

Conference Report: Society for Music Theory Annual Meeting, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 6-9, 2025

Reviewed by
RACHEL MANN AND KATRINA ROUSH

Introduction

The forty-eighth annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory occurred in tandem with the American Musicological Society on November 6–9, 2025, at the Hyatt Regency in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Though not exhaustive, the following is a summary of conference events pertaining to music theory pedagogy.¹ We are pleased to report that a majority of the time slots over the four-day meeting offered pedagogical papers or sessions. The conference featured posters, conventional papers, lightning talks, special sessions, and a workshop focused on music theory pedagogy. The research shared and ideas explored offered valuable insights, practical applications, and moments of introspection.

Posters

A well-attended and lively SMT/AMS joint poster session kicked off Friday's schedule. Music theory pedagogy was strongly represented at the poster session, with six posters explicitly addressing theory and aural skills teaching.

The posters proposed valuable possibilities for innovative pedagogy. Burton Hable and Paul V. Miller's "Music Theory Pedagogy and the Makerspace" showed that incorporating ideas from the maker movement into music theory pedagogy can connect students across disciplines. The poster presented the Sound Lab at Duquesne University as an example, where creative exploration and experimentation are encouraged through collaboration between STEM and the arts. With his poster, "The Gaming Mindset in the Theory Classroom: Utilizing Constructive Competition for the Practice and Assessment of Speed and Accuracy in Core Theory Classes," Fred Hosken explained several games he uses to enhance his pedagogy through "constructive competition." He adapted existing games for theory instruction, specifically to boost

¹ Due to time constraints, we were unable to attend the Friday mid-morning session on "Integrating Disciplinary Silos in our Teaching," which also featured pedagogy papers.

students' speed and accuracy, which proved useful even for some advanced topics. One of the games was available for attendees to try out for themselves.

Two posters specifically addressed students with varying levels of ability. In "Pattern Recognition and Music Theory Ability," Nancy Rogers showed that increased pattern recognition and strong working memory can predict student success in music theory. The same traits are correlated with high achievement in math. Rogers conducted an experiment in which participants studied pictures with dots for a short period of time and were then asked to remember the correct number of dots. All students performed better when the dots were arranged in a pattern, and the students who performed the best self-reported strong outcomes in both music theory and math. Richard Drehoff's poster "Beyond One-Size-Fits-All: Differentiated Instruction in Contemporary Aural Skills Pedagogy" faced a pressing question head-on: "How do we ensure that more-experienced students feel sufficiently challenged while preventing less-experienced students from feeling overwhelmed?" Drehoff's answer was "choiceboxes," which allow students to choose different types of activities for their assignments. This taps into students' agency and curiosity and provides options with varied genres, musicians, and timbres that may result in greater student engagement.

Two other posters suggested shifts in the musical canon. Toby Rush pointed to what he sees as a new common practice in "Teaching the New Common Practice Period: Embracing Modern Studio Production in the Theory and Aural Skills Curriculum." He highlighted the absence of modern studio production in most music theory curricula, even though audio producing skills can now be considered an integral aspect of well-rounded musicianship. Rachel Mann addressed the lack of Iberian and Latin American composers taught in many music theory courses with "¿Puedes Oírme? (Can You Hear Me?): Recognizing Iberian/Latin American Voices in the Music Theory Classroom." She surveyed seven popular music theory print textbooks and two open-access textbooks to find examples by Iberian and Latin American composers or artists. The poster reminded us that, although the field is working toward inclusion of more diverse perspectives, we must be careful not to exclude non-Black composers or artists of color.

Session: Pedagogy

This Thursday morning session brought together three complementary perspectives that examined structural, cultural, and curricular forces shaping the contemporary theory classroom. Although each presentation addressed pedagogy from a different standpoint—commodification, authorship and representation, and

repertoire-driven curricular innovation—the session coalesced around a shared concern: how entrenched systems of value production and knowledge transmission continue to limit whose music is taught, who gets to speak authoritatively about music, and which musical parameters are emphasized within the core curriculum. Taken together, the papers offered both critique and constructive pathways for reimagining music theory pedagogy as more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students’ musical lives.

Dave Easley’s paper, “The Commodification of the Music Theory and Aural Skills Core Curriculum,” framed the session by situating music theory pedagogy within a broader analysis of commodification. Drawing on Christoph Hermann’s account of commodification as a process that transforms educational goods into standardized, cost-minimized products,² Easley argued that the diversification in the theory and aural skills core is not simply a matter of individual curricular conservatism, but rather reflects systemic pressures generated by textbooks, standardized curricular sequences, and assessment pipelines that prioritize uniformity and efficiency. Over time, these forces have narrowed acceptable repertoires, analytical methods, and learning outcomes, while simultaneously alienating and disempowering instructors by constraining their pedagogical agency.

A key contribution of Easley’s paper was its insistence that diversity and inclusion cannot be addressed solely through additive curricular changes, such as incorporating a broader range of composers into an otherwise unchanged framework. Instead, he argued, commodification itself functions as a barrier to diversification by discouraging experimentation and reinforcing rigid curricular norms. Easley concluded by outlining potential strategies for resistance, including reclaiming instructor expertise, decentering textbook-driven curriculums, and rethinking learning outcomes in ways that value multiplicity rather than standardization.

Where Easley focused on curricular structures, Kimberly Goddard Loeffert and John Peterson considered authorship in their paper titled “Representation in Music Theory Pedagogy Authorship.” Building on the critical momentum of the 2019 Society for Music Theory plenary “Reframing Music Theory,” they not only asked whose music is represented in classrooms, but who is authorized to speak about music through publication. While recent efforts have emphasized diversifying musical examples, Loeffert and Peterson observed that comparatively little attention has been paid to the demographics and positionalities of those producing and writing about pedagogical resources.

2 Hermann, 2021.

Their study compared publication data from traditional journals such as *Music Theory Spectrum* and *Music Theory Online* with data from pedagogically oriented journals, including the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* and *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy*, as well as several recent textbooks and edited collections. Their findings revealed differences between authors who do or do not self-identify as minorities in terms of topics addressed, genres studied, methodological approaches, and patterns of solo- versus co-authorship. These results suggested that pedagogical publication spaces may function differently from other disciplinary journals, while also raising questions about how authority, labor, and representation are distributed across scholarly contexts.

Holly Bergeron-Dumaine's presentation, "Teaching Timbre, Teaching Games: Video Game Music as a Pedagogical Asset," shifted the session toward curricular practice by offering a concrete example of how new and alternative repertoires can reshape theoretical priorities. Arguing that video game music (VGM) represents a significant yet underused pedagogical resource, she proposed that this repertoire can help reconceive the core curriculum as culturally capacious and reflective of contemporary musical practices. In particular, she emphasized VGM's capacity to foreground timbre and time—parameters that are historically marginalized in undergraduate theory instruction. Through two classroom-tested lesson plans, Bergeron-Dumaine demonstrated how VGM can serve as an intuitive and interdisciplinary entry point for theoretical study. Collectively, the session offered a fascinating examination of music theory pedagogy during a time of sustained disciplinary self-reflection. Together, these papers emphasized that meaningful pedagogical change requires attention not only to what is taught, but how, why, and by whom it is taught.

Special Session: Teaching Electronic Dance Music in Core Theory: Practical Applications and Critical Pedagogy

This special session examined the pedagogical potential of electronic dance music (EDM) in the undergraduate music theory classroom through the lens of critical pedagogy. While popular music has become increasingly common in theory curriculums, EDM—understood broadly to include house, trance, techno, dubstep, and related styles—remains comparatively underrepresented. The session proposed that this absence is not due to a denial of EDM's cultural significance, but rather to instructors' anxiety about expertise in a rapidly evolving, technologically mediated genre. By drawing on principles of critical pedagogy, centering students' musical

experiences, knowledge, and analytical agency through collaborative, student-led learning can be reframed as a pedagogical asset.

Across the three papers, EDM was presented not as a niche repertoire, but as a rich style through which core music theory concepts in form, timbre, texture, rhythm, and meter can be engaged. The session demonstrated how EDM can be placed in productive dialogue with traditional common-practice repertoire, thereby broadening the range of musical practices represented while promoting engagement among students. In doing so, the presenters modeled lesson plans and assignments grounded in collaboration, group work, and critical reflection, emphasizing that critical pedagogy is defined less by specific content than by its orientation toward learning objectives, student empowerment, and inclusivity.

Hannah Benoit's paper, "Form in Electronic Dance Music: A Pedagogical Approach," focused on musical form in EDM as a way of expanding students' analytical fluency beyond notation-based paradigms. She demonstrated how EDM can be integrated into a curricular unit on form, beginning with students' familiarity with verse-chorus structures in pop music and gradually moving toward EDM-specific formal paradigms. Central to this progression is the build-up/climax (or riser/drop) pairing, which functions as a primary formal articulation in EDM-pop and teaches students to consider sonic functions such as texture, timbre, and electronic effects. Benoit emphasized a scaffolded approach that increases analytical difficulty and culminates in critical discussions about the limits of traditional formal labels, particularly in EDM tracks that resist lyric-based or sectional frameworks. Her pedagogy foregrounds student critical thinking while situating EDM alongside, rather than in opposition to, other commonly taught genres.

Megan Lavengood's presentation, "EDM as Timbre Learning Lab," addressed the persistent marginalization of timbre and texture in undergraduate theory curricula. She argued that EDM, which often minimizes melodic and harmonic complexity, naturally foregrounds these parameters and thus serves as an ideal "learning lab" for timbre and texture. Drawing on critical pedagogy, Lavengood outlined a sequence of lesson plans that use EDM and pop music to develop students' listening skills and conceptual understanding of texture, while also challenging overly simplistic or static definitions. Because timbre and texture are foundational to virtually all musical styles, Lavengood framed this work as transferable beyond EDM, equipping students with analytical tools applicable across repertoires.

Jeremy W. Smith's paper, "Teaching Rhythmic Theory through Electronic Dance Music," focused on rhythm and meter, demonstrating how EDM can support instruction

in foundational and advanced rhythmic concepts. He presented lesson plans using contemporary EDM tracks to illustrate simple and compound meter, hypermeter, metrical dissonance, tresillo and double tresillo patterns, and clave-based grooves. He reasoned that EDM's loop-based structures reinforce rhythmic concepts through repetition and support spiral learning, allowing instructors to revisit the same track across multiple lessons. Smith also emphasized comparative approaches, inviting students to analyze how rhythmic patterns function differently across genres through transcription, DAW-based analysis, and reflection.

Taken together, this special session presented a compelling case for EDM as a pedagogically powerful repertoire that supports student engagement, critical thinking, and curricular diversification. By aligning EDM-based instruction with principles of critical pedagogy, the presenters demonstrated how theory classrooms can become more inclusive, student-centered spaces without sacrificing analytical rigor.

Special Session: Teaching Music Theory Through Times of Disaster and Trauma

The SMT Professional Development Committee sponsored a special session moderated by Lyn Ellen Burkett. The session featured five presentations followed by guided small-group discussion. The frame for this session, which all presenters referenced, was the book *Disaster Pedagogy for Higher Education*, edited by Victor Malo-Juvera and Nicholas C. Laudadio.³ While addressing various disasters their institutions had experienced in recent years, the presenters considered five concepts from this book: disruption, accommodation, reinvention, compromise, and collaboration.

First, Mark D. Richardson gave a paper called “Music Theory as ‘Home Room,’” in which he talked about East Carolina University during Hurricane Floyd in 1999. He presented data that showed how natural disasters are becoming more frequent, then discussed how they can impact colleges and universities. Often, in the face of a natural disaster, students’ academic performance suffers, or they may drop out. Richardson posited that we as music theory instructors can play a key role in keeping students engaged with their education through challenging times. We have a distinct privilege—and responsibility—in that we see students from all music disciplines. In some cases, we see these students every day for two years. Because of this, the music theory classroom can take on the qualities of a “home room.” To help students through a natural disaster, Richardson suggested we listen to students’ concerns, reach out to

³ Malo-Juvera and Laudadio, ed., 2022.

absent students, slow down our teaching with patience and repetition, and include students in the potential restructuring of courses (for example, what exams should look like, how assignments might change, etc.).

Next, Jeff Perry talked about the COVID-19 pandemic in “Faculty Governance in the Face of Natural Disasters: A Case Study.” He discussed his experience at Louisiana State University during the pandemic and explained how the health situation affected his instructional environment. The presentation focused on the importance of shared institutional governance, especially during times of crisis. Perry encouraged music theory faculty to familiarize themselves with the governance structures at their institutions and to get involved, because it can make a real difference for faculty and students. Three suggestions were to participate in faculty governance, engage with state lawmakers, and network with faculty in other disciplines across campus.

In “Musical Ensembles and Disaster Pedagogy,” Amy Carr-Richardson emphasized how coming together as groups can help students cope with trauma through solidarity with their peers. During social distancing due to the pandemic, East Carolina University kept ensembles relevant with various creative ways to provide collective experiences for music students. Carr-Richardson showed how ensembles can be spaces of healing communal grief.

Evan Jones’s “Trauma, Instructional Response, and Institutional Memory” stepped away from natural disasters for a moment to speak about the trauma of gun violence on university campuses. He began by comparing the situations surrounding the two recent shootings on the Florida State University campus (in 2014 and 2025). Jones offered two key pieces of wisdom. First, we should approach all students with empathy, assuming they have all suffered trauma at some point. Second, musical study and practice can increase resilience.

Finally, Lyn Ellen Burkett presented “Nimble Syllabus Practices.” Using examples of how Western Carolina University handled the devastating fallout from Hurricane Helene in 2024, Burkett explained a number of principles that are crucial in times of crisis. First, we cannot ignore a crisis. It will affect students and be disruptive to our pedagogy. It will also affect us, and it is appropriate and healthy to allow ourselves to be upset, too. Second, communication with students is crucial, even if this takes different forms than our normal modes of communication. Finally, we should examine our courses with “crisis goggles,” asking ourselves what needs to change and what needs to stay the same. This is where nimble pedagogy is essential. In times of crisis, we should remain willing to change our courses as needed. This might include flexible due dates, updated grading schemes, policy shifts, and increased student choice.

Burkett further discussed the careful balance in nimble pedagogy between changes in courses and accreditation standards.

After the presentations, participants took questions from the audience. The second part of the session alternated small-group discussions with the sharing of insights from these discussions with the entire room. Some issues addressed in small groups included how faculty can incorporate responses to disaster and trauma in music theory pedagogy, how faculty can help each other heal from trauma, and what support faculty should seek from our institutions. The space created during these discussions appropriately modeled how instructors can listen to and share with students when they are experiencing or recovering from disaster and trauma. Session attendees seemed comfortable openly sharing their questions and thoughts, which were received by the presenters with empathy, acceptance, and care.

Sponsored Session: Aural Skills Foundations & Musicianship Through Video Game Music

This special session was sponsored by Auralia/Musition. Two presenters demonstrated how their materials are currently being integrated into Auralia. Both presentations emphasized sound principles for aural skills pedagogy and featured interactive components that kept the session engaging and enjoyable.

In “Aural Skills Foundations,” Timothy Chenette began by focusing on problems presented by traditional aural skills pedagogy. These include a lack of foundational skills, an emphasis on pitch and rhythm to the exclusion of other aspects of listening, and limited musical styles. His open-access book *Foundations of Aural Skills*⁴ addresses these issues, and an upcoming addition to Auralia will incorporate principles from this book into its exercises, including links to sections of the book. One goal is to focus on learning rather than assessment. The assessments in Auralia are based on foundational skills that students struggle with, such as internal hearing, finding “Do” in the middle of a piece of music, tuning, improvisation, and essential preparation before sight reading a melody.

Thomas B. Yee presented “From Chunking to 8-Bit Soundworlds: Aural Skills Foundations and Musicianship Through Video Game Music.” With Yee’s help, Auralia will soon release instructional supplements featuring VGM. One benefit of these supplements (and of using VGM in general) is that students do not need to read notation to work through the exercises, thus increasing the inclusivity of these

4 Chenette, 2022.

pedagogical materials. Because of copyright considerations, Auralia was limited to using only first-party YouTube videos and proceeding with caution when acquiring and using scores. Yee explained that the copyright issues create an “accidental canon,” a problem worth considering for future updates. They strove to include composers of various nationalities, time periods, and genders, and each example includes a bio of the composer. Future updates will feature more question types, such as improvisation, composition, timbre, and production.

Workshop: Developing a Student-Centered Approach to Classroom Learning

Over the past decade, shifts in student demographics, institutional expectations, and instructional resources have placed increasing pressure on traditional teaching models in higher education. Pedagogical approaches that many faculty encountered during their own training often fail to address the realities of contemporary classrooms, which frequently include larger enrollments, students from multiple majors and disciplinary backgrounds, and diminishing institutional support for teaching. In response to these challenges, Ashely Marian Pribyl and Sidney Boquiren led a joint AMS-SMT workshop that introduced musicology and theory participants to Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (POGIL), a student-centered pedagogical framework originally developed in the sciences and increasingly adapted for use in the humanities and performing arts.⁵

The workshop began with an overview of POGIL’s theoretical foundations: an emphasis on structured collaboration, inquiry-based learning, and the use of carefully designed models to guide students toward conceptual understanding. Participants learned how POGIL differs from unstructured group work through its reliance on the learning cycle—exploration, concept invention, and application—and its assignment of specific roles within small groups of three to four students. These roles are designed to promote accountability, equitable participation, and the development of transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. The facilitators also discussed research demonstrating POGIL’s effectiveness in improving student engagement, content retention, and confidence across a range of class sizes and institutional contexts.

Following this introduction, workshop participants engaged directly with the POGIL approach by dividing into small groups to work through three real-time

5 Visit <http://pogil.org/> for more information on POGIL.

practice scenarios that illustrated its adaptability across disciplines. The first activity, involving three bank loan profit models, served as a deliberately content-neutral, non-musical example. Participants analyzed and compared the models collaboratively, using guided questions to identify patterns, make predictions, and justify conclusions. This activity demonstrated how POGIL can be implemented using generic or non-disciplinary material, making it accessible for instructors seeking to understand the structure of the method without the added complexity of unfamiliar subject matter.

The second scenario focused on *Chicago Manual of Style* bibliographic construction and was framed within a musicology context. Participants worked through a model that presented sample citations, identifying conventions and inferring rules before applying them to new sources. This activity illustrated how POGIL can be used to teach research skills and disciplinary writing conventions, areas often addressed through lecture or prescriptive handouts. The exercise highlighted the method's potential for fostering deeper understanding of scholarly practices in humanities courses. The final activity centered on triads and was explicitly designed for a fundamentals or elementary theory classroom. Through guided analysis of musical examples, participants collaboratively constructed an understanding of triad types and their components.

The workshop concluded with a reflective discussion on adapting POGIL for diverse teaching contexts. Participants considered strategies for modifying activities, managing group dynamics, and integrating POGIL into existing curriculums. Overall, the session provided both a conceptual foundation and practical experience, positioning POGIL as a flexible and effective pedagogical approach for addressing contemporary challenges in higher education across disciplines.

Pedagogy Interest Group Lightning Talks and Meeting

The Pedagogy Interest Group featured eight lightning talks, with intermittent small-group discussion of self-reflective prompts, followed by the group's annual business meeting. The session encouraged attendees to identify their own values in teaching and consider how to align them with their teaching practices. Each lightning talk was supported by a principle that guided the presenter(s) of that talk.

- “The Stepping-Up Principle: Increasing Students’ Confidence in their Competence” by Philip Duker and Jennifer England
 - Guiding principle: “We strive to increase students’ confidence in their competence.”

- “Style is the Answer to Everything” by Peter Schubert
 - Guiding principle: “I try to meet my students on a middle ground between their experience and my technical vocabulary of theory.”
- “Valuing Care in Music Theory Pedagogy” by Alexandria Jonker
 - Guiding principle: “I build compassionate relationships in the classroom so that students feel cared for and safe to make mistakes.”
- “A Punk Pedagogy for Music Theory” by Dave Easley
 - Guiding principle: “I value a classroom that fosters skill-building, community, and the conditions for students to critically evaluate the learning process.”
- “The Labour of Agency: Co-Design and the Ethics of Shared Power in the Music Classroom” by Jocelyn Ho and James Humberstone
 - Guiding principle: “Students should be given agency as intellectual partners in classroom design.”
- “Surveying the Experiences of Black Students within the Music Theory Sequence” by Ellen Shaw
 - Guiding principle: “We must go beyond diversity initiatives to engage deeply with the experiences and needs of minoritized, specifically Black, students.”
- “Should We Grade Participation, Preparation, and Attendance? If So, How?” by Leah Frederick
 - Guiding principle: “Our grading systems should reflect our pedagogical values.”
- “*Inakomysliye*: Values-Aligned Teaching in an Increasing Environment of Political Assertion” by Michael Chikinda
 - Guiding principle: “Being resilient in values-aligned teaching benefits both the faculty’s creativity and the student’s critical thinking skills.”

After the first four papers, attendees divided themselves into small groups and shared one or two pedagogical values of our own and an example of how they influence our teaching. After the final presentation, the small groups gathered a second time to discuss further how teaching stems from values, including ways in which areas where faculty feel hesitant can be connected to these principles. One of the best outcomes of interspersing lightning talks with small group discussion in this session was that it afforded consideration of many core values and practical ideas from both presenters and fellow attendees. Attendees also spent time earnestly contemplating how their own pedagogy aligns with their values as instructors.

Conclusion

While we were unable to attend every pedagogy-related presentation due to various scheduling constraints, the sessions, workshops, and posters we attended left us invigorated about the field of music theory pedagogy. It is encouraging to see and hear presenters developing new research, introducing innovative ideas in their classrooms, and inspiring the next generation of scholars in our discipline.

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