

Reflections on Music Theory Pedagogy: Beyond the Three Bs¹

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Like many, I first began to think about pedagogy when asked to teach—specifically, when hired as an undergraduate to tutor fellow music theory students. The year was 1973, which totals more than 50 years thinking about what makes effective teaching. Our textbook was by Robert Ottman, and our teacher instructed us to label every connection between chords with a number from Ottman’s numbered list of part-writing rules (Ottman 1961). In our class, there was very little study of “real music.” It was all part-writing, all the time. When we did occasionally look at a phrase from Mozart or one of the three B’s—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms—there was little attempt to situate the excerpt in relation to the work as a whole, nor its place in music history, nor its sociological context, nor why it was chosen as an example for study. It went unremarked that all these excerpts were composed by white males. Judging from textbooks of the time, I don’t think my training was unusual.

Compare this attitude with those revealed at the 2019 Plenary Session of the Society for Music Theory and at the 2018 Project *Spectrum* event that preceded and inspired it.² Although the field is now acknowledging the long-standing biases of curricula that focus almost solely on Euro-centric male-dominated repertoire, it is worth remembering that just a generation ago (my generation) some theory classes hardly engaged with real repertoire *at all*, save hymns and simpler Bach chorales. These chorales served as abstractions in their pedagogical contexts—stripped as they typically were from their texts, liturgical settings, and even characteristic timbres. As Van Geest demonstrates in his tally of Bach chorales in contemporary music theory texts, this is still very much the case (Van Geest 2021).

¹ This paper originated as a presentation on the 2024 panel “Has Music Theory Become More Diverse Since 2019?” part of the Committee on Race and Ethnicity session at the national meeting of the Society for Music Theory (Friday, November 8, 2024; Jacksonville, FL). Some material comes from an earlier talk given at the 2024 Pedagogy into Practice conference at the University of Oklahoma (May 30, 2024; Norman, OK).

² The Plenary session was part of the Society for Music Theory’s annual meeting (November 9, 2019; Columbus, OH). The Project Spectrum conference was entitled “Diversifying Academia: Strengthening the Pipeline (October 31–November 1; San Antonio, TX).

At the 2019 SMT Plenary, Philip Ewell presented a table of seven contemporary theory textbooks (chosen by market share) and tallied the number of musical examples composed by nonwhites in each of these texts. Example 1 comes from his article published the following year, where he demonstrates that textbooks accounting for approximately 96% of market share in 2019 contained only 1.67% examples by nonwhites (Ewell 2020; see also Ewell 2023).

Textbook	Percentage of market share	Total # of examples	# of examples by nonwhites	Percentage of examples by nonwhites
Aldwell and Schachter, 4th ed. (2011)	5	465	0	0%
Benward and Saker, 9th ed. (2015)	13	333	8	2.40%
Burstein and Straus, 1st ed. (2016)	11	304	1	0.33%
Clendinning and Marvin, 3rd ed. (2016)	25	504	15	2.98%
Kostka, Payne, and Almén, 8th ed. (2018)	29	370	10	2.70%
Laitz, 4th ed. (2015)	8	550	2	0.36%
Roig-Francolí, 2nd ed. (2010)	5	404	13	3.22%
TOTALS	96	2930	49	1.67%

Example 1

Reproduced from Ewell (2020), “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.”

How have these texts—and music theory pedagogy, more broadly—changed since 2019? Since that time, all of the texts he examined have appeared in new editions. Example 2 updates Ewell’s data by tallying examples from the most recent editions of these same texts, and it expands the scope of this inquiry to include music composed by women. Data for editions pre-2019 come from Ewell and Lyons; those for the most recent editions (given in bold) come from the authors of those texts themselves (Ewell and Lyons 2024).³ Two caveats: there has been no new edition of Aldwell-Schachter-Cadwallader since 2019, so it is omitted here (Aldwell, Schachter, and Cadwallader 2018). Further, Roig-Francolí’s third edition and Benward and Saker’s tenth edition were published soon after the Plenary session, and thus were well into production before this recent conversation about race and gender was raised (Roig-Francolí 2020, Benward and Saker 2021).

³ I want to extend my thanks to the textbook authors shown in Example 2, who gave generously of their time to tally the musical examples in their texts.

Example 2 shows increased representation of music by nonwhites and by women in almost all of these texts in their newest editions, with quite striking increases in some. In its third edition, Burstein-Straus increased examples by nonwhite composers from less than 1% to over 17%, and those by women from under 2% to almost 33% (Burstein and Straus 2025). Clendinning-Marvin's fifth edition increased music by nonwhites from almost 3% to over 17%, and by women from under 3% to almost 19% (Clendinning and Marvin 2026). Finally, Laitz-Callahan's fifth edition increased music by nonwhites from less than 1% to almost 32% and music by women from less than 1% to almost 33% (Laitz and Callahan 2023). Recall Ewell's 2020 finding that only 1.67% of examples by non-whites appeared across all these texts. Today we see 14.96% examples by non-whites across the most recent editions, and in the three just discussed, an average of almost 23% composed by non-whites. For works composed by women, we see almost 19% across all recent editions and nearly 28% by women in the three texts identified above.

Textbook	Total # examples	# by nonwhites	% by nonwhites	# by women	% by women
Benward and Saker 9th Ed (2015)	333	8	2.40%	7	2.10%
Benward and Saker 10th Ed (2021)	448	13	2.90%	13	2.90%
Burstein and Straus, 1st Ed (2016)	304	1	0.33%	5	1.60%
Burstein and Straus, 3rd Ed (2025)	389	67	17.22%	128	32.90%
Clendinning and Marvin, 3rd Ed (2016)	504	15	2.98%	14	2.78%
Clendinning and Marvin, 5th Ed (2026)	544	96	17.65%	102	18.75%
Kostka, Payne, and Almén, 8th Ed (2018)	370	10	2.70%	10	2.70%
Kostka and Almén, 9th Ed (2023)	200	6	3.00%	9	4.50%
Laitz, 4th Ed (2015)	550	2	0.36%	2	0.36%
Laitz and Callahan, 5th Ed (2023)	581	185	31.84%	191	32.87%
Roig-Francolí, 2nd Ed (2010)	404	13	3.22%	30	7.43%
Roig-Francolí, 3rd Ed (2020)	365	11	3.01%	32	8.77%
TOTALS (for most recent editions)	2527	378	14.96%	475	18.80%
TOTAL for Burstein-Straus, Clendinning-Marvin, and Laitz-Callahan most recent	1514	348	22.99%	421	27.80%

Example 2

Tallies of recent editions of textbooks cited by Ewell (2020).

Example-counting is an imperfect metric due to a number of factors: overlapping categories (for example, nonwhite women), multiply-authored compositions, counting multiple examples from the same work, and the very definition of “nonwhite.” As Mann, Gonzales, and Hatch note, this term is problematic because some Hispanic and Latinx people do—and others do not—identify as “nonwhite” (Mann, Gonzales, and Hatch 2025). Mann et al. tallied textbook examples by Hispanic composers from the Iberian Peninsula, Latin America, and the US. Their methodology results in greater recognition of composers with Hispanic heritage, such as Mario Davidovsky and Lalo Schiffrin (who are Argentine-American), Édouard Lalo (French, but of Spanish descent), and even John Philip Sousa (American, of Portuguese descent). It is probable that all of these composers were considered “white” in previous tallies. For these presenters—who teach in Hispanic-serving institutions—identifying the lineage of these composers is important to them and to their students. And to be clear, diversifying repertoire is not only about recognizing and rectifying the historic exclusion of composers by race and gender, but also about creating a more inclusive classroom, where all students see themselves represented in the music they study. Even so, we should recall Ellie Hisama’s question, posed during her Plenary paper—“who gets to count?”—by recognizing that these tallies do not capture representation of Asian composers, differently abled composers, or LGBTQ+ composers (Hisama 2021; see also Everett 2021 and VanHandel 2023).

Another measure of changes in pedagogy may be found in the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. Example 3 considers topics over three windows of time: from 2006-2011 to correspond with Straus and Choi’s tally of SMT annual meeting programs, as well as the four years before and after the 2019 Plenary (Straus and Choi 2025). Example 3 tallies each article in only one category. If a composer’s name appeared in an essay’s title, that name determined its category. If not, the article’s musical examples were surveyed to make the assignment. If music by multiple composers was present—among which was even one woman or nonwhite composer—it was given “credit” for the underrepresented composer in the appropriate column. Articles about pedagogical strategies or curriculum design (rather than about music analysis or particular repertoires) were tallied in the “Other” column.

Years	Articles	White male	% White male	White female	% White female	Non-white male	% Non-white male	Non-white female	% Non-white female	Other
2006–2011	38	24	63.16%	0	0%	4	10.53%	0	0%	10
2015–2018	28	12	42.86%	1	3.57%	2	7.14%	1	3.58%	12
2020–2023	18	2	11.11%	3	16.67%	4	22.22%	0	0%	9

Example 3

Three snapshots of *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* by topic.

Example 3 shows a steady decline in articles focused on music by white males and a concurrent increase in discussions of music by women. As for nonwhite males, the most recent period shows the highest proportion of articles engaging with this music. Finally, the column for music by non-white females is notably nearly empty, suggesting an area that deserves considerably more attention.

Today, online teacher resources for music by underrepresented composers abound—with links to scores and recordings—where very few existed before 2019. These resources make the task of diversifying music in our classrooms much more attainable. Indeed, the search for new works can be exciting and rejuvenating to teaching. Example 4 provides a partial list with links.

Downloadable scores, teaching materials, and syllabi:

Brazilian Music

- <https://musicbrasilis.org.br/>

Composers of Color Resource Project

- <https://composersofcolor.hcommons.org/>

Diverse Music Theory Examples

- <https://diversemusictheoryexamples.com/>

Expanding the Canon: Black Composers in the Music Theory Classroom (ed., Melissa Hoag)

- Downloadable scores and lesson plans: <https://resourcecentre.routledge.com/books/9781032068275>

Expanding the Music Theory Canon (ed., Paula Maust)

- <https://www.expandingthemusictheorycanon.com/>
- Print anthology: <https://sunypress.edu/Books/E/Expanding-the-Music-Theory-Canon>

Music by Women

- <https://www.musicbywomen.org/>

Music Theory Examples by BIPOC composers

- <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1CMnSjyraQ1Ho68XUrPpmegBhVmD0pSaQkj17T7MPA6w/edit#gid=0>

SMT Winners for Diversity in Course Design Syllabi (downloadable syllabi)

- <https://societymusictheory.org/grants/dcd/syllabi>

Example 4

Select online resources for teaching underrepresented composers.

Returning to our initial question: has theory pedagogy changed since the 2019 Plenary? Yes, it has. Remarkably, in about five years of textbook revisions, students now see and hear a much broader array of works by diverse composers. Even so, some would argue that we must go further than simply swapping out examples in a curriculum that is firmly bound to the stylistic norms of a canon whose roots are European and mostly male. One approach to this conundrum is to re-imagine the undergraduate curriculum from the ground up, diversifying both the repertoire and the topics we choose to teach, and de-centering the Western classical canon. Such a curriculum would make more room for the study of timbre and textures, diverse types of rhythmic patterning, harmonic and formal principles of popular music, notation systems—like TUBs, Nashville numbers, or *jianpu*—and that include theoretical systems and musics of the world. Inclusion of popular music and world musics as areas of study in our undergraduate curricula will greatly expand the diversity of composers and performers heard by our students (Kim 2021, Reid 2022). Example 5 lists a few post-2019 textbooks that take on this challenge.

In the end, it remains to all of us to assess the needs of the students at our particular institutions and—fully aware of the issues raised here—make thoughtful choices to create an inclusive classroom.

Recent and forthcoming texts with significant popular and/or world music content⁴

De Clercq, Trevor. *The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody, and Form in Commercial Song Writing*. 2024. Routledge.

Ewell, Philip, Rosa Abrahams, and Cora Palfy. Forthcoming. *The Engaged Musician: Theory and Analysis for the Twenty-First Century*. W. W. Norton.

⁴ Note also that the fifth edition of Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin's, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, has significant popular and world music content, with two full chapters devoted to each topic (W.W. Norton, 2026).

- Gotham, Mark, Kyle Gullings, Chelsey Hamm, Bryn Hughes, Brian Jarvis, Megan Lavengood, and John Peterson. *Open Music Theory Version 2*. 2023. <https://viva.pressbooks.pub/openmusictheory/>
- Loeffert, Kimberly Goddard and John Peterson, eds. 2025. *Modeling Musical Analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Osborn, Brad and Christine Boone. 2026, forthcoming. *Music Theory Matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Snodgrass, Jennifer Sterling. 2020. *Contemporary Musicianship: Analysis and the Artist*, 2nd edition. Oxford University Press.

Example 5

Selected post-2019 textbooks with significant popular and/or world music content.

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