Corralling the Chorale[1]

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Introduction

We begin with an anecdote from one of our contributors:

> Shortly after receiving my PhD, I was hired into a one-year position. In this position, I was tasked with teaching within a pre-existing music theory curriculum at a state school with a large performance program. As is customary and encouraged by all of the most popular textbooks on the market (including the one we used), this "Theory I" course focused on harmony and voice leading through the framework of four-part chorale-style SATB writing. Partway through the semester, one of my students, a vocalist, came to office hours for help with a musical she was writing. She said she couldn't quite get it to sound right. When she showed me her work, I saw why: she had painstakingly harmonized every single note of the vocal line with a different chord, in four voices in SATB range, and attempted to avoid parallels and adhere to all of the other good practices of voice leading we had learned in class. When I explained to her that musicals involved a different set of textural, harmonic, and voice leading considerations, she looked disappointed, even a bit betrayed. I showed her some examples and sent her on her way, and she was ultimately able to make something much more stylistically appropriate. But I can't help but think that this moment of disillusionment could have been avoided.

Clearly, the instructor failed to make some important caveats about the limitations of the theory discussed in class. But should this mistake have been so easy to make? The situation described in this anecdote came about partially because of the teacher's relative newness in leading a core curriculum, but it is not exclusively a reflection of their experience level. After all, the course was not entitled "The Theory of Common Practice Classical Music, Abstracted through the Practice of Four-Part Writing." Nor were there alternative courses offered covering different kinds of theories about different kinds of music. Is it any wonder that a student might have walked away assuming that what was on offer was a compositional and analytical guide to music, writ large? SATB chorales require significant teaching *around* to clarify the difference

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from other contexts. For example, when four-part paradigms are used for learning harmony and voice leading (e.g., the question "which voice should one double in first inversion?" assumes a four-part texture), and when Bach chorales form a large part of the instruction, it is easy for students to get the sense that this kind of structure is not merely one possibility among many, but rather a universal model for how composition might work. And while this anecdote is striking, it is not unique. When teaching with textbooks that highlight SATB paradigms, it is not uncommon for students to get confused about harmonic pacing or idiomatic textures in their own compositions. Moreover, students coming from AP music theory courses have been primed to focus on SATB voice-leading guidelines.[2] This is something that the authors have heard from many colleagues as well.

Four-part chorale-style writing and analysis are so central to music theory pedagogy that it is difficult to imagine a curriculum without them. Yet, as much as music theory instructors rely on chorales to teach general principles of music, chorales are specific in structure, and their origins lie in a specifically German religious tradition. This raises some important questions: are chorales effective for the purposes to which we put them? What pedagogical possibilities do they obscure? What can our reliance on this genre tell us about North American music theory and its commitments or anxieties? In sum: are we right to depend on SATB writing as we do? In this colloquy, we seek to engage with these questions by examining the role of the chorale in the undergraduate theory curriculum and proposing pedagogical approaches that delay, reconceptualize, or replace it.

The essays that follow critically examine the role of four-part writing in North American music theory pedagogy and provide perspectives on "corralling the chorale." This project emerges from a study group that meets monthly to discuss current issues in music theory pedagogy. The group convened a panel during the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory and discussed the topic with a number of other pedagogues thereafter.[3] Theorists also responded to the panel on the SMT-

2 The 2020 AP Music Theory sample questions prioritize four-part voice-leading exercises for analysis and writing: https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/pdf/ap-music-theory-exam-2020-sample-questions.pdf. Accessed August 5, 2021. This creates a chicken-and-egg situation where the materials on the AP test and undergrad theory mutually reinforce one another, and it is difficult to change one without destabilizing the other. For more on the tribulations of curricular change around SATB writing, see the essays in this colloquy by Chelsea Burns and Peter Smucker.

3 The panel was recorded and may be viewed online. See Chelsea Burns, William O'Hara, Marcelle Pierson, Katherine Pukinskis, Peter Smucker, and William van Geest—Jennifer Snodgrass, Respondent, "Corralling the Chorale: Moving Away from SATB Writing in the Undergraduate Music Theory Curriculum," November 2019. SMT Conference Panel, 1:36:35. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TGc7SO4jMI.

discuss listserv.[4] As we received informal and formal feedback on these submissions, our discussions shifted. It is our hope that the field of music theory will continue to grapple with the implications of its reliance on four-part writing, and that this colloquy will be a useful entry point into the discussion around this practice.

We are hardly the first to question the chorale's privileged position in music-theory pedagogy.[5] Controversy surrounding the chorale has proliferated recently, with some authors calling for its rejection,[6] some defending its prominent role,[7] and some calling for modifications of its use.[8] These discussions come within a broader reconsideration of music theory curricula, exemplified perhaps most visibly by a 2014 report commissioned by the College Music Society,[9] but visible also in recent curricular overhauls such as those of Harvard University (2017) and University of Southern California (2018).

The anecdote above describes a student who left her theory classroom lacking critical perspective: she understood the stylistic practices of chorale-writing to be those of musical composition in general. We take this student's experience as illustrative of common issues in the Anglo-American music theory classroom, and our essays address her situation in different ways. In the first essay, William van Geest demonstrates that this student is likely a common one. Through a corpus study of undergraduate music-theory textbooks, he shows that the chorale occupies a privileged position in American music theory, both in the frequency with which chorales—and particularly those of J. S. Bach—arise and in the idiosyncratic ways in which authors handle them compared with non-chorale repertoire. Geest also shows how this handling, according to which the chorale is presented as a distinctive music-theoretical object, renders it conspicuously similar to a conception of musical structure widely held in the field. Marcelle Pierson establishes the high stakes of the common tendency to conflate "good" voice leading with voice leading in the style of Bach. She concludes by offering a number of ideas for repositioning and reframing voice leading within the undergraduate curriculum.

The third and fourth essays focus on the promise and challenge of curricular change, at both the classroom and institutional levels. Our student's theory curriculum

4 See "Corralling the Chorale: Moving Away from SATB," SMT-Discuss, https://discuss.societymusictheory.org/discussion/507/corralling-the-chorale-moving-away-from-satb.

5 See Piston (1941, 56).

6 See Kulma and Naxer (2014), and Richards (2015).

7 See Follet (2013), Burstein (2020), and Remeš (2017).

8 Chenette (2018).

9 Sarath, et al. (2014).

is heavily determined by forces of labor that are more than likely invisible to her; Chelsea Burns examines the barriers to changing an SATB-heavy curriculum, including labor inequity, retraining, and instructor anxieties. Because existing instructional materials overwhelmingly rely on SATB examples, an instructor interested in novel approaches will find herself without readymade tools. Burns argues that while curricular change is a worthwhile undertaking, acknowledging and addressing its significant costs must be part of the process. Next, Peter Smucker examines how curriculum change may affect three constituencies: students, faculty, and administrators. The negative experience of our student should be concerning to all constituencies. Smucker compiles hypothetical scenarios and practical advice relevant to curriculum change in order to draw attention to both positive and negative impacts upon these three constituencies.

The fifth and sixth essays describe alternative curricular paths, imagining ways that our student could have developed a sense of context around and through her study of music theory. Katherine Pukinskis proposes decentering the chorale in music theory courses. She offers repertoire examples that can stretch conversations of harmony and voice leading to include student interpretation and performance as well as considerations of rhythm, motivic material, phrasing, and repetition. William O'Hara picks up the thread of voice leading, suggesting one way in which it may be studied outside of the context of four-part chorale-style writing: a sample curriculum on Neo-Riemannian theory that introduces undergraduates to current questions regarding the subdiscipline's renewed focus on voice leading. This alternative approach to voice leading instruction opens opportunities for students to apply what they know about voice leading outside of the four-part setting, to study non-canonical repertoires from new perspectives, and to engage with current debates and new directions in the field.

One thread that runs throughout these essays is the reconsideration of what voice leading means and what its role should be in the undergraduate theory curriculum. Pierson's essay addresses this directly, questioning assumptions about what constitutes "good" voice leading—assumptions that pervade and structure the traditional music theory curriculum. Pukinskis's and O'Hara's essays demonstrate, respectively, how curricula could focus on holistic concepts aside from voice leading and how curricula could conceive of voice leading differently.

It is not our aim to suggest a new one-size-fits-all curriculum to replace the existing one; we believe there may be many effective responses to the deficits of the status quo. We also affirm the importance of broader conversations about curricular revision, taking on issues beyond the scope of these essays. As we reevaluate the role of chorales in our classrooms, though, we do hope to contribute to the larger project of

critically assessing the assumptions and values embedded in North American theory curricula as a whole.

This project is urgent, given the increasingly diverse goals of our students and the increasingly varied musical worlds they enter after graduation. Just as music theory itself is a living discipline, evolving with new creative horizons, so too must music theory pedagogy shift in response to students' needs and ambitions. Today there may be students who still benefit from traditional voice leading instruction on the basis of the chorale. But there are also many who look more like the student in our opening anecdote, whose musical aims were not served but instead were thwarted precisely by the chorale-driven method. As music theorists and pedagogues, our task is to enable and inspire students, leading them toward competency relevant to the professional lives ahead of them. If our practices are not enabling and inspiring, but instead are provoking confusion and frustration, then it is time to reevaluate those practices and see how we can do better.

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