



Music theory is too often associated with long lists of terms to be learned off by heart before an exam. It is sometimes considered unnecessary information for performing music. Indeed, at third-level for example, theory is not always the first thing that students would choose to study had it not been mandatory, and in terms of actual music exam bodies, the number of those that elect to take theory exams is a fraction in comparison to those who take instrumental exams. Viewing theory in this context would suggest that it is somewhat redundant, kills the fun, and takes the joy out of any musical activity.

Yet, there are exam boards that require their grade 5 theory written exam be passed before undertaking their grade 6 instrumental exam. And similar to universities, that may have theory as core modules, exam boards that require grade 5 theory as a minimum level in order to proceed with the instrumental senior grades, do so for a reason; it is acknowledged that a certain level of understanding of theory helps develop the musician and supports their learning process as they progress through the grades.

This document makes an argument for embracing theory during your music studies and in your lessons. It draws on analogies to help rethink what theory means and involves as well as how we might engage with it.

Why should I learn theory*? If approached in a certain manner it:

- Enhances your understanding of a piece of music
- Provides you with a framework for performing music
- Develops your aural and sight-reading abilities
- Can be used as an aid in memorising music
- Helps you consider the piece musically and holistically
- Encourages you to connect the dots between the various components of music e.g. aural, sight-reading, writing, performing
- Can lay the foundations for improvisation
- Broadens your understanding of music styles
- Allows you to notate music you have composed
- Makes learning music more fun
- Facilitates the student in becoming an independent learner
- May deepen your appreciation of music even as a listener

*theory here refers more to musicianship than the general perception of learning terms off by heart and understanding music out of context.

Why do so many people dislike theory?

In general, theory seems to be considered boring, redundant, and not relevant to music-making. This may in part be due to it being taught separately, if at all, and out of context of music-making. Would you keep studying recipes if you had no intention of buying the ingredients or making the food in question?



But doesn't theory destroy one's love of music?

I have been asked countless times whether considering music from a theoretical aspect has destroyed my love of music; not at all, quite the opposite. I appreciate it even more and when I took up the cello in recent years, my knowledge of theory really helped me to progress on the instrument quickly. Does understanding the rules of tennis, boxing, golf, rugby, football, soccer, gymnastics etc. take away the enjoyment of the sport? Or does it help you to engage with it in a meaningful manner? A referee, say, isn't just someone wandering around the pitch blowing their whistle at random intervals ... well generally speaking they're not.

Should we rethink how we teach theory?

In the majority of cases, yes; in particular if theory is being taught as a list of terms and as a separate topic to the pieces being worked on. Would you be interested in only learning how verbs are conjugated for what would appear to be no reason other than for the sake of knowing about conjugations? Or, would you prefer to learn verbs and vocabulary for a language that is relevant to the context in which you will be using them? For example, if you go on holidays to the South of France every year, you might not be interested in learning how to read 19th-century French literature. Or, the verb *nager* [to swim-regular verb] might be useful if going to the beach, but if you have only ever focused on conjugating 'ER verbs' without applying it to actual verbs, such as *nager*, then losing interest in French lessons would be understandable.

Should I teach theory?

Ideally yes, but this doesn't necessarily have to be a separate class. Better still, it can be tied into the lesson and connected to the performance. You may already be teaching theory, but you might be doing it in a way that doesn't correspond with the traditional pen-and-paper style. If so, great! Now you may be in a position to consolidate it further through writing.

If you strictly follow an exam syllabus and use it as a curriculum – as many people do – it is important first to have a thorough understanding of theory yourself and how it connects to the broader picture. For example, although theory might be given 5/100 marks in some exam boards, it doesn't mean that it is not valuable. As examiner, I have often encountered candidates who do not reflect on what they have done when playing a piece of music as their answers frequently reveal. For example: – what does *f* mean? – *Forte* means slow (*forte* is loud). Even though the candidate may have played it loudly in the exam, their answer suggests they have viewed or learned theory as a completely separate component. The answer may even be correct, but in the exam this passage was played quietly. During the lesson, talk through what *forte* means and encourage the student to reflect on what it is they are doing at that point. Similarly, keys of pieces, time signatures, and the character of a piece are frequently answered as though divorced from the performance. Link the key to the corresponding scale, develop awareness of pulse for the appropriate time signature, think about what you are trying to portray through your performance.



When should I teach theory?

All lessons should include theory even if implicit rather than explicit. The written part of theory is best introduced when students have experienced both the music and concept you are formally about to present. For example, there is little use introducing students to time signatures and pulse if their attention has never been drawn to how the pulse feels, or if there isn't any emphasis on or acknowledgement of a pulse when playing pieces. Avoid introducing key signatures and writing scales on manuscript paper if your student has never played or sang a scale or thought about the accidentals in the piece they are playing.

My students refuse to learn theory. What should I do?

Similar to the word 'practising', theory has come to have a negative meaning, probably because of students or even parents' previous experience of what theory was for them. It doesn't have to be like this. Teach theory in a meaningful and creative way so that students understand it, see it as stimulating, that helps them to grasp its broader application. Often, what students are referring to is not liking the written part of theory rather than theory itself. Draw connections between what they are doing and its place in theory, but in a timely fashion, and ideally when they have first internalised it.

My student only wants to learn for fun!

I have had students who have just wanted to learn music for 'fun', by which they meant no scales, no aural work, no sight-reading, no theory, no 'classical' music, no exams. In some cases, their interaction with music had either previously been exam focussed, where they may have considered each component of music in the same manner as exams – all categories separate– or they have preconceptions about what learning music requires. Shortcuts don't make it fun, being an independent learner makes music fun.

Students who want to learn for 'fun' might use the language analogy i.e. we speak first and read and write later. This only really works if they are coming to the first lesson, like their language, exposed to music a lot and in a way that allows them to be able to play by ear and in a way that they have internalised music without realising it. This does happen. Some of the most enjoyable lessons I have ever had were with someone who had learned to play music by ear while being a member of a band. He listened to a lot of music and explored instruments out of curiosity. He now wanted to take it further: write his own music, read other music, and understand it all from another angle. He told me he was starting from zero, probably because he hadn't learned theory in the traditional sense. Yet my initial assessment confirmed that he already knew **so much**. He was delighted to realise this – he had assumed that you could only really learn through formal lessons – and to realise that he had already a strong sense of pulse, rhythm, harmony. Learning the reason behind how it all worked was a rewarding experience for him. He made the connections between theory and how this worked in practice. This should always be the case. Students can learn for 'fun' and have structure but ultimately, music-making requires a level of understanding of the components of music whether this is achieved in an informal or formal setting.



Still not convinced, let's stay with the language analogy. If you wanted to learn Russian, say, you may find immersion the best way rather than a classroom setting, but immersion within a certain context, right? Would you find immersion to be productive if put into an office to work in Russia with only Russian speakers when you have zero knowledge of the language? Requesting to learn music for fun can feel a little bit like this to teachers at times. It translates something like this: 'teach me the really difficult stuff immediately, I don't want to know anything else. I don't like verbs, I don't like reading, or writing'. So, to go back to our Russian language example, it would be similar to asking your teacher to help you recite a passage from Tolstoy or to learn some phrases off by heart; you are not concerned with understanding them or being able to engage with the Russian language outside of these passages. Suppose though, that you were to start with introductions, or signs on a street, or food on a menu, you might find that it is less overwhelming, there is greater meaning in the language learning, you have time to digest it all, and eventually, you may get to work in that office. Otherwise, you might just get frustrated and give up.

So, what's the problem?

The problem isn't necessarily theory; often it's the way we teach it, what it is we think it might involve, and sometimes underestimating its value on our musical journeys. As teachers, we never stop learning, but if there has been a tendency for theory not to form part of music lessons, in a meaningful way, there is a strong possibility that someone reading this (not everyone of course) might have been brought up musically through this system. Gaps in your knowledge would therefore be understandable. To avoid going down the route of presenting theory as a list of terms to learn, it's important to ask yourself, as all teachers should: how effective are my lessons? Can I learn more?
