Colloquium December 4, 2025
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Title: "What Does Music Theory Offer a Music Technology Student?"

Abstract:

The tools and methods for creating music have changed dramatically in the past century, these changes catalyzed primarily by developments in music technology. During the middle decades of the 20th century, for example, advancements in multitrack sound recording allowed musicians to craft and preserve complex musical compositions without the need to notate any of the individual musical parts on paper. Later advancements in digital technology, particularly the robust sampling and editing capabilities provided by music workstations, allowed musicians to create widely popular musical works without the need for a human to perform any of the instrumental elements. More recently, artificial intelligence has allowed anyone, including someone without any experience or background in music, to create a new, fully produced musical track with just the click of a button. Perhaps not surprisingly, music students have been increasingly drawn to degree programs that teach music technology, since technology has become a major component of the modern music production process.

Where does music theory fit within this new landscape, particularly within a music program centered on music technology? Even in recent decades, music theory pedagogy and research has been concerned primarily with musical domains related to traditional music notation, such as rhythm and pitch, with much less emphasis, if any, on the musical aspects that technology facilitates the manipulation of, such as timbre, dynamics, and spatialization. In this presentation, I talk about my own experiences and strategies teaching music theory and aural skills to audio production students who seek a broad range of careers, spanning from sound reinforcement technician to studio recording engineer to music producer. Instead of viewing music theory as outmoded with respect to music technology, I view what music theory has to offer as a complement to the training these students receive in their other coursework, as an opportunity to develop practical skills that facilitate speed and success in music production tasks. With this mindset, I adapted many of the standard approaches to music theory in my own teaching. I will discuss the large-scale order and pacing of the topics I teach, as codified in my recent textbook, as well as some of the details of how I explain and reinforce these topics. Perhaps most notably, I show how subjects ranging from music fundamentals through advanced chromatic harmony can be taught without relying on traditional five-line staff notation, which is typically not used by musicians when creating modern popular music. I conclude my talk with a brief consideration of the implications for the future of music theory pedagogy and research more generally.

Bio: Trevor de Clercq is Professor of Audio Production in the Department of Recording Industry at Middle Tennessee State University, where he coordinates the commercial musicianship curriculum and teaches coursework in audio theory, sound recording, and music production. His published research has often highlighted how contemporary popular music departs from traditional music theory frameworks developed to explain the organization of common-practice-era European art music. His *Nashville Number System Fake Book* was published by Hal Leonard in 2015, and his textbook, *The Practice of Popular Music: Understanding Harmony, Rhythm, Melody, and Form in Commercial Songwriting*, was published by Routledge in 2024.