

The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody, and Form in Commercial Songwriting

by Trevor de Clercq, Routledge Press (2025)
475 pages, ISBN 9781032362892, \$45.49

REVIEW BY NICHOLAS J. SHEA

***A flexible approach to a new standard in
popular-music theory pedagogy***

Overview

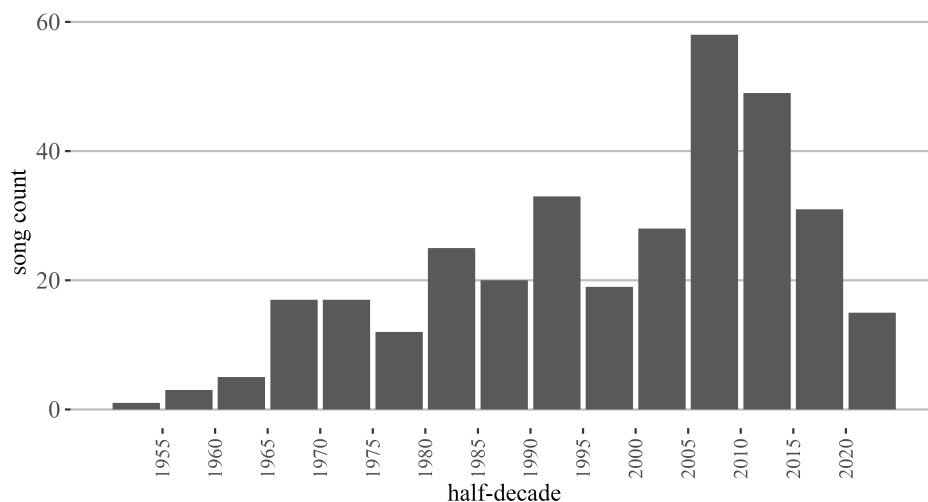
The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody and Form in Commercial Songwriting (2025) by Trevor de Clercq is an unprecedented departure from contemporary approaches to teaching music theory.¹ Grounded on more than a decade's worth of experience teaching commercial music industry majors at Middle Tennessee State University, its 475 pages (roughly 8.5 x 11) interleave written theory and aural skills activities across a four-semester sequence that hits all the traditional theory mainstays — fundamentals, meter types, diatonic harmony, chromatic harmony, phrase structures, form and formal function — alongside compositional techniques perhaps more common to popular music — backbeat feels, song forms, syncopation, mixed meters, and the double-tonic complex. In-text examples cover an impressively diverse 333-song catalogue that draws from wide range of genres, including but not limited to Top 40 pop, folk, rap, hip-hop, classic rock, blues, funk, metal, and country that spans from 1953–2023. Example 1 summarizes the text's song distribution by half decade.

Each chapter concludes with a variety of exercises typically designed around these songs, alongside performance activities such as smooth keyboard voice leading and

¹ Comparable in content are *Contemporary Musicianship: Analysis and the Artist* by Jennifer Snodgrass (2020) and *Music Theory Remixed: A Blended Approach for the Practicing Musician* (2017) by Kevin Holm-Hudson. Each take a slightly different approach to scope, however. To borrow terms from Brian Alegant, Snodgrass's text "scuba dives," focusing on a handful of popular music artists, whereas Holm-Hudson "snorkels" through a survey of different styles and their associated works. de Clercq's hybrid approach reflects his corpus research by casting a wide chronological net across the text but frequently returns to individual songs to add more conceptual layers as the chapters progress.

backbeat simulation. Additionally, *The Practice of Popular Music* (hereafter *TPoPM*) is similarly replete with supplementary materials housed on de Clercq's dedicated website <http://www.popmusicpractice.com> and multimedia drills through Rising Software's online platforms Musition and Auralia. At \$57 USD for the paperback and \$49 USD for the eBook, it is an affordable option in comparison to similar texts that take a no-frills approach to music theory instruction.²

I will first provide the standard survey of the text's content, scope, and assessment materials. Of particular note is how *TPoPM* scaffolds its materials to building Nashville number charts, takes a fresh approach to teaching fundamentals, eschews traditional staff notation, and provides students with a variety of assessment types that align with various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl 2002). I most recently taught from *TPoPM* in a popular music theory course for popular-music majors that satisfies their fourth-semester theory requirement. Drawing on this experience, I will occasionally comment on areas where students struggled to grasp concepts or were presented with supplementary materials to flesh out the main text to cover absent topics like timbre and texture. Once this context is in place, the second half of the review focuses on why instructors should embrace a flexible attitude toward assessment when teaching from *TPoPM* due to research in popular-music perception and genre-specific compositional norms.



Example 1

Chronological distribution of songs in *The Practice of Popular Music* by half decade.

² Examples include *Techniques and Materials of Music* by Benjamin, Horvit, Nelson, and Koozin (2014) and *Concise Introduction to Tonal Harmony* by Burstein and Straus (2024).

Content and scope

Steve Vai, in his guitar method book *Vaideology: Basic Music Theory for Guitar Players* (2019: 5–6), observes that popular musicians often have a complicated relationship with the “academics” (his term) of music theory. These musicians’ attitudes toward theory tend to fall into three camps: those who do not hold any regard for theoretical thought but are “powerful music creators nonetheless,” those who are intimidated by music theory, and those who believe music theory constraints their creativity. In direct response to the latter group, Vai advocates that the “academic” study of music will not necessarily make one a good musician, but it does provide one with a convenient frame for musical understanding — a shared language and a set of tools to communicate with others about its organization. Vai then goes on to argue that “intellectual understanding” is necessary to enhance one’s fluency with “experiential knowing” that comes from practicing an instrument.

The preface of *TPoPM* seems to be implicitly targeted toward Vai’s skeptical musicians. In de Clercq’s own words, “One central goal of this book is to train you in that language [of music theory], and in so doing, to help you understand how popular music is typically organized” (xii). The overall structure of *TPoPM* reflects this goal by dividing its 64 chapters into eight progressively scaffolded sections — I. Foundational Frameworks, II. Essential Elements, III. Alternative Arrangements, IV. Deeper Developments, V. Prevalent Permutations, VI. Colorful Combinations, VII. Tightened Tensions, and VIII. Significant Shifts. By these section titles alone, *TPoPM* signals its engagement with the compositional and performance concerns of practicing popular musicians. But more importantly, it delivers via its interleaved approach. For instance, nearly every topic in the first 12 chapters scaffolds to creating Nashville number charts in Chapter 13. Along the way, fundamental topics such as key signatures (Ch. 7) and intervals (Ch. 9) are peppered between potentially novel activities like creating a drummer’s chart (Ch. 8).

Though it might be tempting to simply teach or review these fundamental topics the way you always have in a traditional theory setting, I strongly encourage instructors to not breeze over the rich content within. de Clercq’s juxtaposition of engaging excerpts, novel pedagogical approaches, and concise figures make brushing up on fundamentals, quite frankly, a fun experience. In Ch. 8, for instance, de Clercq walks students through the process of deducing the key (i.e., pitch collection) for the opening of “Good as Hell” by Lizzo (2016) by mapping the introductory piano riff on a keyboard diagram (41). In doing so, he provides concrete evidence for what

is typically a difficult concept to explain — why we prefer to spell chords in a key using certain pitch names even though C# and Db, for example, sound the same (i.e., are enharmonically equivalent). Walking students through this process grounds the topic in practice, thus making the otherwise abstract notion of differentiating key signatures all the more relevant for skeptics — all the more pressing when considering that digital audio workstations (DAWs), the main compositional technology of many practicing musicians, consistently lack nuance in this regard.

Once students become acquainted with the Nashville number system, subsequent chapters kick the focus on practice into high gear. Coincidentally, this is also where de Clercq's claim — that staff notation is not necessary to tackle musical organization in popular styles — begins to coalesce. Chapter 16, "Melodic-Harmonic Organization," introduces melodic skeletons as a tool for notating the structure of a melody, outlining the process for creating a skeleton for the chorus melody in "Someone Like You" by Adele (2011). To represent the melody, de Clercq sets aside staves and clefs for a simpler system: pitches are represented with note names (or sometimes scale degrees) in place of note heads and the note-name heads are positioned vertically in a relative fashion like in staff notation, but sans staff, such that it is quite easy to tell that F# is the floor of Adele's melody.

Though I am on very much on board with simplifying notation as needed, I admit I find de Clercq's explanation of what exactly constitutes a melodic skeleton to be a little murky. I chalk this up to the conversational tone of the prose (which in most cases I find productive). The "skeleton" as described is not the entire melody listed in Figure 16.1 but is instead the circled notes which de Clercq qualifies as "most *structurally* important" (108). These circled notes, when played or sung in sequence, create a smooth stepwise descent from A to F# — a preferred feature shared with smooth voice leading at the piano.³ I found that my students struggled to grasp *how* to differentiate structural pitches (especially the structural G# that Adele sings to anticipate the upcoming E chord, around 1:34) and, perhaps more importantly, *why* a melodic reduction would be important to create in the first place. To help them along, we sang. First, I had them hum or sing along with the melody in its totality, starting just a few seconds before the chorus at 1:31. Next, we sang only the circled structural pitches. Then finally, we mapped out the pitches for each chord on the board and instructed

3 The "melodic skeleton" echoes the "melodic fluency" principle in *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Theory, Analysis, and Listening* (Laitz and Callahan 2023) and perhaps obviously recalls the *Umlinie* or descending fundamental line (e.g., described in Forte and Gilbert 1982, 132).

students to find a stepwise path between them. To wrap things up, I then showed them examples of beginner piano method books as an analogy to the melodic skeleton – reduced melodies that are easy to play due to the oversized noteheads with pitch names that kind of (but maybe not entirely) sound like the original song.

Now is a good opportunity to discuss the pacing of *TPoPM*. As you might have guessed, we did not get through Chapter 16 in one lesson. In fact, it took us three class periods: one to work through melodic reductions, another devoted to the melodic-harmonic divorce, and the final one to discuss pentatonic versus diatonic pitch collections. Here I would like to underscore two things: 1) not every chapter can be covered in a single lesson, and 2) due to the concise and informal tone of the text, you may want to spend extra time helping students understand the topic at hand in preparation for future chapters. For example, I found it important to guide students through the two ways of generating the major pentatonic scale, either by removing scale degrees 4 and 7 as de Clercq suggests, or by stacking fifths until you get a five-pitch collection. The former, at least for my students, is more intuitive to vocalists and other monophonic instrumentalists, while the latter is so for guitarists and bassists because their instruments are typically tuned by fourths.

Once past Section III, Chapters 17–24, the text becomes more akin to a modular experience where instructors can pick and choose topics to suit the needs of their class. That is, though the earlier chapters occasionally build off each other by adding more depth to a subsequent analysis, later chapters are more independent from others so there is essentially little risk to hopping between them. For their midterm, students were required to compose an original song, notate it via a melodic skeleton, drummer's chart, and Nashville number chart, then perform it with their peers. After using the first few weeks to assess their understanding of various topics, I determined that they needed to brush up on their chromatic harmony and formal templates. I then spent approximately four weeks before the midterm covering Chapters 29, 33, 34, 38, 41, 44, and 47 accordingly. However, other instructors may find that their students are sufficiently advanced enough to move well beyond this threshold by the fourth semester.⁴

Additionally, the content sequence of *TPoPM* is flexible enough such that chapters can be easily supplemented with accessible popular-music scholarship. Doing so is

4 The previous theory course in our sequence for popular-music majors, Arranging for Popular Musicians, is taught outside of our theory area and frequently changes instructors, so for me personally it was best to err on the side of caution and spend ample time establishing a strong foundation of concepts and terminology before delving into advanced topics. In future semesters I will likely progress farther into the text.

essentially required to cover important topics such as timbre and texture that are not directly featured. Along these lines, I chose to assign Alyssa Barna's "The Dance Chorus in Recent Top-40 Music" (2020) in tandem with Chapter 45, "Other Song Forms," and David Temperley's "Syncopation in Rock: A Perceptual Perspective" (1999) when covering Chapter 10, "Syncopation." Later, students read excerpts from Chapter 3 in *Nothing but Noise: Timbre and Meaning at the Musical Edge* (Wallmark 2018: 91-117) and completed a timbral analysis of "Black Panther" by Kendrick Lamar (2018). Such activities are necessary, in my opinion, to round out the otherwise strong base that *TPoPM* provides.

In sum, *TPoPM* runs the gamut of core topics relevant to popular music study. Its scope and content likewise easily fill a four-semester sequence and beyond, perhaps supplemented by instructor-provided materials for timbre, texture, and other lessons currently not present in the text. Regrettably, I very much doubt that most instructors will be using the text for an entire four-semester sequence. To my knowledge, only very few programs have a theory core curriculum dedicated to popular music, thus de Clercq's vision for a popular music driven core theory curriculum (2020) will likely go unrealized — especially if building fluency with staff notation continues to be a deciding factor. But if one finds themselves in a position of creative control over their curriculum or is about to teach an advanced undergraduate/graduate class on popular music, the textbook makes for a careful and holistic survey of the style that provides a platform for engaging with related popular-music scholarship.

Assessments

End-of-chapter practice exercises in the main text of *TPoPM* generally fall into four categories: fundamentals drills, rhythmic notation and tempo/meter/feel analysis, performance activities, and developing Nashville number charts and their associated materials. Additionally, there are numerous supplemental materials provided by Rising Software (not covered in this review). The fundamentals drills are the most straightforward of them all, typically requiring students to produce pitch information from two or more bits of context. To keep things fresh, and following the advice of Rogers (2004, 41-44), questions are framed in different ways. In Chapter 19, Exercise 19.1 has students find an altered scale degree (e.g., $\flat\hat{7}$) when given the tonic scale degree (e.g., $\hat{1} = B$). The next set of exercises, 19.2, flips this task by asking for the altered scale degree of a raised/lowered note again given the tonic scale degree. Predictably, 19.3 then requests scale degree 1 given an altered scale degree and pitch (e.g., $A = \flat\hat{3}$).

Though *TPoPM* explicitly does not adopt Western staff notation in its totality, it does use its associated traditional rhythmic notation throughout, and especially in chapters devoted to rhythm, meter, and drum feels. Rhythmic notation is arguably one of the most complex features of staff notation, as it requires relating all the components of rhythmic values (noteheads, stems, flags, ties) to the indicated meter. The ubiquity of 4/4 in popular music reduces the pedagogical load quite considerably, yet its prevalence is also a double-edged sword when discussing compound meter. de Clercq addresses this issue explicitly in Ch. 18 by referencing a song’s “grid” — a nod to DAW notation where onsets are superimposed against a backdrop of equally spaced vertical lines that represent the song’s meter. In reference to the compound drumbeat in “Breakaway” by Kelly Clarkson (2004), de Clercq poses the question, “Could we think about the hi-hat part in ‘Breakaway’ as triplets?” and refutes: “In ... 4/4, a triplet goes *against* the grid of the song. In contrast, the three-part division of the beat in a compound meter *is* the grid.” I found this framing helpful, as all my students work with DAWs in one form or another.

Chapter 6, “Beat Divisions,” is students’ first real foray into the realm of rhythmic notation. Like before, de Clercq carefully walks us through the implications of different notation choices, this time focusing on the kick drum rhythm in “Save your Tears” by the Weeknd (2020) which features onsets on 1, the “and” of 2, and 3. Recognizing that this pattern can be notated in three different ways, he uses the opportunity to warn students of using a quarter-note rest in place of two back-to-back eighth notes because doing so obscures the location of beat 2. This discussion subsequently shapes the end-of-chapter exercises, where students are required to write in the beat location under note onsets (6.1, 6.2), transcribe the rhythms of a vocal melody and align them with the lyrics (6.3), perform the rhythms from 6.1 and 6.3 while conducting with a metronome (6.4), and perform a straightforward backbeat pattern using high and low sounds between the hands (6.5). As with the fundamentals drills, the different activity types help to keep students engaged. They also provide opportunities for further in-class discussion, such as comparing and contrasting the various ways students notated the melody rhythms in Exercise 6.2.

Creating Nashville number charts require students to synthesize multiple aspects of heard musical organization into a single coherent notation format. It is therefore the most time-intensive and conceptually complex assessment activity. As indicated earlier, *TPoPM* thoughtfully scaffolds lower-level activities in preparation — namely, creating drummer’s charts (Chapter 8) and marking changes in harmonic rhythm (Chapter 12). Performance activities, such as playing chord progressions from chord symbols using

smooth voice leading at the keyboard (Chapter 11), also help students understand the harmonic logic and pacing behind their notation choices. For instructors, I also highly recommend reading de Clercq's article "The Nashville Number System: A Framework for Teaching Harmony in Popular Music" (2019) in Volume 33 of this journal well before teaching from the text, as it covers the range of its notational quirks one might need at hand when making charts for songs not in the text. The article also addresses the perceptual and philosophical axioms of the system, which in my experience are crucial to articulate for skeptical students, especially if they are approaching the Nashville number system having previously used Roman numerals.

Once the fundamentals of creating a chart are in place, *TPoPM* continues to stack on additional elements requiring variations in notation practices, including the syncopated "pushed" chords that anticipate a metrically strong beat (Chapter 12.2), inversions (Chapter 25), secondary formal sections (Chapter 32), and partial bars (Chapter 39). However, I should also note that *TPoPM* only occasionally requires a student to create an entire chart. Instead, assessments are often simplified to complement chart creation, like in Chapter 32 "Ending Sections" where students are asked to create a form timeline that displays the progression of sections in a linear fashion with their associated timestamps. When the text does require a full chart, I find it best to choose only one or two exercises so that misconceptions can be discussed in class.

As a final comment on assessment types, I do not necessarily agree with de Clercq's decision to omit tablature and guitar-driven performance assessments from *TpoPM*. Though it is true that contemporary popular music is overwhelmingly created via DAWs (digital audio workstations) and MIDI keyboards, if the goal of the text is to capture the practice of popular music, then students should have a basic understanding of where pitches are located on a standard-tuned guitar and how to voice major and minor chords in barre format. From personal experience, knowing what notes a guitarist was playing (even when they did not) has occasionally saved me from flailing as a gigging bassist. It has also helped me immensely when arranging songs for others. Rather than belabor this point, Example 2 provides samples of what a set of guitar-focused exercises might look like in parallel with Chapters 25, "Triad Inversion," 29, "Seventh Chords," and 41, "Mixture in Major Keys."

Exercise 25.3. Use Nashville numbers to chart the chord progression of the fingerpicked guitar part in the introduction and verses (0:00–0:31) of “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac (1975). At least one chord is inverted.

T	1	3	3	3	0	3	3	1	0	1	0	3	0	3	0
A					0										
B	3	2	3	2	2	0	2	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0

	①		⑤ 7		⑥m		⑤ 7
T	1	3	3	3	0	3	3
A					0		
B	3	2	3	2	2	0	2

Exercise 29.6. Transform the first chord into the indicated chord type using tablature. Provide the correct Nashville number for the new chord given the key.

(a)

Major major, 1 = A

T	7		
A	7		
B	5		

④M7

Major major, 1 = A

T	7	7
A	7	6
B	5	5

(b)

Major minor, 1 = Eb

T		
A	3	
B	3	

③7

Major minor, 1 = Eb

T		4
A	3	3
B	3	3

Exercise 41.4. Create a partial Nashville number chart for the introduction (0:00–0:33) of “Say It Isn’t So” by Hall & Oates (1983). Listen carefully for chordal sevenths. Then, use tablature to show how you might voice the chords from this section using standard tuning. The root of the chord should be the lowest note of your chord shape.

In) 1^{M7} — b3^{M7} —
 1^{M7} — b3^{M7} —
 1^{M7} — b3^{M7} —
 1^{M7} — b3^{M7} —

T		
A		
B		

T	6	9
A	6	9
B	5	8

Example 2

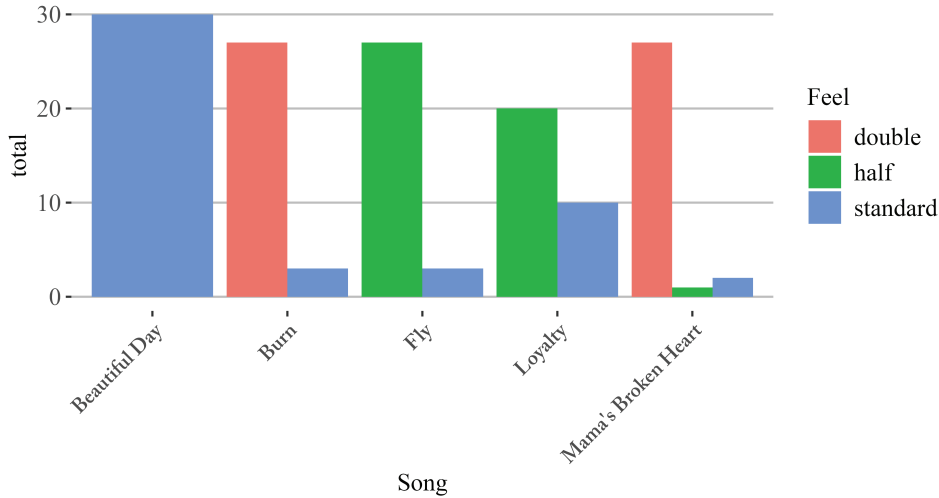
Exercises featuring guitar notation skills to supplement *TPoPM*.

Variability, perception, and experience

As a traditional theory curriculum progresses, assessments typically evolve from a strict binary of correct and incorrect answers to a continuum of appropriate responses. Consider, for instance, sonata form analysis in a hypothetical Theory 3 course, where students can make a case for which cadence best qualifies as the EEC. In my experience, teaching from *TPoPM* requires the flexibility common to third-semester theory and onward across nearly all its chapters. For any given lesson, instructors should be prepared to acknowledge, discuss, and ultimately accept variability in student responses when it comes to a core content area such tempo and backbeat feels. Such variability is a critical feature of popular music, one that cannot be ignored, due in part to the rich relational nature of practice, perception, and genre-specific paradigms. In the following sections, I outline some perceptual and practice-driven reasons for *why* an instructor can expect variable student responses. My goal is not to advocate for one interpretation over the other, but rather to point to literature that supports variability as an innate feature of popular music — a variability that is not always present in other music theory teaching scenarios.

Chapter 20 “Drum Feels in 4/4” was one such instance, where I was slightly surprised by the variability in student responses to Exercise 20.1. I had arbitrarily assigned exercises d–h, requiring students to provide the BPM and drum feel for sections of the songs listed in Example 3. Students were mostly consistent amongst themselves for “Beautiful Day” by U2, “Burn” by Rancid, “Fly” by Nicki Minaj ft. Beyoncé, and “Mama’s Broken Heart” by Miranda Lambert. On the other hand, “Loyalty” by Kendrick Lamar ft. Rihanna was more divisive, where roughly 2/3 of the class heard the backbeat in half time, while the other 1/3 heard it as standard.

Chapter 20 juxtaposes different backbeat feels against the parameters of tempo and kick/snare patterning. Tempo is presented as a flexible threshold in parallel with de Clercq 2016. It is a variable feature but listener responses typical fall between the threshold of 80–140 BPM. Any higher or lower values result in greater variability, with some listeners preferring to subdivide or double the tempo so that it falls within the said threshold. Backbeat patterns are meanwhile presented in three categories: standard, half, and double time. Standard drum feels have two bass/snare alternating articulations within a measure, half-time feels have one, and double-time feels have four alternations or simultaneous articulations. These feels, de Clercq idealizes, should be treated as independent of tempo, even though he implies this is often easier said than done. Other cited influences on perceived tempo are harmonic rhythm and danceability.



Example 3

Student assessments of drum feel in *The Practice of Popular Music*, Exercise 20.1, songs d–h.

Preferred tempo is very much tied to embodied experiences like dancing and can often be observed in voluntary and involuntary bodily movements (Vroegh 2021; Zelechowska, Sanchez, and Jensenius 2024). Head movements, for instance, are an empirically verified reliable indicator of listener entrainment, especially in live-performance contexts (Swarbrick et al. 2019). Nevertheless, the same research does little to affirm the perceptual influence of perceived drum feels on preferred tempo because feels are not analogous to tempo perception in all contexts. Case in point, my students heard “Burn” by Rancid in a double-time feel but reported an average BPM of 138 – the BPM associated with a “standard” drum feel. As such, I again agree with de Clercq in his decision to distinguish tempo from drum feel, especially in light of this evidence.

Returning to perceived drum feel in “Loyalty,” one of my students is a full-time DJ who performs under the stage name MUCCI.⁵ He spends his evenings and weekends playing in various venues across the city and is deeply familiar with contemporary popular music, especially regarding Top 40 pop and hip-hop hits. With his permission, here’s his unedited take on the drum feel in “Loyalty”:

5 <https://mucci.live/>

Out of all of those tracks we had to analyze, Loyalty is the one I'm familiar with the most. Before I started making EDM, I used to produce hip-hop beats. It's so common for a trap kick rhythm and the snare/clap to always be on beat 3. To me, for hip hop tracks, that's the "normal" drum feel. When talking about this, the content we covered in class applies heavily to most Pop (not popular) music and EDM & House music. I think a normal vs double time vs half time drum feel is subjective—the "normal" is different from genre to genre! (eg. House music, a "normal" feel would be snare/claps on 2 & 4, but with hip hop and trap music, a "normal" feel would be snare/claps on beat 3.)

Imagine this—You're listening to that song Loyalty by Kendrick, but the clap is on 2 and 4. It COMPLETELY changes the whole energy and vibe of the track. Kendrick is known for his fast style of rapping, so to me, that "normal" drum feel would make the whole energy of the track sound double time. I do agree that it can be subjective for something like this and I can see why many other students said that this song has a half-time feel, but I overall agree with my original answer, and I hope this helps!

MUCCI's analysis points to genre as the determining factor for drum feels. In essence, his assessment is that while de Clercq's generalizations might best apply to Top 40 pop, EDM, and house music, drum feels do not necessarily function the same way in hip hop and trap music. What is "normal" or "standard" for the former is not so for the latter.⁶

I am less interested in arriving at a "correct" answer for the drum feel in "Loyalty." Such discussions, though fun, are rarely productive outside of pedagogical contexts and in the absence of music-perceptual methods of operationalization. More to the point, I trust this student's judgment because of his experience and my lack thereof. For me personally, hip-hop tracks make up only a small portion of my regular rotation. I am also not a hip-hop scholar. *TPoPM* therefore presents a novel situation where students may very well be more familiar with the repertoire than the instructor. Our job, then, is to draw on our own general but deep understanding of musical organization, and its associated analytical techniques, to push our students to engage at a similarly deep level with the style at hand while simultaneously respecting its idioms.

6 This is not a novel concept in music theory. Meyer, in *Style and Music* (1997), observes that "our understanding, and hence our interpretation, of an event depends not only on its contextual present, but on the implications that the event is thought to have had for subsequent events" (72). Gjerdingen (1996), too, in some sense anticipated the duplicity of structural features in popular music, noting "Charting the exact musical knowledge of modern listeners would be a daunting task. Musics from popular culture, musics from the near and distant past, and musics from various ethnic regions coexist today in a vast commercial marketplace of sound" (380). It seems foolish, then, to not allow exceptions to student conceptions in the multicultural context of popular music.

Final thoughts

The Practice of Popular Music is breath of fresh air in an age where many programs are opting out of textbooks altogether. Its contents represent a career-long synthesis of popular music theoretical-empirical analysis couched in 10+ years of teaching popular-music majors. It should thus come as no surprise that it meets the promise of its title — an approach that is genuinely grounded in the practice of popular music. Any instructor choosing to include popular music in their curriculum, even in a piecemeal fashion, or simply aiming to cultivate student sensitivity to style-specific methods of music analysis, would do well to adopt the text. Yes, at times the prose does come off as slightly dogmatic, even as the author signals a willingness to humor other interpretations, but anyone familiar with de Clercq's scholarship will find his perspectives unsurprising. If anything, this minor fault is perhaps a byproduct of the informal narrative format, which I and my students found helpful in nearly all cases. Additionally, in the context of discipline-wide concerns about canonization, the text undercuts music theory's previous focus on the classic rock canon by featuring a swath of post-millennial songs across a wide variety of genres including Top 40 pop, folk, country, alternative rock, and hip hop. Such a focus typically elevates the contributions of non-white and non-male artists — another critical concern to our discipline. (Ewell 2020, Palfy and Gilson 2018, Shea et al. 2024)

I suspect more than a few instructors will feel apprehensive about their own popular-music analysis skills. Though I consider myself a popular-music scholar, I was admittedly anxious about leading a class full of majors through songs that they potentially have spent more time with, even if only casually. My advice when teaching from *The Practice of Popular Music* therefore is to lean into the novelty. Take the time to create your own Nashville number charts for all the exercises you assign even though it might not be necessary for all lessons. Play through the voice-leading exercises at the keyboard. Record yourself performing the backbeats. Then, during class, challenge yourself to create charts in real time in front of the students without referring to your own. You might be surprised at how good you will get at listening back to the previous hypermeasures.⁷ Sure, you might miss a phrase extension or fail

⁷ Notating hypermeasures in real time feels extremely similar to Karpinski's (2000) method of dictation, which I also adopt in my aural skills curriculum. In dictation, students sing back the melody on a neutral syllable like "loo" while the instructor makes three passes to notate the meter, rhythmic durations, and solfege syllables before. Likewise, for charts, I typically make at least two passes while listening along with students: one for the hypermeasures and phrase lengths, and another for the harmonic rhythm.

to demarcate a four-measure link, but your students will almost surely let you know. By doing so, you will have created an opportunity for a productive discussion about the rich nuances of a style that, in the public's mind, is often regarded as overly simple. More importantly, the act of creating a Nashville number chart simulates real-world performance practices, and this is an opportunity few and far between in mainstream music theory pedagogy.

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