

Topic 0: Music theory in critical and global context

[Fundamentals of Music Theory](#) / Topic 0: Music theory in critical and global context
<https://doi.org/10.2218/ED.9781912669226.0>. © Michael Edwards, John Kitchen, Nikki Moran, Zack Moir, Richard Worth, University of Edinburgh, [CC BY SA 4.0](#), unless otherwise indicated.

0.1. What we cover in this book

Video: [What we cover in this book](#)

This topic is presented in a series of five micro-lectures, each one lasting 2-3 minutes. For this textbook resource, we present these here for you simply as video links and their transcripts. This topic is helpful in introducing the materials of the book, but it is delivered independently of the other topics. So, if you want to get stuck into the rudiments of music theory and notation, you can go straight to Topic 1 and come back to this when you're ready.

Transcript of the Video

00:08	We want you to have the best chance of learning something personal and meaningful through this course. So we have to make some things completely clear. Let's talk about what we cover here, about what we don't cover here, and about how that comes to be. I'll begin with what we don't cover.
00:27	This course is called 'Fundamentals of Music Theory'. That's the title that you discovered and engaged with. But straight off: What we're calling <i>Music Theory</i> here: It <i>isn't</i> a <i>scientific</i> theory that can account for features of the natural world. No. Rather, if you're studying the fundamentals of music theory, what that means is you're being schooled, you're being disciplined in an academic sense, in a particular way of knowing, connected to how you can talk and think about music. That's not necessarily going to be simple and straightforward. So, I mentioned already in the introduction that the theory part doesn't mean scientific, and the fundamentals part doesn't mean elementary. There's more. Brace yourselves.

01:13	<p>In this context, the music part isn't going to give you the full picture, it's not the whole story. The music in music theory in this context signifies an orientation to white European discourse about music. Being fluent in any sort of music language - that relies on a combination of practical and conceptual skills. It's challenging and it requires a sophisticated type of thinking. And stave notation is a powerful tool to support this. But the scope of human musical imagination and creativity goes way past the classroom conventions of music theory. And yet, this dominant knowledge system is quite profoundly oriented to particularly European notions of music born of the past 150 colonial and post-colonial years. More of that in a minute.</p>
-------	---

0.2 What sort of theory is this?

Video: [What sort of theory is this?](#)

Transcript of the Video

00:08	<p>In terms of <i>the material we teach here</i>, the focus is mainly on that bit about 'literacy'. A musical language you learn to write down. The apparatus of music theory <i>more generally</i> includes various – potentially unlimited! – languages and terminology that people can use to think about music. And beneath all languages – including music theoretic languages – we find concepts. We find ideas.</p>
00:39	<p>As I've said in the introduction, in this course, we teach the building blocks of stave notation, as a system designed to communicate musical ideas. And we're going to focus on the concepts of scale and key, and harmony and metre. But if we're not talking about a scientific theory, then where do these ideas, these concepts, where do they come from? Musical concepts come from people in the world. They start off out there in the physical, human, cultural context of performance and imagination in the way that human is. And bodies perceive the physical vibrations of materials and in the ways that they make sense and patterns out of these experiences. So musical notation, in its long and varied history, is a technology. Musical concepts don't start off as symbols on paper, but through</p>

	<p>notation we write them down, visualize them and learn them, and imagine them and create with them. Every successful human technology, it integrates with our lives and shapes our thinking and imagination. So stave notation then, as a form of literacy, it's become a widespread, globalized, influential technology.</p>
--	---

0.3. Why these ideas? Why this system?

Video: [Why this system?](#)

Transcript of the Video

00:08	<p>Here in the UK, the five-line stave is a dominant and thoroughly institutionalized language. Learning music theory generally means learning to read and write music notation. You might already take it for granted that those two things come together. That's even more likely to be true if you're familiar with taking formal music exams. At the heart of the majority of music exam systems is what's known as common practice harmony. That's a way of referring to a harmonic language that, roughly, unites European tonal music for around 2.5 centuries up to the twentieth century. And that spans an array of styles and so-called areas of European classical music – late Baroque, Classical, Romantic eras.</p>
00:56	<p>The graded music examination system started in London in the later part of this common practice period in 1877. Within 25 years – so, by the start of the twentieth century - a very substantial portion of these music theory exams were taking place overseas. This exam system, it was quite an industry going on at a time when the British Empire held power over nearly a quarter of the world's population.</p>
01:27	<p>This exam system has changed somewhat in the last few years, but it's basically continuous now for nearly 150 years. Now, the music theory that's taught in this system, remember, we're not describing a coherent scientific theory. Sound is real; it's material. If you study acoustics, you'll learn the science of sound. But study music theory, and a huge part of what you're studying is cultural convention.</p>

0.4. What's behind these ideas and this system?

Video: [What's behind this system?](#)

Transcript of the Video

0:09	When I said earlier that this course deals with musical 'literacy' – well, education theory has taught us to think critically about literacy. About what we might take for granted when we prescribe certain ways of expressing knowledge in a curriculum – when we make some types of language-use legitimate. When we do that, it means – logically – that other types of knowledge, and content, and facts, are going to get skipped over. They are denied. They appear illegitimate.
0:42	Broadly speaking, this music theory system explains – it legitimizes – some elements of musical compositions better than others. The basic principles of notation on a five-line
	stave, these don't actually tie you at all to any particular musical genre or tradition or music theory. Jazz and popular musicians since the early twentieth century have been some of the strongest advocates for the artistic sophistication that music notation can enable. But the dominant musical ideology of the stave comes from association with the institutions of European classical music <i>as it has been understood</i> for the past 100 – 150 years - since 1877, say - for the time really that there's been a desire to formalise, or rather, to classify, music education and its attainment.
1:39	Well, critical and postcolonial scholarship has given us new ways to understand music education in the UK. And what's taught in schools today is light years away from the Victorian exam system. But very recent work suggests that the institutions of classical music seems still to be strongly shaped by the collective imagination of an idealized human form. It's white, it's male, and it's able bodied. The discourse of classical music education appears aspirational and beyond politics. But, of course, it intersects with social class and sex, and gender and disability. And this has consequences for the musical lives of, well, most people.

2:28	<p>Music theory sometimes comes with a capital M and capital T. The American music theorist, Philip Ewell, explains brilliantly how the language - the bigger academic enterprise - of music theory isn't at all scientifically or politically neutral regarding race. Ewell uses critical race and feminist scholarship to understand and to explain in detail how this is so. And you can read about this freely on his blog posts. The link and some other reading suggestions are on the screen in case you're interested.</p>
------	--

0.5. Taking it from here

Video: [Taking it from here](#)

Transcript of the Video

0:09	<p>So, basically: the ideas we teach about in this course – remember, that's scale, key, harmony, and metre – and five-line stave notation we instruct here, to express them – they don't map simply onto scientific universals.</p>
0:29	<p>Take a big wide view of human music-making, it's obvious that we should expect huge variety in the core principles and theories that underpin different musical traditions. Our musical realities and our conceptualisation of them – there's going to be huge variety between traditions, coming from geographical separation between groups of people – and also between instrumental music and song – differences due to technologies – and to do with function – and to do with social organisation, between genres and scenes of music, and so on. And even within eras of, call it Western tonal music, different musical forms and performance contexts give rise to wildly different types of harmonic conventions and opportunities.</p>

1:23	To sum it all up: Stave notation based on elements of this music theory system has become a very widespread system of communicating about musical ideas. It's the system we're teaching about on this course. It's got some strengths, and some weaknesses. As I already explained, the 'fundamentals' part doesn't mean easy or elementary; the 'theory' part doesn't mean scientific – and the 'music' bit is partial. As a cultural system, it is not politically neutral.
2:00	And now, I want to say: don't let that put you off. The material that we cover here: it's a system, like any other language. Knowing some of its context, you are better equipped to resist it, transform it, create with it.
2:17	Whatever your reasons for choosing to learn on this course, you're in charge of them – you're not obliged to learn this particular system of musical thinking – and it really needn't be your only way of thinking, musically! But whoever you are, whatever your reasons, you are entitled – and you are welcome – to choose to learn this.