



# A NEW MUSIC THEORY AND MUSICIANSHIP CURRICULUM AT SACRAMENTO STATE

Scott Perkins, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Many music theory programs are looking for ways to broaden the scope of the repertoire they teach to encompass non-Western music. At the same time, they want to maintain or increase the level of rigor of their teaching of Western art music. Both of these goals can be met in the aural skills or musicianship curriculum.

One way to introduce chromaticism is to engage music of non-Western traditions that is based upon different scales. After one semester of major/minor work and learning new chromatic variants of scale degrees through the diatonic church modes, students can begin to combine familiar scale degrees in unfamiliar patterns. Scales used in Sephardic and Klezmer music, Arabic maqāmāt, and Hindustani raags can be related to the church modes. Thus, while students are becoming flexible with combinations of different chromatic variants of scale degrees, they are also engaging music outside the traditional Western canon. A carefully planned sequence of the introduction of additional scales, modes, and raags increases students' ability to navigate different patterns of tonal colors, preparing them to tackle tonal aspects of highly complex Western music while advancing cultural and ethnic diversity in their music studies.

## CONTACT

Scott Perkins, PhD  
California State University, Sacramento  
School of Music  
scott.perkins@csus.edu  
www.csus.edu

## INTRODUCTION

Classical music is undergoing a major transformation. In order to sustain itself, a new generation of composers and performers is finding new ways to keep up with cultural developments and become relevant again. They are rethinking how and what they perform, and that music looks and sounds very different from what it once was. California Institute of the Arts Dean David Rosenboom characterizes the inspirations of young musicians today as "pan-stylistic, genre-deviant, collectively emergent, and socially relevant. . . . The sources of musical inspiration accessible to new generations of music students are global in origin and stylistically egalitarian." Chris Thile, virtuoso mandolinist and leader of the Grammy-winning band Punch Brothers, predicts that "you'll see so much genre-hopping from musicians in the very near future that it will cease to be 'genre-hopping.'" Robert Freeman in his book "The Crisis of Classical Music in America" notes the erasure over recent decades of the "clear double line of demarcation between classical music (also known as "concert music," "good music," or "serious music") and the kind of music that appealed to a much broader spectrum of Americans, known . . . as popular music."

A music theory program can make valuable contributions to the skill sets of this new variety of forward-thinking musicians. Through a successful program, professors can introduce students to the structural underpinnings and characteristics of a broad variety of musical styles, teach them how to interpret what they hear, and guide them as they explore new ways to perform, create, and innovate this music. Most music theory curricula are out of date, however; they follow antiquated models of instruction in a narrow body of skills and repertoire. My objective is to create a new music theory and musicianship curriculum for Sacramento State that addresses our students' changing needs and aligns itself with current practices among professional musicians. The skills we want students to acquire put a greater focus on creation: improvisation, composition, arranging, and transcription take precedence over analysis as an end unto itself. These skills come before stylistic considerations; in other words, any literature may be sampled if it supports our pedagogical aims. This allows for considerable stylistic flexibility, the sort of "pan-stylistic, genre-deviant" music Rosenboom describes. Thus, our curriculum will be expanded to address not only Western music but also Hindustani, Arabic, Sephardic, and Afro-Cuban styles.

## METHODS

My work on the curriculum during Spring 2020 focused on Hindustani and Arabic music and was conducted through the following methods:

- Obtaining, listening to, and transcribing recordings of pieces for which there are no extant scores. Most of these recordings were obtained through YouTube, Spotify, and private recordings made available to me by practitioners of Hindustani and Arabic music.
- Researching the cultural context of these songs. As I do not speak Hindi or Arabic, I relied upon English-language sources, including but not limited to Ali Akbar Khan and George Ruckert's "Classical Music of North India: the First Years of Study" and Johnny Farraj and Sami Abu Shumays's "Inside Arabic Music."
- Compiling anthologies of scores and recordings, which involved creating new notation systems for microtonal pitches and a variety ornaments (see below).
- Studying with practitioners of this repertoire, such as Sali Oak, the acclaimed North Indian classical vocalist of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana, and Ali Paris, the international prize-winning Palestinian qanun virtuoso and vocalist.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

My preliminary work on this project has revealed that there is much more to be done than I had anticipated, and I now know that it will take many years to complete it. (I am very grateful for this discovery.) Perhaps the most significant revelation is that I need to rethink the pedagogy of my field at every level to support diversity, inclusion and equity, and to combat the systemic racism at work in the program I coordinate. To that end, I have written a statement of commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity in the music theory and musicianship program at Sacramento State. This document outlines general principles I am using to guide the program (many of these were already established before I began work on this project), resources I will create (shown below) in order to accomplish these goals, an estimated timeline for completing my work, and some concluding thoughts. This is a working document and is likely to be revised frequently as I pursue further research.

## FUTURE COMMITMENTS

1. I will continue my studies with Ms. Oak and Mr. Paris and learn North Indian and Arabic music from the perspective of a music theorist and a practitioner. Mr. Paris and I are co-authoring a text on teaching Arabic music theory, performance, and performance practice to Westerners.
2. I will conduct extensive research in music theory, performance, and pedagogy of all genres I will include in three books I will write on music reading, improvisation, analysis, and composition.
3. I will consult with colleagues in the fields I am engaging, both at Sacramento State and around the world, for input and feedback regarding content and methodologies.
4. After developing and teaching each completed new course at least once, I will create manuals and instructional videos with presentations and demonstrations for my colleagues to prepare them to teach these courses. I will share these materials, including my books, with colleagues at local junior colleges from which we receive transfer students so they are free to adapt their curricula if they wish.

Microtonal symbols, some of which I invented.

\* slightly lower on any maqam beginning on a half-flat note

Ornament symbols, which I named and created.

The beginning of a muwashshah in Maqam Rast, with my symbols for microtonal notes and ornaments.