Do Composers Really Need to Know Music Theory Before They Can Compose?

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

A Theory of Theory

Actually, *no music theory* is required for writing convincing and compelling music. Really. There are plenty of examples of great songwriters in our popular AND classical music traditions who never studied (or took very little) music theory. When we listen carefully to traditional West-African music and North Indian raga, we can hear that both are far ahead of most Western music's rhythmic sensibility (the former) and melodic structures (the latter), yet they are both oral traditions that have developed over thousands of years, generation after generation. Only recently have their repertoire, performance practices, and improvisation techniques been studied and assembled into a body of knowledge for Western musicians.

The Big News is that *no amount of music theory will take the risk out of writing your own music*. Period. Nor will gaining serious proficiency on an instrument or voice (or DAW system). Nor will getting a concentrated exposure to the "masterworks", whatever the style might be. Yet, how often do we hear music institutions or well-meaning private instructors say that music theory is *an essential tool for composing?* All the time. The mythology (and pretense) that surrounds music theory has existed in our Western culture for hundreds of years, especially since the advent of the music conservatory in Europe in the mid-19th century. Those who claim artistic authority have a vested interest in perpetuating a hierarchy of "learned" vs. "untrained" musicians for reasons of both financial support and their own artistic validation. They very often profess that a thorough training in music theory is a prerequisite for composing (as well as improvising and crafting deeply personal interpretations of repertoire).

Too Much Protein

Now, how often is music theory taught directly in conjunction with a chorus? Very rarely. A beginning composition class? Occasionally. An improvisation class? A bit more frequently. The real problem here is how we typically define "music theory". The way it is typically taught — from workbooks for kids to courses at music conservatories — is as a collection of **rules and formulas**. How many sharps are in the key of B? What are the "acceptable" minor scales? What is the "correct way" of linguistically describing a quarter note? No wonder this kind of theory turns off so many people! *When music theory is not directly applied to a tangible, real-life music experience — singing, playing, or composing — it's not likely to be absorbed, or experienced in a way that would keep students curious and inspired about how music is put together.*

Here's one analogy that connects with many students, musicians, and readers. Imagine music theory as the "protein" of music education, i.e. the aspect that is learned the slowest, and takes the longest to digest and internalize. Theory's true density is rarely acknowledged. Now, try imagining eating a single meal with a serving of chicken, fish, beef, tofu, and tempe in a nut butter sauce . . . with only two carrots? Of course not! The body simply cannot digest such a high proportion of protein with other essentials like grains, legumes and carbohydrates. Same is true for music theory, and that is how it is taught the majority of the time. We think this approach is "normal" because that is the way it's *always been* presented. Something to endure . . .

Granted, some people have no problem absorbing music theory (often those with a strong engineering or science background), while others *eventually* put theory and music making together in a way that works. Yet, there are far too many people who will never receive the rewards of music theory because its presentation felt so disembodied from real music making. I have personally worked with many students who belong to this group. Probably the deepest fear that these students confess is that music theory "just gets composers into their heads" and interferes with their ability to compose freely, without inhibitions or second-guessing. Given how deeply personal composing can be, that fear is understandable and quite justified. It's gratifying to be able help my students transform their deeply felt aversion to theory into receptivity and help them see the real practical benefits to their playing, singing, composing, and (most importantly) listening.

New Definition of Theory
From the above, you can probably tell that I am not "anti-theory" at all. But first, let me propose a different definition of music theory — ***a way of observing musical phenomenon and patterns in such a way that opens musical doors***. Please read that sentence again. Notice there's no mention of tonality, scales, time signatures, sonata or blues forms, etc. Sure, that is part of a typical music theory curriculum, but that's *far too specific*. Someone truly versed in theory should be able to listen to any style of music, from any culture, and be able to make clear observations and even predict (to a limited extend) where the music will go next. When theory is taught from a very specific stylistic and/or cultural vantage point, devoid of direct music making, there is inherent limitation in how well a musician can analyze and process music that they aren't familiar with. A person might have a very advanced degree from a major conservatory in theory, but could that same person be truly receptive to (and make sense of) music of falling metal pins in a resonant space, or music for moving bicycle parts, or a consort of balloons? Or John Luther Adams's ultra-nature-inspired chamber music? Would that person simply dismiss those kinds of non-traditional musics because they didn't have the harmonic and melodic traits that they were trained to listen to and value? What about music from other cultures whose forms and instrumental colors are so very different from ours?

How Theory Has Helped Me!
Personally, *I've found music theory to be an invaluable tool for my music*. When I want to create a specific effect in one of my pieces, my process of observation (theory) is right there to help me take apart the elements of that special effect. If I feel stuck or blocked in a particular part of a new piece, theory always provides the light I need to explore new and better options, like using a brilliantly helpful catalogue. When I want to investigate a particular style that I'm not familiar with, theory will guide me, offering new important distinctions to orient me; (e.g. how faithful do I want to be to the original source, what particular ratio of each element will serve my piece best, etc.). When I listen to other composers' music, theory enables me to help sort out and articulate why I'm drawn to (or repelled by) their work. [Note: I never use it to "justify" my taste, but merely to give *specific language* to my reactions about a work.]

Most importantly — when I need to investigate a fundamental shortcoming in my own writing, I use the tools of musical theory to carefully observe my limitation *honestly and without drama*, but with clarity and self-compassion.

In sum, music theory itself isn't the problem. Rather, it's how it's usually taught that is the problem.