Studying the Fish and/or the Water?

A Discussion About the Past, Present, and Future of Popular Music Theory in Europe and the U.S.

Ralf von Appen, Trevor de Clercq, Anne Danielsen, Stephanie DeLane Doktor, Allan Moore

SCHLAGWORTE/KEYWORDS: disciplinary history; disciplinary self-reflection; Fachgeschichte; fachliche Selbstreflexion; interdisciplinary music theory; interdisziplinäre Musiktheorie; Popular Music Studies; Popularmusikforschung

Ralf von Appen (RvA)

Welcome everyone![1] I'm very glad that you are taking the time to be here! To start off, I'd like to ask you to briefly introduce yourselves – and also to reflect on whether you consider yourselves music theorists. Trevor, can you begin?

Trevor de Clercq (TdC)

So, my name is Trevor de Clercq. I teach at Middle Tennessee State University in the Department of Recording Industry. I'm a professor there and I've taught there for 13 years. I teach courses in musicianship and also in audio theory, sound recording, music production, as well as sound synthesis, midi sequencing, and digital editing and mixing.

And in terms of whether I consider myself a music theorist, I mean, I do have a Ph.D. in music theory, so I think I have to consider myself a music theorist in that regard. I've published a lot in journals that are explicitly music theory journals, such as the *Music Theory Spectrum*, and *Music Theory Online*, and *Journal of Music Theory*, so by all definitions, I would be a music theorist. Ironically, though, my job is not in a department of music. We have a Department of Music at MTSU but I'm not part it. As a result, a lot of what I teach is not music theory, and that's because of the needs of my department, which is a Department of Recording Industry. There's a schism at MTSU with regard to popular music and more traditional musical styles, and that calls into question whether I'm a traditional music theorist, compared to other people in America, but there may be similar things in Europe that parallel my situation.

Anne Danielsen (AD)

In Norway and in Scandinavia, we don't have a separate music theory education or program. So, I consider myself a musicologist. I was trained as a musicologist, and musicology in Norway is a quite broad discipline. It has become broader and broader over the

1 This conversation took place via Zoom on 11 June 2025. It was conceived and moderated by Ralf von Appen and has been slightly edited for publication.

years. So, music theory is a part of my education and part of what I do. But music theory has always been closely connected with more interpretive, textual, and contextual analysis. Ethnomusicology, popular music studies, historical musicology and music theory are integrated within our program and how musicology is defined in Norway and also in Sweden and Denmark. So, yes, I think for North Americans, I'm considered kind of a music theorist. I've also published in music theory journals, but also in popular music journals and journals in the field of music cognition and auditory perception. And that's because I've been broadening my competence in the direction of music perception and cognition in recent years.

RvA

But as a leading scholar in rhythm research, would you think that the work you do is basically music theoretical? Or would you say it's musicological?

AD

Well, music theory hasn't traditionally been very concerned with contextual aspects. But I think we understand music theory differently in different parts of the world. In the U.S., it's a very specific kind of training. You are either a music theorist, or an ethnomusicologist, or a historical musicologist. That's not the case in Norway. I work on rhythm and groove, and part of that falls under music theory, but it also involves aesthetic and cultural perspectives, as well as aspects related to perception and cognition. Sometimes I think that I've established my own multidisciplinary field of rhythm and groove research.[2] But it aligns quite well with how musicology is understood in Norway.

Allan F. Moore (AM)

I'm Allan Moore. I'm a professor emeritus at University of Surrey, but I finished there nearly 10 years ago, so my perspective is warped. I'm not a music theorist, but one of the assumptions behind the question is that we can divide up these activities we do in relation to music in fairly well-framed ways. And I've never managed to do that. I think of myself simply as a musical thinker. That's what I do with and around and because of music. And some of it has theoretical tones, some of it is more historical, some of it is more analytical. It depends on what the issue is that grabs me. So, I worry about "what is theory?" Yeah, I worry about "what is popular music." I think all of these things are problematic and so that could be fun. These days, I'm a practitioner, I compose, I paint, and I carve. I don't write anymore – or try not to.

RvA

But wasn't *Song Means*[3] aimed at putting together a theory of popular music? Of how we find meaning?

2 The first publication emerging from this multidisciplinary work on rhythm and groove was the anthology *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Danielsen 2010).

3 Moore 2012b.

AM

Ah, yes, but I call that a methodology. I think there's a difference between methodology and theory. A methodology is how you go about things. A theory is to do with how you assume things hang together. And I'm not sure things do hang together. You have to maneuver a way through. And that's what I was trying to do there.

Stephanie DeLane Doktor (SD)

My name is Steph Doktor. I'm an Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Temple University in Philadelphia. I've been there for three years, so just finished my third-year review and go up for tenure in three years. I teach the undergraduate part of the music theory curriculum, and I was hired to redesign it from the perspective of somebody not traditionally trained in music theory, and also someone who works on issues of inequality and inclusion in their research. I teach undergraduate and graduate courses that are required for students, but my *research* is definitely more historical oriented. I was actually trained by a historian, not a musicologist, and I got my Ph.D. at the University of Virginia, in Critical and Comparative Studies, which was partly created to blur the boundaries between the disciplines. So, it didn't really always matter who you studied with. A lot of people studied with Fred Maus, but they are ethnomusicologists or musicologists, even though he's a trained theorist. There was a lot of blurring of the boundaries in really productive ways that I hope my research reflects as well.

I *want* to be a music theorist. *So bad!* I want music theorists to accept me. And I've always wanted to be a music theorist. I think because I didn't get the mentorship I wanted I ended up gravitating towards working with musicologists, it's like a kind of unfulfilled dream. Well, now it's a fulfilled dream because I have a job in it, but still… I just went to the TOPS conference, the Timber Conference at McGill,[3] and I still think they don't treat me like a music theorist because I didn't go to Eastman, I didn't go to Yale. And the way that I talk about music is different than what a lot of people do. 50% of the research is very theoretical and analytical, but I'm also deeply concerned about what that has to say about culture and issues of inequality. So, I am always wanting to be a music theorist, but will never be that, I guess.

RvA

What I learned from your answers is that in Europe, we don't really have this distinction. But in the U.S., where this distinction used to be very clear, as you said, the boundaries are now being blurred as well. We have two cases here of US scholars who would not consider themselves music theorists – or perhaps would see themselves as music theorists, but not without complications. So, who would you consider *prototypical* popular music theorists in the U.S., Steph and Trevor?

3 *Timbre and Orchestration in Popular Song* (TOPS), 5–7 June 2025, see https://www.mcgill.ca/tops2025/ (3 July 2025).

TdC

I trained with John Covach. But then the irony is that John Covach who I think was one of the leading voices for popular music theory in America, at this point, is probably most famous for his History of Rock book.[4] So, you know, to consider even him a pure music theorist of popular music is itself also problematic. Because he's really steeped in history and teaches history, more than he does music theory courses. So even somebody who's the traditional, prototypical popular music theorist has some issues with that. David Temperley is really strong, I think, and he was my advisor as a Ph.D. in Popular Music Studies. But, of course, he does more than just popular music. I think he's a music theorist, first and foremost, and studies all types of styles, one of which is popular music. So those are two examples. I can't come up with someone who's only a popular music theorist and just does that. Well, that's not true, Christopher Doll and Brad Osborn kind of fall into that category, but there's a lot of people that really push the boundaries of what that might be. Steph, what do you think?

SD

I was going to say, Trevor! Well, it's just funny to hear everyone on this call say that, because I assign all of you and reference all of you in my classes. So, I think of you all as, whether you like it or not, as music theorists. And I was not drawing on any of your research as much when I had a pretty straightforward musicology job.

RvA

Allan and Anne, we first met at a summer school that we called "Methods of Popular Music Analysis."[5] Where do you see the difference between music theory and music analysis?

AM

Well, music theory is the general, and music analysis is the particular. That seems to me to be the balance, and so the two are interrelated. You can't separate them. And that's what was interesting to me in the way Steph and Trevor were talking. When using the term "music theory," I was thinking: well, you also mean analysis, you don't separate the two. But because we've got two words, I think, and because we don't recognize the boundary in the UK and in Europe generally, we think that music theory and music analysis are two things that have to remain, have to be joined, whereas they're actually not distinct, as far as I can see. As I say, one tends towards the general rule and one tends more towards the particular.

AD

That's how it's been used here as well, music analysis, pretty close, I think, to what you would call music theory in the U.S. context. You analyze something in particular, you

4 Covach/Flory 2006.

5 Five-Day International Summer School *Methods of Popular Music Analysis* of the *Arbeitskreis Studium Populäre Musik* (ASPM, nowadays GFPM) at the University of Osnabrueck in September 2011.

really dig into a work or a song. Whereas music theory – we use that term here as well – is more general. It's actually *satslære*, or what you would call, in the classical field, Schenker analysis or something. It comes from the German term *Satzlehre*. That's what we call music theory in my context. You learn counterpoint or general rules, whereas analysis is about digging into one particular musical work or song.

RvA

When we put together the book that came out of the summer school, *Song Interpretation in 21st Century Popular Music*,[6] our aim was to do something that hadn't been done before: to collect analyses of specific songs. We wondered why this had never really happened. It only occurred to me later that music theorists would not typically publish analyses of a single song. So, in *Music Theory Online*, you probably find none, or only very few, papers offering in-depth analysis of just one song. Because the aim of music theory may not be to focus on the specific – the word "theory" implies a search for the general, for understanding how popular music works in a broader sense. Would you agree?

AD

No, well, I've actually had some experiences with *Music Theory Online* where we submitted work that was too general. They didn't want it because we didn't have one specific song or particular work that we digged into. Of course, you also want some more general theoretical contributions, I guess. But in our case, the paper was rejected because it didn't include a detailed analysis of a specific song.

RvA

Trevor, have you written about one specific song?

TdC

I did, but it was in the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, so maybe that's not a good example.[7] I tend to not do music analysis, but there are music theorists in the U.S. who primarily do music analysis – I tend to do more theoretical stuff.

But I do think when we talk about what music theory actually is – that kind of broad question – I just think that term can mean so many things in different contexts. On some level, it's exactly what Allan said: There's this more general notion of music theory, and then there's analysis which is more specific – and those are kind of complements. But at the same time, music theory is this broader rubric, under which both the general and the analytical forms fall. In the U.S., I think "music theory" is not really the right label for what people who get those degrees actually do. I mean, the reason someone gets a music theory degree in the U.S. is because they want to teach, as Anne said, counterpoint, Schenkerian analysis, sight singing, rhythmic dictation – all those skills. It's really a skills-

6 Appen et al. (Eds.) 2015.

7 De Clercq 2016.The *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* turned into *Music Theory and Analysis* after the submission of the paper.

based curriculum that you're teaching, part writing for example. It ends up at higher levels, you maybe will teach more analytical stuff. But it's primarily music skills and techniques. And then, you theorize about those as a researcher, or analyze to inform your understanding of those techniques. But it's all coming back to the technical stuff.

The term "music theory," I think, just has many different meanings, for better or for worse.

SD

Well, it's so funny, Anne, that you said that – because when I've submitted to the Society for Music Theory conference, I've tried to present some broader generalizations about queerness and sound, and it hasn't been accepted. And I wonder if that's why. I just wrote a 21,000-word article on one song – but it is in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*.[8] So, yeah, it's kind of the set distinction that Allan is talking about: where it's not music theory, but it's a hell of a lot of music analysis.

RvA

And then there's also been the term "popular musicology." I think it emerged in Britain about 20 years ago. Allan, do you have more context on where that term comes from or how it developed?

AM

Yeah, because in the UK, at that time popular music studies was a form of cultural studies. So, we needed something else that distinguished what we were trying to do, which was to actually deal with the notes and the sounds. That's where that term came from. I don't think we interrogated it at all. It was just a good idea.

RvA

And would that be a broader term than popular music theory? Or theory of popular music?

AM

Well, I think so. What was strong about the popular music work that was being done was its cultural questioning. It was contextually very strong and it dealt with audiences but it ignored the music. All we were trying to do was to complete the circle rather than to just look at the music. In the UK, I think we've always found it rather strange – though I don't think it's this like this anymore – that music theory articles never used to talk about context. I mean: What are you doing? Where are you starting from? It's as if music was a little bubble and you didn't need to do anything else other than just investigate the bubble. I think that's always been different in the UK. I'm not sure that it still is.

8 Doktor 2024.

RvA

Allan, you had this brilliant quote in your keynote speech at the Liverpool conference[9] a couple of years ago – where you described the fish in the aquarium as the text, and the water as the context. I can't recall the exact wording – do you remember it?

AM

I reviewed Chris Rojek's book,[10] where he made some comment about how musicologists look at the fish without the water. And I said: well, the problem is that he's writing about the water and doesn't know there's any fish there. That was the context – I can't remember exactly what I said.

RvA

But that would have been my next question: What it the relationship between popular music theory and popular music studies? Is the divide really so stark that the people in popular music studies don't write about the actual sounds?

AM

I think these are just these are just labels, they're bureaucratic labels, different institutions insist on different labels. I don't think there's a fundamental difference between these things. It's all a case of whether or not you deal with music as an experience or music as something external. That seems to me to be the fundamental thing. By and large, I read music theorists as dealing with music as a sort of abstract game, and I read analysts as dealing with music as something that's experiential. To me, that's the key dividing line. I can't any longer think about popular music studies as separate from music studies, because popular music is a term that only exists in the academy. It doesn't exist anywhere else. It's not a thing. It's an artificial term that we have developed in order to be able to understand what we're trying to do. But it has no real bite outside the academy. Nobody else knows what "popular music" is.

RvA

Well, people do use the term "popular music" in English, but the German *Popularmusik* is really a term that nobody outside of academia would ever use. It's a translation that has no equivalent in our everyday language. We'd talk about "Popmusik," but not "Popularmusik." It feels like a made-up word.

AM

Well, I think it comes from the origin of IASPM.[11] They were trying to find a way of demarcating what it was that needed studying and wasn't... You know, "jazz" doesn't work,

9 *PopMAC, International Conference on Analyzing Popular Music*, University of Liverpool, 2–4 July 2013.

10 Moore 2012a.

11 International Association for the Study of Popular Music, founded in 1981, see https://www.iaspm.net/welcome/ (3 July 2025).

"rock" doesn't work. Any of these other terms don't work. "Popular music" seemed to cover it all, but it was an artificial term.

RvA

Okay, then let's talk about the parameters of music that we research – about changes in the field, and how different parameters have become more important. I think we can say that melody, pitch, and harmony have traditionally been at the center of popular music theory. But this has opened up, first, perhaps, to rhythm, and more recently to timbre, sound, and voice. And now, in this Special Issue, there's also a paper about performance aspects. So how do you experience the role of different parameters, and perhaps a hierarchy between them?

AD

Well, it's interesting because it's been a development, as you say, within the field. The focus on melody, pitch and harmony is actually coming from the field of classical music. I think many of the popular music scholars that try to make their way into musicology, doing work on popular music, they had to focus or analyze the same musical aspects that were important in the field as a whole, in more traditional musicology. They also felt they had to pick the songs or works that were interesting when you were looking at music through that lens. It constrained what kind of music was studied. Of course, there were some styles, some popular music traditions where there was more to say about those parameters. Even Middleton, in his 1990 *Studying Popular Music*[12] pointed to the need to expand the field – to include those aspects that are probably the most important in at least many popular music styles: sound, timbre, microrhythm – elements that are not captured by notation. He coined this term, "notation centered analysis." It's been a very exciting development the last decades. I mean, the whole field of music production, where I've also been involved. And rhythm and groove has emerged as a separate field in itself, and also timbre research. The focus on melody, pitch and harmony didn't come from nowhere. It was something that we inherited, so to speak, from the more traditional musicology.

RvA

Steph, as the youngest among us, how do you see this development, and which parameters are you focusing on in your work?

SD

I was just thinking about what Anne was saying. There are some racialized implications behind that, as you've already argued in some of your research. Popular music studies – trying to validate itself within the academy – had to use these means that were already valued, but these means, these methods were developed around classical music. And that was white music, right? It was this tradition that sort of cohered around whiteness and white supremacy. So a lot of the features that really matter to non-white music, like tim-

12 Middleton 1990.

bre, like microrhythm, got ignored. And it's really lovely that I don't have to fight for their inclusion. That's already happened. It's totally normal for me to give a talk on microrhythm. There's a multi-million-dollar research initiative in Canada on timbre and orchestration, which is so cool. It's really nice that I can build off of that work that's already been done and not have to fight for it to be included. That said, within the academy, in the music theory sequence, it's still not included. So I do feel like I'm trying really hard to say: we should have units where we teach students about microtiming, about timbre, and about different ways to analyze and make sense of these elements. But that hasn't quite happened yet. And I'm hoping that will start to change. I've just started to include it in my theory sequence – whether or not my more senior colleagues appreciate it, or even know that I'm doing that. I'm just sneaking it in because I know the students love it. These are the really meaningful elements to their experience. They're all listening to popular music. And yet we teach four semesters – two full years of theory, and we don't talk about timbre? That is insane. The great thing is, I have research I can bring into the classroom, which is so nice. Because that work's already been done. So I can say: look at what people are doing – these parameters, secondary parameters, so to speak, they're very meaningful. I feel like as a younger scholar, I've got it a little easy. I don't have to fight so hard for these things to be included. But I'm still working to include them in the classroom.

RvA

You've just called them secondary parameters. So there is a hierarchy?

SD

Well, I'm thinking about Leonard Meyer, isn't that his work?[13] There's definitely a hierarchy. I think, at least in the United States, that hierarchy sometimes is perceived in a way that timbre studies or microtiming studies are seen as less rigorous – more experimental, more about feeling. There's certainly a gendered component there, too. They're seen as secondary in the sense that they're considered more valuable in musics that are often derided for their commercialism instead of more serious or artistic music, which is more pitch centric. But I think that hierarchy is changing because of the changes in the institution and the research that's being done. I hope it is!

AD

I think that within the field of music theory, the traditional structural aspects have been privileged. Melody, rhythm, harmony, those are the primary. And the rest is like, more performative or less rigorous, like more up to the performers, less systematic. I guess there is something there that's still circulating.

RvA

So how do you see the relationship between traditional music theory and popular music theory? Could they learn from each other? Should they learn from our expansion of ana-

13 Meyer 1983.

lytical parameters – and perhaps also from our choice of repertoire? And on the other hand: how important is what's happening in traditional music theory for your work? Do you follow the journals in that field to draw on theories that might be useful for popular music?

AD

If I can try to answer the first question – I think, actually, we've seen what's been called a performative turn, at least here, and I think in Europe in general. There's been growing interest in performance, also within research primarily focused on classical music. There was this project in the UK, the CHARM Project,[14] which was about performative aspects of classical music. Perhaps you will not get those people to admit that they were inspired by popular music studies. But I think actually the focus on performative aspects within the field of popular music studies might have had some influence.

AM

It did, yeah, it did!

RvA

Trevor and Steph, how do you see this development in the U.S.?

TdC

I've just been thinking about what Steph said earlier, and reflecting on my own thoughts on the issue of timbre and how that relates to music theory. It's really a question I've been struggling with. Just to recap the way my department is structured: it's a department that primarily teaches audio engineering. And so we have courses on audio fundamentals, on sound synthesis, on microphone techniques, on mixing techniques, signal processing, dynamics processing, equalization. Basically, the entire curriculum is about timbre and how timbre affects sounds, and how you manipulate sounds through timbre. I teach some of those courses, but I also teach this little bit of music theory with rhythm and pitch. It's almost the opposite of the way a music department is structured, where you have all this work on pitch and rhythm and maybe just a little – or maybe none – on timbre. And I wonder if a music theorist is supposed to cover all of this, all this audio engineering and sound recording, timbre work, and be an expert and teach that as well? And also still do all the traditional areas, pitch, rhythm, and form and those kind of things? I wonder if the issue is not that we need to put more timbre into music theory, in terms of teachers, but simply to hire audio engineers and sound recording experts and mixers and those kind of folks to teach that to our undergraduate students. Maybe music theory is a wrong term for what the people do over here. They teach pitch and rhythm and music techniques. That would be another category of person.

In California, there's a difference in the way music theory is taught. On the East Coast, I think it's people who have degrees in music theory teaching music techniques. But in

14 Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Center for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM), established in 2004. See https://charm.rhul.ac.uk/index.html (3 July 2025).

California, it's usually the composers who teach music theory. There's really not such a thing as a "music theorist" on the West Coast. I mean, there *are* music theorists on the West Coast, but that's a kind of a different system. Even within America, there's contrast: you have the composers – or songwriters, in a popular music context – who are writing melodies and harmonies, and they're teaching those techniques. And then you have the audio engineers, who are teaching timbre and using timbre. And maybe they're all music theorists in the sense that they're doing research on theories of how these things work. But maybe music theory, as a field itself, shouldn't exist as a standalone field, because it's really just something that encompasses all fields. And maybe the European model, where music theory always has a component of musicology and everything is that kind of global is a better model.

RvA

So it seems that music theory is very closely linked to practical aspects. You're teaching how to *do* something, right? Especially the audio engineering people who are training students to become record producers. When we go back to Aristotle's definition of theory, for him the highest state a human being can reach is that of a theorist. And that's not about *doing* something at all, it's about understanding the world. It's about grasping the essence of things and to understand, regarding music, how music works – not about how someone should compose a certain piece, or how to EQ a track. So we call it "theory," but very often, at our universities at least, it's actually oriented toward practice, right?

TdC

Yeah, I would agree with that.

RvA

So, Trevor, when we met in Nashville last week, we talked about the opening up of music theory in the U.S. and that includes not just different analytical parameters, but also different repertoire. How would you describe the current situation in the U.S.? What does this "opening up" actually mean, and how does it manifest itself – in conferences, in journals? What exactly is being opened up? And is this a process that's only happening now, or has it already been underway for the past decade, as Steph suggested?

TdC

I just came back from a workshop at NYU. It was a three-day workshop on broadening the curriculum for music theory studies.[15] I gave a little workshop on popular music and related topics. But there were workshops on Japanese song, on Korean music, on Turkish music, the whole gamut of possible global musics that maybe should exist within a music theory curriculum. Historically, that music theory curriculum was structured primarily

15 Transitions: A Pedagogy Workshop for Evolving Music Theory Curricula, 6–8 June 2025 at NYU Steinhardt, New York, see https://societymusictheory.org/events/transitions-pedagogy-workshop-evolving-music-theory-curricula-2025 (3 July 2025).

around classical music. Obviously, because those curriculums were kind of driven by professors at Eastman or at Florida State, who are primarily teaching cello and oboe players who were going, at least historically, to be in a concert career. So that music theory would explain those styles. But, of course, as Steph said, those styles are heavily, at least traditionally, oriented around the music of white men. Obviously, we need more diversity in the repertoire.

But it becomes a really thorny situation. Because, even after taking a workshop on Turkish music, I wouldn't consider myself enough of an expert on Turkish music now to go teach even a module on Turkish music. It's just too foreign to me. It starts to beg the question again. I mentioned that silo of music theory or music techniques, and then the silo of audio engineering. But there's another silo of ethnomusicology. How much is music theory going to be overlapping with ethnomusicology?

I know that's beyond the question of popular music, but as music theory itself questions what it teaches and who it teaches, it opens up this question of not just what is music theory, but what are the silos we have for music studies? And who's studying what, and who's teaching what? In the U.S., I think it's just completely a disarray, maybe not in the day-to-day curriculums that you see from fall to spring semesters. But I think right now it's not clear what a music theory curriculum, if even a music curriculum, should look like for undergrad or graduate students.

SD

Yeah, and I think this just circles back to what you were saying before, Trevor. At Temple, we have an incredible music tech program – that's fairly new. I had already done work on timbre, but without the deep, spectrogram-based analysis. When I got to Temple, I was struck by how high the student enrollment for the tech program was. Because this is what students want to do. We have way less classical music performers, even though we're known as a city conservatory because we have all these people from the Philadelphia Orchestra teaching. We have a decline in enrollment in classical music and an incline in people who want to write and perform pop music, various different types of pop music, electronic music. And I wanted to reach those students. They're doing all this work and they're building recording skills. How can I help them analyze and hear timbre better? That's why I changed the curriculum a little bit, because I think our students are heading in a different direction. So the field's going to have to grapple with that at some point.

And I think you're right – in the U.S. even the sequences are somewhat in disarray. Especially after Schenkergate,[16] when America finally realized the thing that the Germans already knew, there's been this push to change the curriculum, to change our scholarship. It is a little chaotic and all over the place. I was hired to bring in this pop music content – but then the students are still taking a classical music curriculum. Then all of a sudden, they take my pop music class. We're in this real moment of flux and transition. And I'm hoping to see that it irons out over time.

I wanted to say one more thing – and also echo something else Trevor was saying. Some of the best kind of rethinking of music theory and skills-based teaching is happening at places like Oberlin, where they start by asking: what are the basic elements of

16 Ewell 2020; Ewell 2023.

sound? Pitch, rhythm, timbre – that kind of thing. When you're teaching through that lens, or approach your scholarship through that lens, you can use any repertoire you want to get into that. I have studied classical music, jazz, and popular music, so I can bring all that in. But I would love to bring non-American music and non-Western music in to really diversify the curriculum. But like Trevor said, I'm not… I would feel uncomfortable teaching even a short unit on something I don't feel familiar with. Still, I would love to see students being able to get exposure to studying music theory, but from music around the world, different types of commercial music, folk music, art music – because if you're teaching about rhythm, you can get down that pathway through *any* type of music.

RvA

So the way forward would be team teaching and bring together experts from ethnomusicology and popular music studies? But our universities wouldn't allow that, because it's twice as expensive, right?

SD

There you go, that's it! I mean, honestly, team publications! Writing across the disciplines seems like really helpful for music theory.

AM

A couple of things have come to mind as everybody's been talking. One is, there's a real *risk* in only being taught by experts. Some of the best teaching I've ever done is when I've had to take on a class at a week's notice about something I didn't know *anything* about. Because I have some experience, I can *show* my students how it is that you come to knowledge of this – the *process* of understanding it. Because I'm going through it, *too*, just a little bit further ahead. I think that can be really instructive.

And that relates to this other thing: The problem I have with theory *per se* is that we only have theory because we want to control. Theory is a means to control! And this is the reason that we start off by theorizing pitch. Because it's a closed system, because we can measure it, because we can control it in all its aspects. We've never talked in the same way about timbre or even rhythm, to a certain extent. Because we couldn't control it in the same way! But now that we've got spectrograms and what have you, we *can* control those other spheres. So that's why they're coming into theory, and that's why I think it's a problem. Because I actually think that exerting control over what it is that we're doing is part of the problem that we all have.

RvA

What is being controlled? People or theories or methodologies?

AM

People are being controlled. Because as you as you think you know something, then you pass that knowledge onto somebody else, and you control the knowledge of somebody else. That's the fundamental problem I have with theory per se.

SD

I think that's really relevant, Allan! You just said the part out loud that I feel like I can never say as a junior scholar and as a woman. I think back to Fred Maus's "masculine modes of music theory."[17] That article changed my life, and I actually still assign it all the time. It's the scientification of music that seems really linked to control. And I get it. Like, I want to control things in my life, that makes me feel like not everything is just like flying around me, and it eases my mind a little bit. I'm so glad you said that, Allan! But we also have to, at the end of the day, teach students, communicate with others, and we have to have a shared system in order to communicate in some way. And so a lot of these methodologies, notation systems, ways of thinking and talking about music have been an effort for us to not always control, but to have a shared form of communication.

AM

We need to remember they're provisional. They're always provisional. And that's what we sometimes forget. "You never use perfect fifths in succession! You don't do it! It's a rule!"

AD

But if we remember that it's provisional, then it's quite useful, actually.

AM

Oh, absolutely! But we forget it. And students certainly don't think it's provisional because we give them a red cross when they do it.

RvA

Coming back to the question of repertoire: it's not only about including repertoire from all over the world; even with Western popular music, there's also been an opening towards hip-hop, for example, or electronic dance music. But that's a slow process, right? What is your view on that?

AD

I'm not sure if it's been so slow. Well, of course, it depends on the time perspective. But when you were asking about who are the "pure" music theorists these days, I would, for example, mention Mitch Ohriner. He's done extensive, quite rigorous theoretical work on hip-hop, and he's quite respected for that. So I think actually both electronic dance music, electronica, whatever you call it, and hip-hop have entered the repertoire. I would say that it's quite accepted, but I'm more in doubt as to whether mainstream pop is accepted within our fields, because that's always been something that's been…, that's partly a gendered thing as well. It seems that these new, groove-based repetitive musics are more respected, I think, than great, fantastic pop ballads.

17 Maus 1993.

RvA

So you mean that rock – as opposed to pop – has been a much more frequent subject of research?

AD

Yeah, that's always been the case! It's probably also part of the reason why we don't call it pop music studies, because then you exclude the rock fans and all the serious male scholars, mostly. And I think hip-hop is also a male dominated genre, in a way. Yeah, it's interesting that this tension between pop and rock and the downgrading of commercial, or what I would call mainstream pop, is still there. I mean, if you compare, for example, work on Prince compared to work on Whitney Houston, there's a massive difference in terms of quantity. Why is that?

AM

It's because we're interested in musicians, not music.

AD

Musicians? But Whitney Houston is a fantastic musician. She's one of the most fabulous singers!

AM

No, absolutely! But the focus is on *who* did, rather than what was done. The focus is on the music as a means of communication. And we want to understand the music because we want to understand that star.

AD

Yeah. But why are we interested in those stars? The stars also belong to a genre. It's not only about the gender. It's also about styles, I think.

TdC

I think, Anne, you're onto something for sure here. And it's not just Whitney Houston, it's obviously Mariah Carey as well. But it's also Garth Brooks – I don't think I've ever seen a paper on Garth Brooks in any music theory journals, yet he's one of the biggest stars in country music. Honestly, this has been a problem, even going back to classical music. I played in orchestras as a cellist for many years, and I think I can say that a lot of undergrad symphony players love Tchaikovsky. One of the best composers, I think, that students want to play. But Tchaikovsky's music is never something you see analyzed in a music theory textbook. Why is there this distinction? Why do we separate composers we study from ones, like Allan said, we want to know more about – or that people listen to. Why is there that schism?

RvA

So what desiderata remain for us? Where do we go from here? What are the questions we need to address most urgently in popular music theory?

SD

Just to build on what Anne was saying, there is a growing emergence of, for example, Taylor Swift studies. Chelsey Hamm, who's done a lot of work for Open Music Theory, just gave a talk on Taylor Swift.[18] I think younger scholars – especially women and queer and feminist music theorists – are looking at extremely commercial music, studying timbre, studying some of those types of music, and the elements that have been lower on the hierarchy. It's just becoming more common. I won't name this person, but there was a senior pop music studies scholar whom I adore, but they mentioned that they're having a hard time getting into music theory conferences, because really popular, Top 40 music, is what's starting to dominate some of the conversations. So I'm hopeful, I think it is changing and there's a lot more questions of valuing *really* commercial music, because that's also what our students are listening to. They *want* us to analyze that in the classroom. They want us to be talking about it. They're not listening to the Rolling Stones.

AD

As I mentioned before we started, we got this funding of this AI and Creativity Center in Oslo today. I think that's one thing that will be interesting to look into. How will AI actually influence the field of popular music? How good can AI be? What parts of the field will be taken over by AI? But perhaps it will also strengthen the identity and importance of other areas. That's going to be a topic that will be on the agenda for several conferences in music production, and music theory, and popular music studies in the years to come. One possibility is that AI-generated music will actually increase the value we place on music where you can really hear the presence of a human being. So maybe, paradoxically, it will strengthen the importance of human creativity and performative qualities.

RvA

Going back to the *really* popular music and the hierarchy of parameters – when you bring up Taylor Swift, the common prejudice seems to be: Oh, sure, she's interesting from a sociological or cultural perspective. But musically? People often assume there's nothing worthy of analysis – just the same four chords over and over again, verse-chorus forms, and pentatonic melodies. It's the intersection of two forms of bias: one against the really popular music, one against its musical content as supposedly simplistic.

SD

Yeah, I think those things are definitely coexisting. But when I'm reading some of the work on Taylor Swift, it's – as you know – so much more than just four chords. Or, thinking about some of the work that Trevor has done, there's a lot we can do with four chords –

18 Hamm 2025.

thinking through this in really thoughtful ways. And not to keep bringing it back to the students, but *they* don't have a problem with these four chords – they seem to love it. So it does seem like the old critique of highly commercial music being simplistic just isn't sustainable anymore – especially now that we're studying these secondary parameters.

Chelsey Hamm's paper was on timbre, and she did this really fine-tuned timbral analysis of the ways in which Swift is resonating her voice in certain ways, at certain points of the song. Maybe the harmony is straightforward – not always actually – but even if it seems that way, the microtiming and the timbre can be quite complex.

TdC

Well, and even if the chords are simple – we have all these theories of harmony in popular music and music theory, but theories of *melody* in popular music hardly exist. And if you look at Taylor Swift's melodies, they're not doing the classical model of chord tones and non-chord tones, and it's not just pentatonic scales being run up and down. So how does melody interact with these simple chord progressions? Do we have concepts that are equivalent to classical notions of chord tones, non-chord tones, appoggiaturas – and if so, how do they work, and how to implement? I don't even think we have a great theory of melody for classical music either, barring some sources like Anton Reicha's.[19] I think there's a lot of research to be done – even on the traditional topics that music theory would cover with regard to some things that we think are simple, maybe harmonically, but are really not. Because I don't know how I teach a theory of melody to my students. How do you write a melody over a looping chord regression? How do you create tension? How do you create release? How do you cadence, given that there's not really a kind of coordinated resolve on a tonic chord, you know?

AD

Yeah, and you can turn the question around and ask, why is it that we actually like to hear the same chord progressions again and again? What is the magic that makes those four chords new and fresh and interesting? It's always interesting to try to dig into those simple forms and see what can be done and what *is* done with those simple forms. And why do they work?

RvA

That reminds me of the work of Asaf Peres,[20] who analyzes recordings by Max Martin and Taylor Swift with a focus on production techniques, melody, and harmony. He decided not to stay in academia, but instead creates videos on YouTube and markets his knowledge directly to songwriters – offering workshops aimed at that audience. This also raises the idea of really *popular* music theory – meaning popular on platforms like YouTube. People like Adam Neely[21] come to mind. I think it's great that music theory has become so accessible and popular in this way. It attracts many of our students, as well as people outside of academia, who want to understand, for example, how the Beatles used the

19 Reicha 2001.

20 https://www.top40theory.com(3 July 2025).

21 https://www.youtube.com/adamneely(3 July 2025).

Dorian mode, or how the current number-one hit works musically. So there's now a broader audience for music theory beyond the university, which is kind of exciting.

AM

But a lot of this work treats theory as a fixed thing – applied, which is part of the problem. That's always been part of the problem with theory. Theory is prescriptive. And now, with the rise of this sort of thing on the internet, that idea that theory is always prescriptive is *so* much stronger. And so when you get your students in, it's that much more work to do to unbreak that.

RvA

Going back to what Anne said – about what it is in those four chords that's so compelling, and why we want to hear them again and again – I think there has been a lack of interdisciplinary work that brings together music psychology and popular music theory.

There *is* a connection between music cognition and music theory, of course, but questions like "What makes a melody work?" or "When does a hook truly become addictive?" haven't been explored deeply enough in a collaborative way. There's some great work – like the book by Jadey O'Regan and Tim Byron,[22] where a music theorist and a music psychologist actually team up. But that kind of collaboration is still rare, I think what's missing is that music psychology hasn't fully opened up to explaining how music works – not just how we respond to it, but why we like certain musical features. Do you know of any other good examples?

TdC

I was recently criticized for trying to talk about that in a *Music Theory Online* paper. I had something about looking at all the most popular songs, and then comparing some parameters, like how long the intro is or whatever, to some of the more deeper cuts. And seeing if there's differences so we could explain why maybe some songs are more popular. It's this field called hit song science, which has problems, I'll agree. But there is a potential research area there. But the reviewer said, "Is this person even a music theorist? This is not what music theorists do. This is not something we're interested in." And I thought – well, maybe I'm not. I don't know. But it does sound interesting if we could figure some of this out. Maybe it's inherently interdisciplinary.

RvA

A discipline "disciplines" what we do, right? It tells us what to do, and it sets boundaries.

SD

Back to what Allan was saying about control…

22 O'Regan/Byron 2023.

AD

Yeah, music theory has been expanded, as you said, in the direction of music cognition. And I suppose I'm a representative of that expansion myself. Of course, you can come up with interesting explanations. But I'm still not sure if music cognition can explain why we like those four chords and why we want to hear them again and again. It can be explained to a certain extent. But beyond that, a lot remains open – to new theories, or maybe it's just ultimately unexplainable.

AM

Well, I think that's why the phenomenological approach is so important, because we do write as if we're anyone, but we're not. We're one particular person in a particular situation. And if you make that apparent, then you can talk about your own experience, because then someone can measure those against it. That seems to me really important, rather than trying to be anonymous.

AD

I totally agree. And I think the best explanations I've read of why a certain song is "magic" are those deep phenomenological, subjective interpretations where you talk about *everything* and also connect all the different aspects of a song.

RvA

Yes, Allan, your work has been so important in this regard, because you keep emphasizing that point. These days, if a student hands in an analysis paper without using "I," I tell them that's not acceptable. You can't write about a song as if you know how everyone else in the world is experiencing it. You *have* to be subjective when writing about music – at least in analysis papers, if not necessarily in theory papers.

Anyway, this has been a brilliant conversation! Thank you all so much for your time and contributions!

TdC

Well, thanks for inviting us! This has been a unique opportunity to have a little open discussion.

AD

Yeah, thanks. Very productive and thought-provoking!

References

von Appen, Ralf / André Doehring / Dietrich Helms / Allan F. Moore, eds. 2015. *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*. Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington.

de Clercq, Trevor. 2016. "Deconstructing the Blues in the Beatles' 'Taxman'." *Music Theory and Analysis* 3/1: 58–70.

Covach, John / Andrew Flory. 2006. *What's that Sound? An Introduction to Rock and its History*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Danielsen, Anne, ed. 2010. *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*. Farnham: Ashgate (Routledge 2016).

Doktor, Stephanie. 2024. "On the Failure of White Feminism: When Björk and PJ Harvey Covered the Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction'." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 77/1: 103–161.

Ewell, Philip. 2020. "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame." *Music Theory Online* 31/1. https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4

Ewell, Philip. 2023. *On Music Theory, and Music More Welcoming for Everyone*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hamm, Chelsey. 2025. "Intertextuality, Interpretation, and Emphasized Sibilance in the Music of Taylor Swift." Presentation at the conference *Timbre and Orchestration in Popular Song*, McGill University, 7 June 2025.

Maus, Fred. 1993. "The Masculine Discourse in Music Theory." *Perspectives of New Music* 31/2: 264–293.

Meyer, Leonard B. 1973. *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Middleton, Richard. 1990. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press.

Moore, Allan F. 2012a. "Pop Music, Pop Culture. By Chris Rojek." *Music and Letters* 93/2: 274–276.

Moore, Allan F. 2012b. *Song Means. Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington.

O'Regan, Jadey / Tim Byron. 2023. *Hooks in Popular Music*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reicha, Anton. 2001. *Treatise on Melody* [1814]. Translated by Peter M. Landey. Hillsdale: Pendragon Press.

© 2025 [1]Ralf von Appen (von-appen@mdw.ac.at, ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8850-5617), [2]Trevor de Clercq,[3] Anne Danielsen, [4]Stephanie DeLane Doktor, [5]Allan Moore

[1]Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien [University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna]; [2]Middle Tennessee State University; [3]University of Oslo; [4]Temple University; [5]University of Surrey

Appen, Ralf von / Trevor de Clercq / Anne Danielsen / Stephanie DeLane Doktor / Allan Moore. 2025. "Studying the Fish and/or the Water? A Discussion About the Past, Present, and Future of Popular Music Theory in Europe and the U.S." *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 22/1, 9–29. https://doi.org/10.31751/1220

Dieser Text erscheint im Open Access und ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International Lizenz.
This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

veröffentlicht / first published: 10/07/2025

zuletzt geändert / last updated: 13/10/2025