

Conference Report: Pedagogy into Practice: Teaching Music Theory in the Twenty-First Century (Santa Barbara, California, May 23–25, 2019)

SCOTT DIRKSE, BAKERSFIELD COLLEGE

On May 23–25, 2019, the second “Pedagogy into Practice: Teaching Music Theory in the Twenty-First Century” conference took place in Santa Barbara, California. Sponsored by the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy (home of the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*), this conference was a follow-up to the inaugural 2017 program at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee. With the recent postponement of the annual Teaching Music History Conference, it was encouraging to see the vitality of pedagogy research and discourse from our sister discipline. Chaired by Rebecca Jemian, the program committee (Timothy Chenette, Bryn Hughes, Rachel Mitchell, Susan Piagentini, Derek Remeš, and Jena Root) reviewed almost one hundred proposals and curated a vibrant program featuring thirty papers, ten workshops, two panels, twenty-seven posters, and three keynote presentations.

The papers covered a wide range of topics and were grouped into the following panels: Pedagogy and Extensions of Music Theory, Aural Skills, Diversifying the Curriculum, Global Pedagogy, Writing, Addressing the Range of Students, Fundamentals and Inclusivity, Expanding Our Approach, and Models for Learning.¹ While a full review of the papers is not possible here, several themes permeated the discussions, including assessment, inclusivity, and relevance.

Many papers proposed new strategies for accommodating a changing student population that is not only entering college with a different set of musical skills and cultural experiences than previous generations, but also requiring different collegiate instruction to succeed as twenty-first-century musicians. For example, in “From Design to Implementation: Creating Inclusive Assessments within the Music Theory Classroom,” Stefanie Bilidas and Zachary Lloyd explained how language, syntax, and semantic choices on assessments may unintentionally privilege certain students, and they showed how educators

1. See <https://jmtpp.appstate.edu/conference/conference-abstracts> for abstracts of all conference presentations.

can better construct questions to reflect the diversity of experiences present in the classroom. Jane Piper Clendinning discussed the Mathematics and Music Theory Project at Florida State University in “Mathematics and Music Theory: Assisting Music Theory Students with Math-Related Learning Disabilities.” She and her music and psychology colleagues (Nancy Rogers, Colleen Ganley, and Sara Hart) investigated the relationship between mathematical and musical abilities in an effort to develop a predictive screening tool that may provide early identification of students likely to struggle with music theory.

Conference attendees had the opportunity to engage more deeply with the presented material in a set of ten interactive workshop sessions. Several of these workshops focused on strategies for teaching particular skills in the aural skills classroom, such as Jana Millar’s sketching technique for melodic analysis and Nathan Baker’s use of galant schemas to teach counterpoint, harmony, and voice leading. Other workshops addressed more general pedagogical concerns: Leigh VanHandel provided strategies for assisting students with memory deficits, and Elizabeth West Marvin, Molly Murdock, and Jane Piper Clendinning showed how to find and include more music by women in the theory classroom.

Both of the panel sessions offered at the conference focused on redesigning core theory requirements to offer more flexibility and choice to undergraduates. In “Diversifying the Theory Curriculum: How to Open Multiple Pathways through the Theory Core,” Andrew Gades, Megan Lavengood, and Crystal Peebles discussed the merits of a modular approach to theory course selection from the perspectives of a state institution, liberal arts college, and conservatory, respectively. Greg McCandless, Jennifer Sondgrass, and Andrew Hannon showed how their new curricular approach at Appalachian State University allows students to select theory coursework based on their future professional needs in “From Core to Cores: Curricular Reform toward Degree- and Student-Specific Theory Coursework.”

One highlight of the conference was the Friday poster session, featuring twenty-seven posters on the topics of technology, performance skills, theory games, curriculum and learning, and musical design. Conference organizers gave this session its own featured time slot, with no competing concurrent activities. As a result, the session was well attended and full of vibrant dialogue.

Each day of the conference featured a keynote address. In “Public Music Theory and Pedagogy,” J. Daniel Jenkins highlighted his work bringing music theory instruction to inmates at Lee Correctional Institution, South Carolina’s largest maximum-security prison. Attendees of Daniel B. Stevens’s “Never Twice the Same: Listening and Improvisation” exercised their creativity in a series of small group improvisational challenges. Cynthia I. Gonzales showed how she applies music learning software in her aural skills classroom in “SmartMusic: Removing the ‘Fear Factor’ from Sight Singing and Aural Skills.”

Attendees convened for a final “Coda” session at the conclusion of the conference. Program chair Rebecca Jemian first asked everyone to reflect on their conference experience and discuss takeaways for their classrooms. Participants tossed a Catchbox throwable microphone around the auditorium, sharing the many valuable ideas and strategies they gleaned from their time in Santa Barbara. Jemian also asked attendees to identify any overlooked areas of music theory pedagogy discourse that were missing from the conference. This final query elicited several important topics to which we as music history pedagogues could also devote more attention, including entrance exam objectives, graduate student pedagogy, and community college outreach.

Thanks to the efforts of directors Steve Laitz and Jenny Snodgrass at the Center for Music Theory Pedagogy, hosts Ben Levy and Janet Bourne at UC Santa Barbara, and the conference program committee, the second biennial Pedagogy into Practice conference offered a welcoming and collaborative venue for the advancement of research and dialogue in the field of music theory pedagogy. After experiencing three days of stimulating pedagogical discourse on a variety of musical topics, it is clear that the fields of music theory pedagogy and music history pedagogy have a lot to offer each other. One way to promote a greater interchange of ideas and collaboration would be a future joint pedagogy conference for teachers of both history and theory. Pedagogues in both areas care deeply about two central issues—listening and learning—and greater dialogue between our disciplines would undoubtedly be mutually beneficial.