

An esteemed journal devoted to the teaching
of music theory has reached an international audience
from a tiny library on the OU campus.

How Music Works

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

Saying *The Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* three times in a row may be a bit of a tongue twister, and a copy is not likely to be found on the rack of local newsstands. Yet for three decades the journal's distinguished contents have been esteemed by thousands of musicians around the world for its progressive approach to new teaching ideas.

Since 1985 JMTP has served as the sole publication dedicated to the very essence of music, the basic frame around which all musicality is built — theory. The journal has been doing so since its earliest desktop publishing days from a small library in Holmberg Hall, now the Reynolds Performing Arts Center, on the University of Oklahoma campus.

Although by no means a simple subject, in essence music theory is the Xs and Os of musical training for professionals across the spectrum, be they bassoonists, conductors, pianists, or vocalists. Put simply, music theory is the study of how music works.

A sheet of music holds the blueprint for the musical piece itself. Five parallel staff lines serve as scaffolding for the treble and bass clefs, note values and other indicators such as meters, key and time signatures and dynamics. As scales and chords, melodies and phrasings take shape on that framework, one can get a picture of the complexities of the subject. It is up to musicians and conductors to read and interpret that blueprint for their audience.

"Music theory is the academic aspect of music," explains James Faulconer, OU Presidential Professor Emeritus of music and co-founder of the journal. "What does the harmony sound like? How about the melody? Why does the



The five staff lines of written music were modeled after the human hand in early music theory.

music sound like that? How does this help you understand the music? This is what we call 'ear training.' You have to use your ears to discern what you are hearing while articulating that to help others understand what is happening. Understanding music theory brings out better, more meaningful performances for everyone."

As a young trumpet and piano student Faulconer was influenced by his teacher Gail Boyd de Stwolinski, who taught at OU for 38 years and had a profound impact on his chosen profession.

"Gail and her commitment to music and theory turned the world on for me," he says. "I thought her devotion to the understanding of music was the coolest thing. When people asked that ubiquitous 'what-are-you-planning-to-do' question after high school, I knew I wanted to do what she did. I committed right then to get my music education."

Faulconer joined the OU School of Music as a special instructor after earning his doctorate in 1972, holding several positions throughout his career before retiring in 2004. Ultimately his resume included co-founder and director of the center dedicated to his mentor, the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy. When it was established at OU in 1985, the center's purpose was to serve as an international hub for the teaching and learning of music theory. An endowment created by her husband, Louis, continued Boyd de Stwolinski's commitment to excellence in teaching music theory. The creation of the journal was part of that dedication.

At the time the center was established, more than 25 prominent music theorists from around the world were polled and they determined a peer-reviewed journal dedi-



Lynette Lobban

TOP - Gail Boyd de Stwolinski was the central figure of OU music theory education for 38 years. Her legacy is carried on by the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, now headed by Steven Laitz, below.

cated to the research and teaching of music theory was in order.

Faulconer, who also served as OU chair of music theory at the time, says founding the publication was crucial. He was assisted by co-founder Alice Lanning, who served as managing editor of JMTP for many years.

"There was no other journal like it," he says. "The word 'pedagogy' was added to distinguish our journal from a similarly titled publication by Harvard University."

Music majors at most universities must take several semesters of theory due to its overall importance. OU is no exception. When students earn a music degree from OU

they have more hours of music theory than almost anything else.

Music theory helps students to be successful in their careers, not just by instilling an ability to create and perform music, but by providing a foundation for understanding the artistry and technique that brings music to life.

Today, the journal has evolved into a print and online resource reaching more than 6,000 music theory and musicianship instructors in the United States.

"When I came on board we changed the thrust of the journal to attract a larger body of readership," says Steven Laitz, who now serves as the center director and JMTP editor. "For many years music theorists wrote for one another. *The Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* exists to help everyone."

After serving as a member of the JMTP editorial review board and reviews editor, Laitz became the editor-in-chief in 2009. When Faulconer stepped down as center director in 2013, Laitz stepped in to that role as well. He is considered an expert in the relationship between analysis and performance. Laitz has been faculty member of the Eastman School of Music since 1989 and is the author of two leading textbooks on music theory. Currently he is on faculty and chair of Music Theory and Analysis at The Juilliard School.

Under Laitz's leadership, the center launched a website in 2015 that includes back issues of JMTP, along with a variety of theory demonstrations in a number of formats. For example, if the topic is augmented six chords, a teacher can go to the journal website and watch that subject being taught in a posted video. Newly minted Ph.D.s can post samples of their teaching as well as they begin their careers looking for positions.

"The website was well worth the effort," says Laitz. "It is quite robust. All of the journal issues are there, suggested assignments, syllabi, and a blog. And, at the beginning of the year, we opened the portal and made the JMTP free online. This is important to us because we want to ensure its presence and availability throughout the world."

In addition to publishing the journal, the center offers the de Stwolinski Prize for lifelong contributions to music theory pedagogy, and in 2015 instituted a bi-annual conference.

Laitz also is committed to recruiting more women to the music theory profession and is planning a fundraising campaign to offer scholarships to support that effort. "In a department of 14 at Juilliard, there is one woman on the music theory faculty," he says. "It is uncommon for women to enter this field and I would like to change that. We are looking for creative ways to make that happen and offering scholarships is one way to do that."

By reaching more teachers and building on its network of international contributors and readers, Laitz hopes that the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* will inspire harmony for years to come.

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