided into five units: (I) Fundamentals, (II) Diatonic Harmony, (III) Chromaticism, (IV) Large Forms, and (V) 20th-Century Developments. Unit I, on fundamentals, provides a strong grounding in navigating Western music notation, basics of rhythm and meter, major and minor scales, intervals, triads, seventh chords, inversions, basic Roman numerals, and functional harmonic progression (via the classical phrase model). Several concepts that are typically introduced later in other textbooks are introduced comparatively early on in *Explorations*, including score reading (with early exercises serving to help students learn how to quickly navigate a variety of scores, providing a simple foundation for the more advanced analysis exercises that appear later in the book) and non-chord tones. The latter, introduced melodically in the Improvisation Lab in the very first chapter, and then again in Chapter 8 (after intervals, triads, and seventh chords have been introduced), is a particularly welcome inclusion, as students are encouraged to use simple passing- and neighbor-tone gestures to improvise melodies and navigate their way through chord progressions. The introduction of this topic so early on, before principles of voice leading have been introduced, reflects the book's emphasis on exploration by providing students with the tools to improvise, compose, and make sense of convincing melodies right out of the gate.

Unit II covers the use of triads and seventh chords in functional harmonic contexts, as well as phrase forms (sentences and periods), applied chords, modulation, and common-practice small forms (simple and rounded binary and ternary). Unit III, on chromaticism, handles similarly standard topics such as mixture, Neapolitan and augmented sixth chords, and chromatic modulation, but also contains several chapters on concepts that have only more recently made their way into undergraduate theory textbooks, including topic theory and Neo-Riemannian transformations. Unit IV, on large forms, features chapters on sonata form, concerto forms, cadenzas, and fugues. The chapter on cadenzas, in which analyses of pre-composed cadenzas and standard melodic and harmonic patterns are used to facilitate an understanding of cadenza improvisation, is an especially impressive inclusion that effectively showcases the benefits of the improvisation-focused learning model adopted throughout the book.

The final unit, Unit V, covers the twentieth century and features a wide-ranging

set of chapters on topics including modes and collections, free atonality, serialism, neoclassicism, and jazz improvisation. Improvisation labs are sparser in this final unit, but the lab in the chapter on jazz is particularly strong, offering accessible exercises that help introduce students to a range of jazz improvisational techniques, starting with a simple scale-based approach to the twelve-bar blues before moving on to guide-tone voice leading, basic arpeggiated melodic lines, and finally more complex arpeggiation patterns. Although each chapter does an admirable job of introducing the major principles of these topics and offers a surprising amount of depth, space restrictions understandably force the authors to treat the concepts in this unit in a relatively cursory manner. Instructors who are looking to spend a semester or more on twentieth-century theory would likely be better off supplementing with more focused textbooks. Similarly, instructors who are interested in diving into popular styles in detail should look elsewhere, as popular music appears only rarely throughout *Explorations* and, unlike several other textbooks on the market, there are no chapters dedicated entirely to popular music.⁶

Each unit ends with a summative chapter in which the authors offer practice exams and suggest a variety of projects that assess cumulative student learning, including composition-, arrangement-, improvisation-based projects and analytical and historical papers. Many of the project ideas in these unit-ending chapters are thoughtful, inventive, and well-structured while allowing students a wide range of options to choose from. In addition, these projects sometimes move beyond the mostly Western common practice repertoire that is the focus of much of the book, allowing students to engage with styles that especially interest them.

Although individual chapters are not always fully self-contained and are numbered and arranged linearly, the authors claim that the book may be used in a modular fashion. The book's organization of content aids in this considerably: While the textbook is comparable in length to other similar textbooks, the content itself is concisely explained, with bullet points, examples, and suggested exercises standing in for lengthy prose.⁷ This streamlined format makes jumping in and out of the book quite

6 For contrast, Clendinning and Marvin (2021) features two chapters on popular music ranging from the 1930s to the 2010s, Gotham et al. (2021) features a unit on popular music containing fourteen chapters on wide-ranging topics, and Holm-Hudson (2017) thoroughly integrates popular styles alongside common practice works throughout the entire text.

7 The length of the book, at 828 pages, is comparable to most other undergraduate music theory textbooks; only Burstein & Straus (2025) has a considerably shorter length. While most of the prose is concise, the "Historical Minutes" at the end of each chapter necessarily depart from this practice, as more detailed prose is needed to explain considerably more advanced topics and provide historical

easy, and therefore ideal for flipped-classroom assignments. The minimal prose is balanced out by active learning exercises, so instructors who wish to take advantage of what the textbook offers will need to ensure that students complete the exercises that flesh out each chapter. The content of each chapter would likely be a bit sparse without these exercises, but this is precisely the benefit of the book's orientation: students are expected to learn through active music-making more than through reading, and the book's expedient organization helps to facilitate this activity-based learning.

These organizational benefits are tempered somewhat by the book's formatting. Unlike many competing textbooks that feature colorful duotone formatting, dynamic shading, and varied fonts and font sizes that visually differentiate elements from one another on the page, *Explorations* features gray-scale coloring and unvaried fonts that can feel dull and repetitive. Similarly, because content is not always distributed between pages in a systematic way, there are occasionally awkward page breaks. Another concern is with the physical layout of the workbook I received, which confusingly does not feature perforated pages. If students scan their completed assignments and submit them electronically, this will of course pose no problems, but for hard-copy assignment submissions, students and instructors alike will quickly become frustrated with the difficulty of cleanly tearing pages out of the workbook. Hopefully this is either an early printing error or an easy fix for future pressings of the workbook. The above formatting drawbacks are especially unfortunate because the relatively dull presentation of the book's content does not at all reflect the dynamic sense of exploration that the authors have worked so hard to cultivate in the book's many exercises and activities.

As of this writing, *Explorations'* online resources—although evidently planned out and referred to throughout the book—are not yet published, so I am not able to comment on the nature or quality of those resources.⁸ When these resources become available, the inclusion of and ease of access to recordings of the works featured throughout will be an important consideration for any potential adopter of the textbook. As of this writing, there is no easy way for students or instructors to access recordings of these pieces. While recordings of the more well-known works should be easy to find, other works by relatively lesser-known composers may be difficult to access. Until this is

context.

8 In a personal email communication with a Routledge editorial assistant, I was told that these resources will be “primarily text-based” and “consist of additional exercises and practice materials, similar to the textbook.” At the time of this writing, the online resources do not yet have an anticipated release date.

rectified, this represents a major disadvantage compared to the book's competition.

One larger concern revolves around the repertoire with which the book engages. In their preface to the instructor, the authors acknowledge "a push in the field of music theory toward a more inclusive, world-based repertoire" (xvii). After signaling that they are keen to "work toward a truly inclusive study of music," the authors highlight an "opposite danger," namely that curricula that are overly polystylistic may fail to build sophisticated musicianship skills and familiarize students with repertoire they might be expected to know for K-12 education or graduate school entrance exams. In order to balance these opposing concerns, the authors attempt a compromise, writing: "we start from the assumption of a classical canon but expand it intentionally to include composers of many backgrounds from the common-practice period and other styles" (ibid). Unfortunately, this balance turns out to be rather difficult to strike. In both content and repertoire, the book is overwhelmingly centered around the Western common practice canon. This focus is strong enough that the inclusion of non-canonical material may sometimes come across as tokenistic.⁹ An example of this may be found in the "Composer Spotlights" that appear at the beginning of each chapter and provide a brief profile of an underrepresented composer whose work will be used in the upcoming chapter. Although these spotlights are well-intentioned, each chapter typically features the work of only one such composer, and because these composers' works often do not appear in the text until well after the Composer Spotlight introduces them, these inclusions can unfortunately feel like diversity afterthoughts in an otherwise canon-focused text. Similarly, one of the suggested projects at the end of Unit 2 (described on pp. 381-82) asks students to select a work featuring tonal centrality from any style, with "Classical, Romantic, Baroque, Renaissance, Jazz, Ragtime, Pop, Rock, various world musics, and 20th-century western art music" offered as possibilities. Given that so few of these styles are explored in the text, however, it seems inevitable that students will compare them against the classical norms they have been studying.¹⁰ In many chapters, examples from popular music and jazz, as well as from a wider array of both early and contemporary classical music, could have been included to help demonstrate the wider relevance of topics

9 For more on the perils of tokenism in music education and ways to address it, see Hess (2015), Madrid (2017), Reid (2022), and London (2022).

10 Although jazz is very occasionally incorporated in the text, and although there is one full chapter on jazz improvisation, the lack of integration of jazz into the rest of the book is especially disappointing because one of the authors has already written a fine textbook on jazz theory; see Terefenko (2018).

like applied dominants, sentence form, and modulation, but non-common-practice examples remain few and far between.¹¹

Despite these flaws, however, *Explorations* manages to present a fresh take on traditional music theory curricular design by coupling together concise prose and a focus on improvisation and activity-based learning. Instructors looking to forge a strong connection between music theory and active music-making in the classroom will likely find that the book's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Terefenko and Wadsworth have created an impressive foundation that other textbooks may wish to emulate, and on which future editions of *Explorations* can continue to build.

¹¹ A smaller, though not insignificant, repertoire issue concerns the repeated use of tunes that are assumed to be familiar to most readers, including "My Country 'Tis of Thee," the "Ode to Joy," "Jingle Bells," "The Star-Spangled Banner," and "O Canada." The pedagogical strategy here—using melodies that students are likely to quickly recall—seems sound, but only for the book's anglophone audience familiar with these tunes; international students may feel adrift. In particular, the use of multiple national anthems lends a strange political dimension to these exercises, inviting a whiff of the nationalistic aims of these songs. Given the increasingly global reach of Western music theory teaching and learning, I believe it would be best to avoid using these kinds of tunes.

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