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Michael Buchler

## REPORT ON AMERICAN MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMS IN MUSIC THEORY

Summarizing American master's degree programs in music theory is a difficult task. In the United States, there are no national standards, either official or implicit, for what constitutes a master's degree in music theory (which we Americans generally take to mean music theory *and* analysis) and there are at least three different sorts of master's degrees offered: a "stand-alone" degree that helps students prepare for doctoral studies either at that same school or elsewhere, a master's degree that is earned en route to a Ph.D. at the same school and does not have separate (and separable) requirements, and a master's degree in theory pedagogy, which is not especially common, but which is generally meant for students who either have an interest in teaching music theory at a non-research university or to help musicians who are earning doctorates in performance or music education gain the training they need to teach some undergraduate theory courses.<sup>1</sup> A degree in theory pedagogy can be particularly helpful for performers who get jobs at smaller schools or who will have small studios (e.g., some bassoonists and harpists) and will also need to teach another subject to be a full-time professor.

This report will focus on American master's degrees that emphasise research. While most schools that confer graduate theory degrees offer the master's degree in music theory, an increasing number of prominent schools have elected to do away with the master's degree in music theory altogether and simply accept students directly from undergraduate work into doctoral study.

That direct link from bachelor's to doctoral study has been the norm at several of our Ivy League universities (Yale, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania) for years, but a growing number of other programs including the University of

1. At least three American schools offer a master's degree in theory pedagogy: The University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, Johns Hopkins University's Peabody Conservatory, and Michigan State University (where one can focus on teaching, research, or both during the master's degree)

Rochester's Eastman School of Music and the University of Michigan now allow students to bypass a master's degree altogether. Some of these schools confer the master's degree (usually Master of Arts) en route to the Ph.D.<sup>2</sup> It is generally awarded after successfully completing a certain number of classes and/or exams, but in these programs the M.M. (Master of Music) or M.A. (Master of Arts) requirements are not separable from the Ph.D. requirements. (Some schools offer an M.A., others an M.M. in music theory; it does not appear to me that there are definable and consistent differences between M.A. and M.M. theory degrees in the United States.) Yale University even offers two non-separable master's degrees: a Master of Arts, awarded after completing seven classes and a language exam, and a Master of Philosophy after completing all of the other Ph.D. requirements other than the dissertation. These are milestones en route to the Ph.D. and they are also often junctures where faculty can elect to dismiss students whose work has fallen short of doctoral expectations.

Most American universities that offer graduate work in music theory do offer master's programs. I surveyed colleagues at sixteen different schools that offer stand-alone theory master's programs (M.M. or M.A. degrees that are not defined subsets of a Ph.D. program at the same school) and asked the following questions:

1. What are the central goals of your theory/analysis master's degree? How do they differ from your goals for doctoral students (if you have doctoral students)?
2. What are the core courses that all theory/analysis master's degree students must take at your school?

The responses I received suggest that we American music theorists share some broad common goals for and curricular requirements in our master's degrees. However, there were also some marked differences that I had not expected.<sup>3</sup>

2. It might be worth noting that I earned my master's degree in music theory from the University of Michigan (in 1990).
3. Many thanks to the following forty professors, who teach at a wide variety of schools across the United States, and who responded to my brief survey and helped me gain a firmer grasp of the landscape of American music theory master's degrees: Byron Almén (University of Texas at Austin), Vincent Benitez (Pennsylvania State University), Jack Boss (University of Oregon), Matthew Bribitzer-Stull (University of Minnesota), Steven Bruns (University of Colorado), Guy Capuzzo, Adrian Childs, David Clampitt, David Damschroder (University of Minnesota), Gregory Decker (Bowling Green State University), Nora Engebretsen (Bowling Green State University), Anna Gawboy (Ohio State University), Cynthia Gonzales (Texas State University), Sumanth Gopinath (University of Minnesota), Christopher Hasty (Harvard University), Dave Headlam (Eastman School of Music), Áine Heneghan (University of Michigan), Julian Hook (Indiana University–Bloomington), Jason Hooper (University of Massachusetts Amherst), Eric Isaacson (Indiana University–Bloomington), Michael Klein (Temple University), Stanley Kleppinger (University of Nebraska), Edward Klorman (Queens College, New York), Daphne Leong (University of Colorado), Catherine Losada (University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music), Elizabeth West Marvin (Eastman School of Music), William Marvin (Eastman School of Music), Timothy McKinney (Baylor University), Jana Millar (Baylor University), Sam Ng

In stand-alone programs, many of my respondents viewed the central aims of master's degrees to be a general introduction to the field of music (particularly music-theoretical) scholarship and to prepare them for doctoral studies. Students in our undergraduate programs generally do not have a chance to engage in detailed study of what we might think of as the core topics of music-theoretical scholarly research. Indeed, the courses commonly called "music theory" for our first- and second-year undergraduate (bachelor's degree) students often train students to part-write in four voices, label harmonies, write simple counterpoint, and understand common tonal forms. These are important skills, to be sure, and they're integral to undertaking advanced study, but they constitute only a small part of what we do as theorists.

I estimate that a substantial majority of our undergraduate students who are in performance or music education programs never take courses that require them to meaningfully engage with so-called advanced topics. Such students often have to satisfy long lists of degree requirements that are proscribed by our universities and by our accrediting agencies, so it can be difficult to squeeze in an extra class in Schenkerian analysis, history of theory, advanced post-tonal analytical techniques, or music theory pedagogy. Accordingly, those are the courses that most commonly form the core of American masters' degree programs in music theory.

By and large, the purpose of American stand-alone (research-oriented) master's programs in music theory is to introduce students to the breadth of our scholarly field. Here are three similar perspectives from distinguished scholars who teach at large public universities with music theory graduate programs:

Keith Waters, University of Colorado–Boulder: «[Our program provides] students with a sense of the landscape of the discipline, with sufficient training to be accepted into a nationally-ranked Ph.D. program [and they] develop appropriate research skills via a master's thesis».

Stanley Kleppinger, University of Nebraska–Lincoln: «As much as is possible in limited time [two years], our curriculum tries to provide a broad (if shallow) introduction to the main "streams" of theory. Our thinking is that doctoral work, should the student choose it, will provide the chance to select a specialization within music theory for deeper exploration».

(University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music), Jeffrey Perry (Louisiana State University), Ian Quinn (Yale University), Nancy Rogers (Florida State University), William Rothstein (Queens College and City University of New York Graduate Center), Phillip Ruprecht (Duke University), Matthew Santa (Texas Tech University), David Schwarz (University of North Texas), Stephen Slottow (University of North Texas), Dmitri Tymoczko (Princeton University), and Keith Waters (University of Colorado).

Julian Hook, Indiana University–Bloomington: «The objective of the master’s program is a broad-based familiarity with the important areas of contemporary music theory scholarship. It contrasts with our Ph.D. program in that the latter is much more specialized and individualized, emphasizing in-depth study of areas of particular interest to the student. The master’s program consists of a nearly-fixed curriculum of theory courses, essentially the same for all students, while Ph.D. students choose the seminars of greatest interest to them».

Our field was once stereotyped rather narrowly, as nothing but Schenkerian analysis, set theory, and history of theory, but a glance at any recent Society for Music Theory program or a perusal of the contents of our Society’s journals (*Music Theory Spectrum*, *MTO*, and the brand new video journal, *SMT-V*) reveals a dramatic expansion of our field’s topics for scholarly inquiry. In addition to the subdisciplines that have formed the traditional (or simply stereotypical) core of our field, we now embrace research on cognition and perception, on various epistemologies and methodologies of tonal and atonal analysis, on narrative and semiotic readings, on music theory pedagogy, on music and philosophy, and on the interrelationship of mathematics and music (and I certainly don’t intend this list to be a comprehensive summary). A two-year master’s program can scarcely transform one into a music-theoretical polymath, but we can, I hope, give students the basic training needed to engage with the diverse range of music-theoretical scholarship in the twenty-first century.

At Florida State University (where I teach), that entails completing one-semester courses in Schenkerian analysis, atonal analysis, and pedagogy of music theory (though two semesters of each are offered). In the analysis courses, the first semester is devoted to becoming adept at applying the methodology in relatively straightforward and clear musical situations and the second semester is devoted to more advanced techniques, to analysis of complex music, and to critical readings that both expand and problematize the discipline. Our students then have a menu of other options: they can either take a course in current music theory readings or a course in history of theory, they take a counterpoint class, a history class, a music bibliography class, and some electives. Our students can either write a master’s thesis that serves as the capstone of their degree or they can choose to take three more courses in music theory. Almost all of our students choose the non-thesis option, and we believe that this is a good fit with our goal of giving students a strong taste of our field’s breadth.

Beyond our own coursework, we also encourage our graduate students (both master’s and doctoral) to attend national, regional, and occasionally international conferences. This way, they can explore the most current trends and, when we travel to conferences with our students, we can use the scholarly talks as springboards

for productive discussions. Our students also host their own small scholarly conference at Florida State University every spring.

Our master's degree program substantially resembles those at Indiana University, University of Colorado, Bowling Green State University, Ohio State University, Queens College (CUNY), Louisiana State University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Penn State University, University of Nebraska, University of Texas at Austin, Texas Tech University, Texas State University, Temple University, Baylor University and other schools.

Some master's degree programs have more required courses (minimising the number of electives a student can take); some have fewer requirements, thereby giving students greater freedom to take courses that interest them (but perhaps creating a situation where students of a particular program graduate with less baseline knowledge).<sup>4</sup>

We want our master's students to be comfortable speaking the language of music theory, reading articles, and hearing talks in the field. We recognise that there is a huge difference between reading and producing great scholarship (just as there is a difference between reading books and being able to write them). If the goal of our M.M. program is to develop reading knowledge; the goal of our Ph.D. program is to develop writing and researching skills. Of course, all Ph.D. students must ultimately produce a considerable and original piece of research and the doctoral coursework is geared toward helping students narrow their research focus, write substantial papers, develop their own scholarly voices, and become productive members of our academic community.

4. One program where required classes are minimised is the University of Minnesota, where students must take at least six music theory seminars, but no particular classes on any given music theoretical subject.