Engaging With Mozart: Using Composition to Teach Music Theory
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Introduction
Most students in college learn Music Theory from textbooks and are assessed for their musical aptitude based on written exams and homework assignments. My course, MUSIC 2104, was designed to help music majors engage with theory through practical application in performance, composition and improvisation at the keyboard.

The students for my sections totaled 5, and varied from 1-9 years of prior keyboard training.

Methods

Develop repertory for piano
Establishing a repertory of prepared pieces was important, not only for development of aptitude at the keyboard, but as models for creative work.

Haydn, Minuet in D Major
Mozart, Minuet in C Major, K. 6
Beethoven, Minuet in B-flat Major
Mozart, Piano Sonata No. 16 in C Major, K. 545
Beethoven, Drei Albümblätter, “Für Elise”

In-class improvisation
Improvisation at the keyboard was used to strengthen musicianship skills.

10 weekly composition assignments
Assignments increased in complexity, from the smallest units of composition to larger forms.

Phrase- a simple musical unit of 4 measures.
Period- a larger unit consisting of 2 phrases.
Modulation- changing key; typically occurs at the end of the first period in a binary form.
Binary Form- one of the simplest musical forms; consists of 2 periods, the first of which modulates, the second of which returns to the original key.

Composition Assignments

Composition Assignment #7

Students demonstrated their comprehension of theoretical concepts based on how well they were able to recreate them in musical composition. By Assignment #7, they were making full piano pieces.

Here, the student has begun his composition with a convincing 4-measure Phrase.

After the second phrase of music, the student has completed a Period (with Modulation), moving from the original key of A major to the new key of E major.

During the Start of the 2nd Period, the student returned from the new key of E major to the original key of A major.

The fourth phrase is a varied restatement of the first, confirming the return to the original key and the End of the 2nd Period; Complete Binary Form.

Mid-Semester Evaluations

Sophomore, Music Major, 8 years piano experience: “I like the composition assignments; helps me try to apply what I learn.”

Junior, Music Minor, 9 years piano experience: “I like working together to [harmonize at the keyboard], individual instruction time; it’s nice to get individualized feedback.”

Senior, Music Minor, 1 year piano experience:
“I like individual instruction time, the compositions, and improvisation.”

Results and Conclusions

• Students enjoyed the composition assignments, as they were opportunities for them to test out theoretical concepts at their own pace and according to their own keyboard facility. They took creative ownership over these assignments.

• By the end of the semester, students could play five “easy” masterpieces at the piano, and improvise and play their own compositions; demonstrable proof of their musical knowledge and ability.

• Students began to feel less intimidated by “great works” described in traditional theory classes, and felt empowered to make their own contributions in the Classical idiom.

• Shifting the way we assess the musical knowledge of students to include composition is both more effective in revealing strengths and weaknesses in student learning, and more fun for the students.