

Ruf, Benedikt

## Doing music theory? Teachers' notions about practice when teaching music theory

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### Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS  
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation  
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung  
E-Mail: [pedocs@dipt.de](mailto:pedocs@dipt.de)  
Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

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Benedikt Ruf

# Doing Music Theory?

## Teachers' Notions about Practice When Teaching Music Theory

Music pedagogues and scholars seem to agree that music theory must be taught practically: Ruismäki and Juvonen point out that music theory is a common cause of negative experiences in music lessons. They consider music theory, which for them seems to consist in particular of reading music, to be quite difficult – if not impossible – to understand “if it is taught separately from everything else and not directly connected to practice” (2011, p. 120). The authors see the cause of this difficulty to lie in the fact that music theory is taught separately from other subjects and lacks a connection to practice. Music theorist Diether de la Motte summarises “Music theory should always be about musical practice” (1988, p. 736) and music pedagogical authors emphasise the role of practice in the context of general thoughts on music teaching (Nimczik, 2001) as well as regarding concrete proposals for the design of lessons (Mascher 2002; Köhler, 2002).

A close reading and comparison of these texts show that the term practice<sup>1</sup> is used to describe different things. Ruismäki and Juvonen use “practice” (2011, p. 120) to refer to pupils playing an instrument. De la Motte refers to the fact that pupils can hear music in their heads. In the music educators’ texts, “practice” (1988, p. 736) means making music together in the classroom.

The question arises whether teachers also understand something different by the term practice. If their notions are like those of the music educators and scholars cited, it is not a question of practice in the sense of praxeology or practice theory. Rather, they

<sup>1</sup> See the next paragraph for a clarification of the term practice. It should be kept in mind that the concept of *Praxis* (practice) has long played an important role in the German-language discourse on pedagogy and music education, typically in relation to theory (e.g., Weniger, 1929/1952, Rauhe, Reinecke, and Ribke, 1975, Abel-Struth, 1980, Lehmann-Wermser & Niessen, 2004). It is therefore understandable that the term represents an important point of reference.

seem to be notions of practice defined as being distinct from – and in relation to – theory. Lehmann-Wermser & Niessen (2004, p. 134) critically observe a common juxtaposition of the two terms, which seems to imply that they exist separately. Alternatively, the distinction between theory and practice can be considered a schema that guides observations, thought of on an epistemological, rather than an ontological, level (Fuchs, 2004, p. 35; see also Gravett, 2012, p. 2).

Why is it interesting what notions of practice teachers have? From a sociology of knowledge perspective, it can be assumed that teachers' perceptions are important for how a topic is treated in the classroom (Bogner & Menz, 2009, pp. 72–73). Educational research shows that teachers' beliefs have an impact on students' learning success (Peterson, Fennema, Carpenter & Loef, 1989; Staub & Stern, 2002). As the role of practice in teaching music theory is often emphasised, I assume that different notions may affect the way music theory is taught. Therefore, I investigate what notions of practice are in use among teachers. With the title "Doing music theory" I emphasise that, in reference to the book theme "Music is what people do", teachers believe an engagement with music theory has to become practical. In this paper I try to reconstruct what this means for them.

## Research Project and Method

The research presented in this article forms part of my dissertation project<sup>2</sup> investigating how teachers think about teaching music theory. I conducted interviews with teachers, which I then transcribed. In the interviews, the teachers often emphasise the role of practice. However, they seem to understand this term in different ways. This led to the question pursued in this paper: What notions of practice do teachers cultivate in the context of teaching music theory? As a further research question, I tried to answer *why* practice is an important concept in the context of teaching music theory.

Research process and analysis were based on the Grounded Theory Methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This methodology makes it possible for me to answer my research questions: on the one hand, it allows me to reconstruct the concepts of the teachers interviewed whilst, on the other hand, it enables me to develop a theory based on data.

In the course of coding, I identified different concepts of practice (for the following, see Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 221–278).<sup>3</sup> This process began with open coding. In doing so, I identified practice as a potentially relevant concept and found starting points for what distinguishes it. On this basis, I recoded the transcripts and included statements from the

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<sup>2</sup> The dissertation project on which this text is based was supported by the Hanns Seidel Foundation with funds from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

<sup>3</sup> With this approach, I also identified different concepts of music theory, see Ruf (2014).

interviewees in the analysis that had similar characteristics, even if they did not explicitly mention *'practice'*. Finally, I used axial coding to relate notions of practice to notions of theory that I had also reconstructed.

My sample consists of 11 teachers at Bavarian high schools. All of them teach according to the same or similar curricula, which allows for comparison. Following Truschkat, Kaiser-Belz, and Volkmann (2011) I combined purposeful, systematic and random sampling, as most external criteria such as seniority and gender proved not to be relevant.<sup>4</sup> I ended the sampling after fewer and fewer new aspects emerged and finally, in the eleventh interview, no new insights at all were gained, i.e., a theoretical saturation had been reached. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and translated them into English for this text; emphasised words are underlined>. In the following, I will use quotes from my interviews to describe both notions of practice in more detail and show how I proceeded with my analysis.

## Results

The interviewees emphasise the role of practice. They all seem to agree that there should be a kind of *'practical'* approach to music theory. However, a closer analysis reveals that the corresponding focus points on practice are understood quite differently. Two distinctly different notions of what is meant by practice in the context of music theory can be described:

- (1) Practice as positively related to theory: it is assumed that there is theoretically informed practice. Practice can thus benefit from an engagement with theory.
- (2) Practice as negatively related to theory: practice and theory are seen as disjunctive. If they are linked, this is done by bringing together moments in teaching that are thought of as theoretical and practical, respectively. Practice is thought of as non-theory.

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<sup>4</sup> I combined several approaches to collect possible contacts. Firstly, I used the snowball method, i.e. I asked the interviewee for further recommendations. There is a danger that those recommended in this way resemble the recommenders. Therefore, I pointed out that I would be particularly interested in people who think differently, in order to achieve a certain contrast in the sample (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2014, p. 35). I also sought further recommendations by asking acquaintances from non-musical contexts about their music teachers and asking them to initiate contacts. Towards the end of the sampling, I specifically asked for normal music teachers in order to prevent my sample from containing mainly people who were particularly involved with music theory. Since field access was easy overall, I was able to choose from a large number of interview partners. I used the criteria of seniority, gender and whether they teach at a school with a music focus. All the teachers who were asked agreed to be interviewed. With regard to the sample, it is positive that there were no refusals as those "are often of a systematic nature", "their non-inclusion distorts the results in a certain direction in relation to the overall case" (Merkens 2008, p. 288).

Moreover, it becomes apparent that practice is a kind of umbrella term that encompasses quite different things.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the recourse to practice often seems to be a sort of panacea.

### ***Notion 1: Practice as Positively Related to Theory***

An example of the positive relationship between practice and theory can be found in the ideas of the interviewee Mr Böhm.<sup>6</sup> He distinguishes between music theory as it is done in his classroom and the kind which he experienced at the music university.

*So, when I think about how music theory is discussed in music university per se and the different methods of analysis and stuff, then music theory definitely didn't come up in my music classes. Rather in contexts with musical analysis and [...] creative composition, for example when [...] an accompaniment to a song was created or when an instrumental piece was written or something like that, so that the result was a sort of practically applied music theory (Mr Böhm)*

In this quote, Mr Böhm emphasises the application of music theory. For him, for it to be 'applied' seems to be the decisive criterion for music theory in school. He also seems to have experienced that music theory was discussed rather abstractly at university; for example, by comparing different methods of analysis. At school, in contrast, for him music theory knowledge has to be applied. This is not necessarily practical in the sense that pupils act in an observable way. For him, musical analysis is also typical of school music theory. For Mr Böhm, music theory in school seems to be something with which you should be able to do something. At another point he states:

*And in rare cases also in such a way that they [the pupils] are to become creative themselves, [...] that is often then completely "creative" between quotation marks in the sense that it is perhaps an own piece that they are to write (Mr Böhm)*

Mr Böhm's idea is that pupils should apply theory creatively. In this way, their actions are self-regulated, productive and yet theoretically informed. Similar passages are found in other interviews. Another teacher, Ms Junge describes how she teaches asymmetrical time signatures using examples. Afterwards, the pupils put into practice what they just learnt:

*And then they have to do it themselves; that is, clap themselves, find out the accents and then realise that these are actually compound measures. [...] and then they have to come up with asymmetrical measures themselves; that is, they have to put measures together and then (also) put stresses [...]. And then they try it out themselves and clap it against each other and that's a lot of fun for them. (Ms Junge)*

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<sup>5</sup> This also includes music practice. For the purposes of this paper, I will refrain from differentiating between music practice and practice in general, because the distinctions are vague.

<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



In the lesson described here, the pupils first realise that there are compound measures in the music piece they are listening to. To do this, they clap and analyse the distribution of the accents. Then they construct compound measures themselves and clap along. Again, the pupils actively apply the theory covered in class; again, their practice is theoretically informed.

Mr Fuchsinger, a third teacher, describes how he hands out worksheets on which the pupils are to practice music theory facts.<sup>7</sup> However, something else is crucial for him:

*And then above all, I tell everyone, come to the piano and play it for me. [...] That is for the ear! Not for any finger exercises. So play it for me and when you hear it, you'll get it. (Mr Fuchsinger)*

In comparison to the previous quotes, it is striking that Mr Fuchsinger assumes that the pupils can play the piano. This is because, like Ms Junge, he teaches at a high school with an explicit focus on music. In this kind of school, all pupils know how to play at least one musical instrument. In this respect, Ruismäki's and Juvonen's (2011, p. 120) indication that there is a connection with practice in the sense of instrument playing is realised there. It seems plausible that the abilities of the pupils can have an influence on which notion of practice the teachers apply to their music lessons. Practice as an application of music theory is much more obvious when it comes to pupils easily. Nevertheless, I assume that these abilities are not determinative. By this, I mean that teachers do not automatically cultivate a certain notion of practice depending on the abilities of their students. This is supported by the fact that Mr Böhm, who teaches at a school without a special focus on music, has a similar concept of practice as Ms Junge and Mr Fuchsinger, who teach at schools with a musical focus.

What constitutes practical access to music theory for the teachers cited so far? It seems crucial for them that music theory is put into practice. This can happen by analyzing or writing pieces, by (de)constructing time signatures or by learning to understand the content of music theory auditorily. There are a few more examples of this notion of applied music theory in my interviews. They exemplify one of the two notions of doing music theory that I have identified.

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<sup>7</sup> I do not have Mr Fuchsinger's worksheets. However, it can be assumed that the exercises are similar to those printed in the workbooks he also uses. Tasks there (using the 7<sup>th</sup> grade workbook as an example, see Adamczewski, Barth & Englhardt (2009, 7, 15, 22–23) for the following) are, for instance, to determine musical keys, to find dominant seventh chords of different fundamental notes, or to harmonize melodies with triads of the main steps.

### ***Notion 2: Practice as Negatively Related to Theory***

The notion that practice is negatively associated with theory was expressed much more frequently in the interviews. I identify seven relevant aspects related to this notion:

- (1) Practice is distinguished from theory.
- (2) Theory is problematised.
- (3) Making music in class is typical for this notion of practice.
- (4) Other pupil activities are also understood as practice if they can be observed externally.
- (5) Theory and practice are connected in that they are addressed in the classroom in temporal proximity.
- (6) This connection is not used to help pupils develop their aural abilities.
- (7) It seems questionable whether motivation for music theory can be achieved through this connection.

(1) The interviewees often distinguish practice from theory. Practice is understood as that which is not theory. Ms Kempf's description is typical of this:

*Theory is actually everything, I'm sorry to say so. Because with us there is little practice, I mean, of course you sing from time to time, but, or you listen to something, but, well, listening is actually also no practice, thus... Actually one would almost have to say, unfortunately, that 90 per cent are simply theory, everything that the pupils do not make themselves practically.* (Ms Kempf)

Ms Kempf assumes that theory and practice are distinct from one another. By practice she understands what the 'pupils [...] do practically themselves' – everything else is theory for her. The disjunction also implies that practice is non-theoretical. Similar juxtapositions are found frequently.

(2) Theory is often problematised in the process, as Ms Kempf does with the phrase 'I'm sorry to say so'. Ms Danninger describes in detail that music theory is often perceived in a very negative way. From her point of view, to put it into practice can prevent that: 'There are also teachers who torment their pupils with it, but today it is written in the curriculum that theory is always done in connection with practice anyway.' Practice seems to have a palliative function here, insofar as it prevents the torment that often accompanies theory. Several times during the interviews, the teachers also considered whether it would not make sense to do without music theory altogether. Mr Böhm does not take this position but puts it best: 'Perhaps I can do more for my pupils (2) much more if I don't explain the note values to them, but if I just sing or dance with them [...] every time.' Mr Erlenmann articulates himself similarly:

*Music lessons could also be limited to making music with the pupils. Then one could do without music theory altogether. [...] But that is not possible, because we are supposed to fulfill the curriculum more or less, and therefore music theory is taught. Although for those who don't play an instrument, I have the impression that it doesn't really help that much. (Mr Erlenmann)*

Mr Erlenmann distinguishes between music theory and music making and, from his point of view, music theory is of little use to many pupils. From his perspective, those who play an instrument are the most likely to benefit from music theory. One example of Mr Erlenmann's efforts to connect music theory and music practice is described thus:

*One always tries to connect music theory [...] to practical things, i. e., to singing, to an instrument, that for example all scales are played on the xylophone, because it is also relatively illustrative and even those who do not have an instrument can do it. That they also connect listening with doing. (Mr Erlenmann)*

(3) The typical case of practice as non-theory is 'making music' in the classroom. This points to the fact that practice – in the sense of playing instruments – can form one approach to music. However, the situation described by Mr Erlenmann involves instruments that are played without prerequisites. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that most of the pupils can actually play these instruments in the sense of Ruismäki and Juvonen (2011, p. 120). Thus, what is described is more akin to the ideas of the German music educators cited before (Köhler, 2002; Mascher, 2002; Nimczik, 2001) who suggest making music in the classroom with few prerequisites. The difference is important. The Finnish researchers consider music theory to only make sense for those pupils who already know how to play an instrument. The German music educators, on the other hand, point to the possibility that practice – in the sense of making music in class – can also make it meaningful to pick up music theory.

(4) However, practice in the sense discussed here does not only include making music.

*And of course, I always try to connect music theory to practice. So, I also work a lot with, for example, glockenspiels as instruments that the pupils are supposed to play, and I ask them to make a drawing of a keyboard [...] so that they then realise just by drawing themselves, that they draw the black keys incorrectly or some of them despite the model presented and then they realise whoops there is a semitone step. (Ms Danninger)*

The two examples Ms Danninger mentions here are clearly different but seemingly both understood as 'practice'. The first – to play glockenspiels – is part of making music which, as mentioned above, I consider to be typical of music theory in school. The other is to draw the keyboard, i. e. the arrangement of the white and black keys. But what do both activities

have in common? I presume that the crucial criterion here is that pupils are actually engaged in an observable activity.<sup>8</sup>

For Ms Danninger, drawing the keyboard should lead to pupils learning its layout. Similarly, Mr Erlenmann points out that playing scales on the xylophone is quite illustrative. These rationales point to ‘theory’ as content which can and must be logically grasped. This necessary act of logical comprehension seems to me only to be dressed up as ‘practice’ in the examples described. Simply because pupils are visibly active, teachers see it as ‘practice’. The same applies to the moments when music is made in the classroom in connection with the treatment of music theory.

*I also try to make sure that while making practical music I always sing songs, which are also in the specified keys and then always [...] I ask all the pupils to read the notes for a few minutes, line by line, so that they become familiar with reading notes, especially those who do not play an instrument. (Ms Danninger)*

(5) ‘Making practical music’<sup>9</sup> is an interesting tautology. My interpretation is that Ms Danninger wants to emphasise that ‘practice’ is happening here, that something is being done practically – and that it is something musical. For Ms Danninger, singing songs is ‘practice’, reading music is ‘theory’. From my point of view, what needs to be questioned is how the two are connected. I would argue that there is no integral connection between theory and practice in the teaching described by Ms Danninger. First, a song is sung, then the notes of the song are read. Theory and practice stand next to each other, they are linked additively, but do not interpenetrate. The same can be observed for Mr Erlenmann’s statement above stating ‘that for example the scales are all played on the (.) xylophone as well’. In another instance he also describes: ‘We sing a lot of songs [...] Then I just try to get to the note reading via the written notes there.’ Once again, the connection to music practice remains rather superficial. This seems conclusive to me insofar as Mr Erlenmann and Ms Danninger relate practice to theory in a negative way. Similar passages can be found in other interviewees’ statements regarding theory and practice as a kind of opposites as well.

(6) Do the teachers assume that students can improve their ability to listen musically when songs are sung and then the note names are read? At least in schools without a music focus, teachers are cautious about what can be achieved in this regard. In their view, the students can at most improve their ability to listen musically a little bit. As Ms Danninger was quoted earlier: Students ‘realise just by drawing themselves, that they draw the black keys

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<sup>8</sup> This is what Lehmann-Wermser and Niessen (2004), p. 134, describe as an “oversimplified notion” of practice.

<sup>9</sup> In German, Ms Danninger says “beim praktischen Musizieren”.

*incorrectly or some of them despite the model presented and then they realise whoops there is a semitone step.* The realisation that there should be a semitone step is gained visually, not auditorily. Similarly, Mr Erlenmann describes in the statement quoted earlier that it is *'illustrative'* when the scales are played on the xylophone. In addition, he does not speak of a connection between listening to and reading music, but of a connection of *'listening with doing'*. Based on these statements, I do not assume that teachers try to connect music theory with practice to help pupils to develop their ability to listen musically.

(7) The teachers I interviewed often articulate the fact that it is difficult to motivate the pupils for music theory. It seems plausible that singing and making music is simply an attempt to foster motivation. However, it seems questionable whether it actually does accomplish the aim of motivating pupils for music theory: reading sheet music itself does not necessarily become more attractive just because one has sung before.

### ***Practice as a problematic matter of course***

It is remarkable how self-evidently the teachers often emphasise that music theory should be combined with practice. In the three statements quoted last, the teachers speak of *'always'* striving for this. It almost seems as if connecting theory with practice is a kind of music pedagogical convention (cf. Radtke, 1996, p. 102). This is reminiscent of the "axiom" formulated by Abel-Struth "that practical interaction with music is always the best music teaching" (1985, p. 212). However, it also points to the fact that practice is sometimes thought of as a panacea in the context of teaching music theory: It is meant to prevent the study of music theory from being a torment and to motivate pupils. It is supposed to help pupils develop their ability to listen musically, and it is intended to promote their understanding of music.

The notion of practice as non-theory seems limited in its ability to achieve these goals. Regarding motivation, it seems plausible that music practice has a motivating effect. However, it does not seem clear why it should motivate for music theory. As far as the ability to listen musically is concerned, the didactic settings described in the interviews do not seem to be designed to develop it. With regard to understanding music, it seems relevant that a non-theoretically conceived practice implies a notion of theory that is non-practical. Theory may be practised, but it is not applied. It is not used to solve problems; for example, understanding how a piece of music is constructed.

Overall, it seems that the notion of practice is overloaded with demands. In the context of teaching music theory alone, the goals associated with practice turn out to be very diverse. I assume that they cannot be traced back to a single and consistent notion of practice. Instead, practice is understood in different ways. These include music practice, moments of observable activity and the application of music theory.

## Discussion

I have shown that the respondents have two different notions of practice. These differ primarily in the way they are related to theory. With the first notion, practice is positively related to theory. Based on this notion, teachers strive to make an understanding of music theory practical for pupils. This can mean that they learn to understand music better, to play it better, to listen to it differently or to compose music themselves. The second notion of practice is that it is distinct from theory. Practice is seen as that which is non-theoretical: for example, theory is typically problematised and is literally described as tormenting. By re-linking it to practice, an attempt is made to solve this problem: practice is meant to motivate, to open up auditory conceptions and to promote an understanding. Looking at the concrete examples of lessons, it can be observed that, although attempts are made to bring practice and theory together, the two ultimately stand unconnected next to each other. For example, songs are sung whose notes are then read as separate task. It can be doubted that the mere temporal proximity of music theory and music practice establishes a substantial connection between the two. This is conclusive when practice is considered as non-theory.

Furthermore, it has become apparent that practice is understood in very different ways. It seems to be a kind of umbrella term that should be used with caution. Simply talking about practice can cause misunderstandings. Instead, one should always clarify in which sense one is using it. In contributions to music education discourse this is usually the case. In my interviews, the teachers often speak of practice in a general way and associate different notions with it. In the second notion of practice, a common feature is that pupils are recognisably active. However, this is only an accidental aspect, which may be important with regard to classroom management, but is not a decisive criterion in terms of teaching and learning theory. Therefore, it seems desirable to strive for an awareness of conceptual clarity in teacher education when it comes to the concept of practice.

The first notion of practice that has been elaborated here seems to offer potential for the treatment of music theory, insofar as it could serve as a regulative principle. Using this principle, the focus could be to ask what the respondents should be able to practically do with a music-theoretical content. With this focus, it is also possible to examine teaching and learning settings: In which way does the study of music theory in the classroom enable students regarding their own approach to music?

It seems obvious that notions of practice are only one aspect of the complex process of music theory teaching and learning. It can neither be assumed that every lesson that takes the first notion of practice as a starting point automatically succeeds, nor does a notion of practice as non-theory have to lead to bad music lessons. However, what can be assumed is that teachers' notions are among the important influencing factors (Peterson

et al., 1989; Staub & Stern, 2002). Based on a notion of practice as non-theory, they might misleadingly promote a notion of music theory as something which cannot be applied.

In this text I have been concerned with practice in regard to the teaching of music theory. The unanimous demand that music theory and music practice should be connected seems clear. As I have tried to show, its success depends on whether this legitimate postulation falls on fertile ground with respect to its realisation in the classroom.

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