

Wandering about the Practice/ Theory Axis

Taxonomies of Conservatory Education¹

At most conservatories, music education depends on a division of labor that has engendered fields of 'practice' and 'theory'. Roughly speaking, the 'practice' field features skills training, one-on-one or ensemble tuition, and real-life simulation (in or outside the institution); the 'theory' field features knowledge-based education, group sessions, and academic forms of assessment (e.g., written and viva examinations, essays and oral papers).

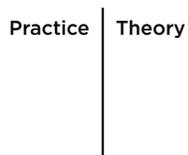
Conventional wisdom has it that practice and theory complement each other; conventional habit, however, has thrown them into competition. What matters is *time*: how should we divide the hours of teaching and self-study between the two fields? And it is *content*: which subjects should be taught, and to which ends should they be tailored, both individually and collectively?

These questions can generate tensions among the faculty, especially between representations of different communities of practice: performers, educationalists, music theorists, musicologists, psychologists and therapists. Many efforts have been made to contain these tensions, usually by adapting theory more to practical needs. However, while such efforts occasionally succeeded in bridging the practice/theory divide, they have affirmed it in the long run. This is because they were usually predicated on an essentialist understanding of this divide. Essentialism holds that the referent of a term truly exists when it can be shown to possess a set of indispensable ('essential') properties. Seen thus, when we refer to 'practice', we think of properties that 'theory' must be lacking, and vice versa. I began above by specifying such properties for both categories. However, this paper takes a critical stance on the essentialist perspective. It develops a more pragmatic, nominalist approach to the practice/theory divide, which in my view opens prospects for a more productive and sustainable rapport between professional parties represented on the faculty of a conservatory.²

From a nominalist point of view, the terms 'practice' and 'theory' are indefinite signifiers. They do not refer to something that is out there in the real world but are used to divide a range of human occupations. We conceive of them as the opposite sides of an axis about which to distribute the various relations that people can bear to a subject, a craft, a thing, or an event. But how do we know that we are on one side of the axis or the other when attending a class or performing a task? What are our criteria of distribution? The gist of the following argument is that these criteria are not fixed and stable – nor are they always coherent. I will show that they are subject to continuous negotiation. For we have more than one perspective on the practice/theory axis; and a change of perspective can move us about it, even while we continue with what we were doing.

For a first perspective, we ask ourselves how we obtain the knowledge and aptitude to do well in a profession. This is the perspective of *equipment*, seen from which 'practice' and 'theory' represent two different origins, and hence two different kinds of knowledge: one emanating from *experience* (practice, on the left side of the axis), and the other from *reason* (theory, on the right side of the axis):

Perspective: Equipment



What is at issue is the valuation of these two kinds of knowledge in the context of a music education program, and the roles consequently assigned to them. What kind of ability do we expect from prospective musicians, and what kind of training is appropriate to offer them? It is obvious that such training should aim at an accumulation of experience and know-how, so as to enable these musicians to act in the world and perform their complex tasks under the public gaze. What they can learn from reasoning is to unravel the many layers of these tasks – technique, idiom, style, communication, etc. – and to identify and solve problems they encounter while practicing, rehearsing, and teaching.

If we view the practice/theory axis from this perspective - the perspective of equipment - how would we distribute the various components of a music education program about it? I will now specify four cases:

- Sight-singing exercises with triplets extending over two beats
- An ensemble training session: intonation in the 'Quasi Sostenuto' section of the first movement of Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, op. 115
- An analysis assignment: The B-flat minor Fugue (WTC II) of J.S. Bach
- A lecture on learning styles

One may wonder why these descriptions should be so specific. I could as well have chosen to speak of a solfeggio class, of ensemble training and music analysis *tout court*, and of a whole course in music pedagogy rather than just one lecture – but I did not. Why? Because one can't tell from the mere title or generic description of a course whether it weighs more towards the 'theory' or 'practice' side of a music education program. This distinction cuts across the nominal division of such a program. There are simply too many ways in which one can teach a course, and these ways may qualify as being more practically or more theoretically oriented – not the courses themselves.

Three of our four cases – the sight-singing exercises, the ensemble training session, and the analysis assignment – share an experiential approach,³ which means that the student is given something to learn by 'doing'. From the perspective of equipment, then, these three program items should appear on the left side of the axis, under 'practice':

Perspective: Equipment

Practice	Theory
Sight-singing exercises triplets extending over two beats	A lecture on learning styles
Ensemble training session: intonation in Brahms, op. 115, I	
An analysis assignment: Bach's Fugue in B-flat minor (WTC II)	

Some will argue that the analysis assignment does not belong here, since working on such an assignment – insofar as it involves a written paper with musical examples, charts, diagrams, etc. – is not daily bread and butter for every performing musician. However, the question if and to what extent this experience resembles an aspect of a musician's professional life should not concern us yet. We have only been discussing the nature, not the actual use, of the knowledge and skills developed in music education. If we raise that question now, we get caught in a confusion of perspectives, which for one time I would care to avoid. Analysis, as musicians have learned it, is a practical skill.

For a second perspective, we ask ourselves what purpose or good our education serves. This is the perspective of *commitment*, seen from which 'practice' and 'theory' represent two sets of disciplines, 'applied' and 'pure'. The difference between them has been succinctly put by Keith Cash, in an article on nursing education: '[applied disciplines] produce actions or artefacts, [pure disciplines] are concerned with truth.'⁴ In other words, we are educated in a discipline

either to provide goods, tools, services, and objects of value and meaning, or to engage in the production and transmission of knowledge.

That is perhaps too succinct. The distinction between ‘applied’ and ‘pure’ disciplines – itself echoing Kant’s distinction between practical and theoretical reason – is part of a much more complex taxonomy of teaching domains, developed over the years by educational theorists such as Anthony Biglan, David Kolb, Tony Becher and Paul Trowler.⁵ However, it has had a great bearing on the discussion about the relation between practice and theory in the conservatory, and especially on the image of theory as something that cannot stand on its own two feet in an environment so much concerned with concrete action.

When contemplating the distribution of teaching subjects about the practice/theory axis from this perspective (the perspective of commitment), we would have to identify them as ‘applied’ or ‘pure’.

However, we cannot do this without taking another variable into account – apart from (again) the way in which courses are taught. This other variable is the student, whose aspirations and prospects for employment may draw a subject to either side of this axis, at least from the perspective of commitment. Consider, for example, a student who plays the clarinet and pursues the dream of becoming principal in a major symphony orchestra, but who is realistic enough to prepare herself for work in a variety of professional settings. For such a student the distribution might change as follows:

Perspective: Commitment

Practice	Theory
Sight-singing exercises triplets extending over two beats	An analysis assignment: Bach’s Fugue in B-flat minor (WTC II)
Ensemble training session: intonation in Brahms, op. 115, I	
A lecture on learning styles	

The lecture on learning styles and the analysis assignment have swapped their positions. The former may find ready application in an evolving teaching practice, which at first may only supplement the hours spent on our student’s deeper-felt ambition, but over time stands a chance of becoming a source of pleasure in its own right. The analysis assignment, on the other hand, is further removed from the practice to which this student is committed, not so much because of the required skill as mainly because of the piece and the particular breed of intricacies to be found

therein. To be sure, there are many reasons to let her do it, but we should not blame her for classifying this assignment as a ‘theory’ assignment.

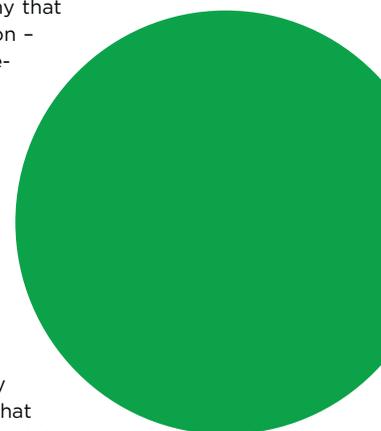
For a third perspective, we raise another question: how stable or dynamic is the field in which we are working, and thus how passive or active is the role that we can play as actors in that field? In other words: can we make a difference, and what does that require from us? This is the perspective of space, seen from which practice and theory represent lower and higher degrees of prior intellectual and/or material organization. Igor Stravinsky used the word ‘theoretical’ in this sense when he compared his achievements with those of Schoenberg and his students, in a conversation with Robert Craft:

I was guided by no system whatever in *Le Sacre du Printemps*. When I think of other composers of that time who interest me – Berg, who is synthetic (in the best sense), Webern, who is analytic, and Schoenberg, who is both – how much more theoretical their music seems than *Le Sacre*; and these composers were supported by a great tradition, whereas very little immediate tradition lies behind *Le Sacre du Printemps*. I had only my ear to help me. I heard and I wrote what I heard. I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed.⁶

I need not go to any length to show the untruthfulness of this statement. Suffice it to stress the irony that not only was *Le Sacre* a product of a tradition – Russian art music⁷ – but also Stravinsky’s statement itself, ejected as it seems to have been from an old production line of commodious ideas.⁸ Nonetheless, it is important to take that statement seriously, if only because many in the music industry still live by those ideas.

Therefore, let us go over Stravinsky’s words one more time, just in order to grab their sense. He first sketches a playing field saturated by ‘tradition’, which urges Schoenberg and his followers to proceed by ‘system’, or by ‘theory’. (Apparently, this is what tradition demands, also from those who want to break through its barriers and revitalize it.) Subsequently, this historically saturated and organized playing field is opposed to the open space that Stravinsky himself has decided to enter, using only his ear – nature – as a source of authority.

This is also a familiar way to define and oppose practice and theory: practice as being essentially open-ended and informed by the flux of life, theory as being more concerned with regulation and containment. What does it mean for the distribution of teaching subjects about the practice/theory axis? We should now measure our four cases by the space they offer the student for discovery and self-expression. And this is the likely result:



Perspective: Space

Practice	Theory
Ensemble training session: intonation in Brahms, op. 115, I	Sight-singing exercises triplets extending over two beats
An analysis assignment: Bach's Fugue in B-flat minor (WTC II)	A lecture on learning styles

We find music analysis and music rehearsal under 'practice' because they are essentially open-ended processes. It is true, they are vulnerable to normative pressure, but this is a contingent matter. From the present perspective (the perspective of space), the sight-singing exercises would probably count as theory, a status not assigned to them under either of the previous perspectives. Obviously, triplets extending over two beats, unlike *Le Sacre du Printemps*, should pass through any vessel.

This touches on another question, which provides us with the fourth and last perspective on the practice/theory axis – the perspective of *ownership*. The question can be put as follows: is our education private or collective? But this is not entirely accurate, for one-on-one tuition need not be exclusive from the viewpoint of content. When a private teacher had trained us to sing supertriplets accurately from sight, few would confuse our mastery of that skill with ownership. Ownership implies that teaching has proceeded in response to a student, to her talent, interests and mindset. Therefore, the question should be more specific: do we become the true and exclusive owners of what we have learned from our teacher, or will we only be shareholders of a fund of learning?

It is not illogical to associate 'theory' with shareholding, as a less exclusive form of ownership. A theory, at least in the scientific sense, is supposed to hold not for a single case of a particular phenomenon but for an infinite number of them, observed under specified conditions. It is a statement or set of statements of general purport. Such generality is often held against the singularity of an artistic achievement. However, we may also apply the word 'theory' – perhaps more metaphorically – to a general program of learning, the aims of which transcend the individual needs of those enrolled. Seen thus, even one-on-one lessons with an instrumental teacher may appear on the right side of the practice/theory axis, namely when students should study a more or less fixed repertoire of sonatas and concertos in a more or less fixed order. And a history course may be found on the left side of the axis when it doesn't follow a general syllabus, but addresses topics selected in consultation with the students.

Now, if we ask ourselves to which of the four earlier-defined cases the idea of individual ownership is most applicable, the answer is, perhaps

surprisingly: the analysis assignment. This is a task on which one can work alone, with at least a chance of achieving something singular: an astounding view of the composition at hand. The other three cases do not satisfy these criteria – at most, they meet only one of them. There is a chance that rehearsing intonation in the 'Quasi Sostenuuto' section of Brahms's Clarinet Quintet will lead to the discovery of unforeseen depths, but this will be seen first and foremost as a collective achievement. In an environment focused on individual education and development, like a conservatory, such a discovery may not be ranked among the decisive moments in a student's career. Does this mean that the larger the collective, the less will be the identification with the tasks at hand? Henry Kingsbury, in his anthropological study of conservatory life, noted that 'orchestra playing is perceived by many students as a threat to [their] ... individual and professional development'.⁹ Of course, such feelings may be outbalanced by a strong commitment to orchestral or ensemble practice. Under the perspective of individual ownership alone, however, the ensemble training session shifts to the 'theory' side of the practice/theory axis:

Perspective: Ownership

Practice	Theory
An analysis assignment: Bach's Fugue in B-flat minor (WTC II)	Ensemble training session: intonation in Brahms, op. 115, I
	Sight-singing exercises triplets extending over two beats
	A lecture on learning styles

Each of our four cases has appeared at least once on either side of the practice/theory axis. This means that each case can qualify as having practical value but can also be perceived as further removed from immediate experience and application. It should be noticed that this is the result not of an experiment but of a speculative exercise. I haven't shown through which lenses music students tend to look at the practice/theory axis. The goal of the exercise was to unravel the complexity behind the language used in educational discussions. This complexity often goes unnoticed, leaving the discussions wanting. A simple binary opposition cannot do justice to the various dimensions and the multiple possible mappings of conservatory education.

That said, have we now added enough nuance to mirror the complexity of the relationship between practice and theory in a conservatory environment (and beyond)? This remains doubtful. The consistent association of theory with remoteness, for example, raises questions. The impression may have been formed that, whichever perspective we use, a case is perceived as less relevant when it appears on the right side of the practice/theory axis.

There are two answers to this. First, although the various perspectives on the axis have been presented one by one, there need not be an exclusive choice between them. In other words, music students may look at the axis through a 'multifocal' lens, seeing different aspects of a class they attend or of an assignment on which they are working. Thus, as we have seen, a lecture on learning styles can be perceived as a theoretical exercise, because it places the students in a passive role. For those who are already teaching, however, it may provide stimuli to action. To the casual eye, their role would be as passive as that of the others, and they would probably be aware of it; but in their minds they would practice what they just heard. Perhaps they would rise to their feet and become active interlocutors, thereby changing the nature of the session. For the audience as a whole, the practical and theoretical aspects would offer more value each, as it could hold these aspects in one view.

Second, this paper represented a nominalist view on 'practice' and 'theory'. In other words, it did not attribute generic properties to the referents of these terms. Rather, it searched for possible rules that guide musicians in their categorization of teaching and learning situations. The next step would be to determine more rigorously whether such rules apply, and if so, to try to comprehend why they have prevailed. To be sure, remoteness is not per se a distinguishing characteristic of everything that qualifies as 'theory', but it is interesting to note that this association is always lurking in the background. An explanation demands a broad frame of reference. The perception of a practice/theory divide in professional music education has a history that extends into earlier centuries as well as into other professional fields. It is a history of higher education gradually becoming more accessible (less exclusive), more specific (less generic), and more dynamic (less stable); a history that can be seen as one long move from right to left across the practice/theory axis. That history should be taken into account in a study of the values and meanings connected with the terms 'practice' and 'theory'.

Finally, I come to the reason why I expect a nominalist view of the practice/theory divide to offer a better starting point for coordination and collaboration among the faculty of a conservatory than an essentialist one. In such a view, as this paper has shown, no member or group of members belongs to one side of this divide. They all have been crossing it in their own teaching practices - why wouldn't they enjoy each other's company along the way?

- 1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Twelfth Conference of the Dutch/Flemish Society for Music Theory in Amsterdam (March 12, 2010), at the Institute of Musical Research, London (April 28, 2011), and at the Music & Research Festival of the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts, Tilburg (April 4, 2016).
- 2 For a similar approach, relating to social work, see: Sylvia Fargon, 'Theory and Practice: A Matter of Words. Language, Knowledge and Community in Social Work', *Social Work and Society: International Online Journal* 15/2 (2017). URL: <https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/121/537> (accessed January 31, 2018).
- 3 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience at the Source of Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984.
- 4 Keith Cash, 'The Pure and the Applied in Nursing Education,' *Nurse Education Today* 25 (2005), pp. 663-667.
- 5 Anthony Biglan, 'The Characteristics of Subject Matter in Different Academic Areas,' *Journal of Applied Psychology* 37/3 (1973), pp. 195-203; David A. Kolb, 'Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences,' in: *The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society*, ed. Arthur W. Chickering, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981, pp. 232-255; Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*, 2nd ed., Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2005.
- 6 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962, pp. 147-148.
- 7 See Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, vol 1, p. 937.
- 8 Stravinsky unconsciously appropriated an image that August Wilhelm Schlegel had conjured up 151 years earlier: 'the eternal spirit of poetry, passing through different bodies' ('der unvergängliche, aber gleichsam durch verschiedene Körper wandernde Geist der Poesie'). *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* [1811], ed. Vittorio Giovanni Amoretti, Bonn: Kurt Schröder, 1923, vol. 2, p. 112.
- 9 Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988, p. 54.