Over the past 20 years or so, popular music has become an increasingly significant area of study among music theorists: journals regularly feature articles focused on various analytical and theoretical aspects of pop, conferences routinely include papers on pop, and monographs and collections addressing various styles and issues make it clear that popular music is now an accepted part of the professional discourse. While the consideration of popular music has developed considerably in musical scholarship, its role in undergraduate teaching — and especially in the core theory courses — is still being explored. It might seem logical, given its increased importance in the field, that popular music should be included among theory offerings, and perhaps within the core music-major courses as well. There are nonetheless valid arguments against such inclusion. One might argue, for instance, that the study of harmony and voice-leading of the common-practice period was never really meant to be comprehensive in a broad sense, even with regard to classical music. Our teaching of tonal theory has tended to focus on mostly Germanic music from Bach to Brahms, and especially on those aspects of the music that are most highly developed in that repertory. The strength of such a relatively narrow focus is that it allows for more depth of study: the repertory may be limited, one might contend, but this allows us to dig deeper into the music. From this “traditionalist” perspective, there is no advantage to including popular music in such discussions; the resulting breadth would only detract from the current depth.

If one does want to include popular music in the theory classroom, on the other hand, there are two general approaches that may be employed; we might label these the “mild revision” and “fundamental revision.” In the mild revision, pop is incorporated into teaching not only by broadening the repertory to include music beyond classical, but also by expanding the ways in which music can be considered. One might compare pop and classical examples in terms of harmonic usage, for instance, pointing out parallels and differences, or explore approaches to form in the two styles. Including pop repertory might also encourage an increased focus on rhythm and meter, as discussions engage issues of syncopation, groove, and ostinato. Though it offers the prospect of broadening the classroom repertory while providing students with expanded ways of understanding music’s structure, however, the mild revision does not change the central focus of theory instruction. In spite of the introduction of non-classical music, the mild revision is still driven by musical values and priorities shaped by eighteenth and nineteenth-century art music. The fundamental revision, by contrast, recalibrates these values to include those of pop music and balances these new elements with those of classical music. Rather than adding pop as an enrichment to a conceptual approach driven primarily by classical repertory, the fundamental revision reformulates the basic approach to
theory instruction. Thus, the mild revision broadens the traditional model, leaving its foundations in place while the fundamental revision rethinks the model from the ground up. Let us explore these two approaches in greater depth.

The Mild Revision

As mentioned earlier, undergraduate theory offerings – and especially those in the theory core – have traditionally focused on common-practice classical music, as well as on twentieth-century music (with emphasis on pcset and twelve-tone analytical techniques). In the study of tonal music, harmony and voice-leading have been primary concerns, resulting in approaches that privilege these dimensions over others and that assume (if only tacitly) the practices found in this music to be normative. Thus, considerations of tonal harmony as it occurs in popular music may be measured against the norms of common-practice harmony. In many cases, this approach works smoothly and does no disservice to the music; there are certainly many (maybe most) passages in the music of Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers, for instance, that conform to common-practice usage. In other popular music, however, the stylistic norms diverge considerably from those of common-practice harmony and (especially) voice-leading. A representative instance that illustrates this divergence can be found in “Can’t Get Enough,” a track recorded by the British rock band Bad Company and released in 1974.

The song opens with an introduction (0:00–0:19) employing I, vVII, and IV in C (see Figure 49.1). According to the traditional approach, the use of vVII ought to be a chromatic harmony of some note, especially since the opening tonic chord is a major triad, leading us to assume – at least provisionally – the key of C major. But while the overall movement of this progression from I to IV is fairly conventional as a prolongation of tonic, there is nothing at all remarkable in this musical context about the vVII. In a sense, this is not the same vVII as one might hear in Beethoven or Brahms, where such a chord could constitute a moment of noteworthy chromaticism. As the verse unfolds (0:19–0:42), we hear the V and vIII chords included in the last four measures. Adding these five major triads up, it is clear that the sonorities are built on the C minor pentatonic scale, with major triads built on C, E♭, F, G, and B♭. In the rock style of the second half of the twentieth century, these chords are normative; and in this sense they can be considered “diatonic.” Note as well that the cross relations resulting between the B♭ in the vVII chord and the B in the V chord, or between the E in the I chord and the E♭ in the vIII chord go relatively unnoticed stylistically. This is partly because voice-leading does not drive the harmony forward in the same way it does in common-practice music. There is voice-leading at work, of course, but it is comprised here mostly of parallel chords – fifths and all – played up and down the guitar neck.

While a traditional analytical approach might do a disservice to the harmony in “Can’t Get Enough,” making it seem more chromatic than it really is in its own stylistic context, a traditional approach to dissonance treatment works fairly well for this song. It is sometimes the case (and especially in melodies that are influenced by the blues) that the notes in a vocal or instrumental melody do not align with the notes in the harmony. Pop scholars often call this the “melodic–harmonic divorce,” stressing that at such moments the seemingly dissonant melody notes are better understood within the overall tonal orientation of the melody itself: they are not truly dissonances in the traditional sense. But the vocal melody in the verse and chorus of “Can’t Get Enough” mostly aligns with the harmony, so there is very little melodic–harmonic divorce there. Indeed, the central guitar solo of the track (1:43–2:21), played by two guitars in harmony, mostly follows the accompanying harmonic structure, especially in the first eight bars of the verse and throughout the chorus. In fact, if one were to search for passages in rock music where the harmonic-melodic divorce is present, the guitar solo might be the first place to explore, since
Words and music by Mick Ralphs, produced by Bad Company. Contained on the album *Bad Company*, which reached #5 in the UK and #1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart in 1974. Reached #5 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 when released as a single in 1974.

**Instrumentation:** electric guitars, electric bass, drums, and lead vocal; two extra lead guitars added for instrumental and chorus and one extra guitar added during repeated chorus sections from 2:36 ff.

**Meter and Form:** \( \text{12} \text{ 4} \) (\( \text{1} \text{ 4} \) shuffle). Contrasting verse-chorus form, with multiple choruses and Coda at end.

0:00-0:19 **Introduction**, 8 mm., I – bVII – IV pattern introduced
0:19-0:42 **Verse 1**, 12 mm., I – bVII – IV, then V – bVII – IV – bIII
0:42-0:57 **Chorus**, 8 mm., I – IV, ends on V – I – V
0:57-1:05 **Interlude**, 4 mm., reprise of Introduction
1:05-1:28 **Verse 2**, 12 mm., as before
1:28-1:43 **Chorus**, 8 mm., as before
1:43-2:06 **Verse (instrumental)**, 12 mm., two guitars in harmony, drums accent 2 and 4
2:06-2:20 **Chorus (instrumental)**, 8 mm., bass breaks into walking pattern
2:20-2:36 **Chorus**, 8 mm., vocal line varied
2:36-2:51 **Chorus**, 8 mm., variation continues, lead guitar enters
2:51-3:06 **Chorus**, 8 mm., variation continues, lead guitar interjects
3:06-3:21 **Chorus (instrumental)**, 8 mm., lead guitar solos, vocal interjects
3:21-3:36 **Chorus (instrumental)**, 8 mm., lead guitar continues solo
3:36-3:51 **Chorus**, 8 mm., vocal returns as guitar soloing continues
3:51-4:13 **Coda**, 8 mm., reprise of Introduction, with added guitar soloing

**Mix:**

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*Figure 49.1* Bad Company’s “Can’t Get Enough,” form and mix scene analysis.

blues-based solos often do not align with the harmonies that support them in a traditional manner. Yet in “Can’t Get Enough,” the lack (mostly) of melodic–harmonic divorce and the emphasis on vertical alignment created by the two-part harmony actually constitute an allusion to traditional harmonic relationships that steps somewhat outside of the 1970s rock style. So just when the song seems chromatic from a traditional perspective, it isn’t; and just when it seems traditional, it is referring outside of the rock style.

Our brief consideration of this Bad Company track makes it clear that if pop examples are going to be used in the theory classroom, we need to be sensitive to their stylistic context, and this forces us to expand the ways we understand harmony, voice-leading, and texture. And while there may be many pop examples that offer parallel examples to classical ones, we need to be careful not
to confuse things that appear similar with things that actually are similar. From this perspective, the traditionalist has a good point: including seemingly similar examples drawn from pop threatens to dilute an understanding of common-practice usage. On the other hand, even though the mild revision remains driven by the traditional concerns of music theoretical instruction, it may nevertheless make important stylistic distinctions in the service of exposing students to a broader range of musical practices and repertory. As pop examples are incorporated, and while consideration may be given to alternative approaches to harmony, voice-leading, and texture, traditional techniques of harmony and voice-leading as found in classical music ultimately remain the focal concern and are considered the central normative models.

### The Fundamental Revision

The fundamental revision seeks to recalibrate the central topics in the music theory classroom, first by approaching the traditional topics of harmony and voice-leading in a way that does not privilege classical music, and second by broadening the range of topics engaged in instruction. Harmony, for instance, may be initially approached from a perspective that is general enough to include both popular and classical styles, and voice-leading might be cast as relationships between tones that may be exploited (or suppressed) in various ways, depending upon style. The idea of the melodic–harmonic divorce can provide an introduction to issues of musical texture, exploring the various ways in which elements in a texture can align vertically or not. Popular music provides a fruitful context for thinking about issues of rhythm and meter, in addition to topics in groove and repetition – issues that might be explored profitably in twentieth-century classical music as well.

The importance of the recording studio (and the attendant technology) in popular music invites listening deep into textures for aspects of timbre and placement, and the importance of improvisation in jazz, blues, rock, and bluegrass encourages a consideration of how such solos might be structured.

To explore how the fundamental revision might differ from the mild revision, let us briefly consider the introductory section of Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water,” a track released in 1972 that is within the same 1970s British blues-rock style as “Can’t Get Enough.” The track begins with a distinctive four-bar guitar riff, played in parallel fourths; the upper notes of this riff employ the first three members of the G minor pentatonic scale (G, B♭, C), plus the “blue note” D♭, which functions here as a chromatic upper neighbor to the C (see Figure 49.2). The fourth below this line employs D, F, and G, along with the chromatic upper neighbor A♭. After two statements of this four-bar riff in the guitar alone, the organ enters (0:17), doubling the guitar part, while the drums introduce a steady sixteenth note figure on the hi-hat, adding the snare on beats two and four of the fourth statement (0:25). The bass guitar enters for the fifth and six statements of the riff (0:34), chromatically ascending from E in an anacrusis figure that lands on G at beat one and provides an eighth-note tonic pedal that breaks off on beat three of the third measure to double the final C, B♭, and G in the guitar riff. Note as well the addition of a bass drum pattern in the drums, filling in the eighth-note spots not already occupied by the snare, on the sixth statement (0:42).

In terms of the traditional pedagogical concerns, there is not much in this passage to relate it to common-practice music. We might point out the use of pedal point in the first half of each four-bar statement, and perhaps the implication of an overall harmonic movement of IV→III→I in the second half. The use of minor pentatonic material here provides a new perspective compared to its use in “Can’t Get Enough,” as the pentatonic material is stated more melodically than harmonically in this introduction. There are no cross relations like the ones in the Bad Company example, since triads are not used, but there is chromaticism in use of the blue-note figure, D♭→C (doubled a fourth below). The most noteworthy aspect of this passage is probably its use of texture. The pentatonic riff in the guitar and the pedal point in the bass form two
layers in terms of pitch structure; the organ part reinforces the guitar layer while the drums add a rhythmic layer. The bass and guitar layers are “divorced” (or “stratified”) until the middle of the third measure of the pattern, where they come together on the C–B♭–G figure (“coordinated”). We can thus observe a kind of “textural rhythm” in which the layers alternate 2½ measures of stratified texture with 1½ measures of coordinated texture. This stratification occurs mainly in the pitch domain, since the rhythm of these parts is strongly coordinated by the 4 meter, which is reinforced by the drums layer. The layered quality of this example is further highlighted by the manner in which the instruments are presented – that is, one or two instruments at a time until the texture is complete.

**Instrumentation:** guitar, organ, bass, drums, and vocal, with extra guitar added for solo during instrumental verse and chorus.

**Meter and Form:** $\frac{4}{4}$. Contrasting verse-chorus form with a hint of compound AABA.

0:00-0:51 **Introduction**, 24 mm., $(4 + 4) + (4 + 4) + (4 + 4)$ using 4 mm. guitar riff

0:51-1:25 **Verse 1**, 16 mm., $4 + 4 + 4 + 4$, i − bVII − i
1:25-1:38 **Chorus**, 6 mm., $4 + 2$, IV − bII − I, harmony vocal added

1:38-1:55 **Interlude**, 8 mm., $4 + 4$ using 4 mm. pentatonic guitar riff
1:55-2:28 **Verse 2**, 16 mm., as before with more active organ part
2:28-2:41 **Chorus**, 6 mm., as before

2:41-2:58 **Interlude**, 8 mm., as before
2:58-3:31 **Verse (instrumental)**, 16 mm., 16th-notes on snare, bass more active, i − iv - i
3:31-3:39 **Chorus (instrumental)**, 4 mm., based on chorus, IV - bVII

3:39-3:56 **Interlude**, 8 mm., solo overlaps into first 4 mm., otherwise as before
3:56-4:42 **Interlude**, 6 mm., as in Verse 2
4:29-4:42 **Chorus**, 6 mm., as before

4:42-5:35 **Coda**, 16+ mm., $4 + 4 + (4 + 4)$ using 4 mm. guitar riff, then fade on vamp, organ improv

**Mix:**

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*Figure 49.2*  Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water,” form and mix scene analysis.
If we turn to the verse (0:51–1:25) and chorus (1:25–1:38) sections of “Smoke on the Water,” we can see that the verses are made up of a harmonic progression (bass, organ, and guitar) that moves from i to VII and back, accompanying a vocal melody built on the G minor pentatonic scale. The texture is mildly stratified, as vocal melody notes in the second half of the four-bar phrases do not quite align with the harmony in the instruments. The harmony in the chorus moves from IV to II and then to i and features a strong coordination with the melodic material. Overall, the harmony suggests G minor; the lack of a sixth scale degree makes it unclear in the verses whether the mode is Aeolian or Dorian, but the IV in the chorus suggests Dorian, while the VII seems borrowed from the Phrygian mode. There is an interesting variation to the verse and chorus materials that occurs later in the track during the guitar solo (2:58–3:47): during the four-bar verse phrases (2:58–3:31) the harmony moves from i to iv and back, replacing the VII heard previously and altering the harmonic rhythm slightly; and in the chorus (3:31–3:39), the movement is altered to IV–VII, with the duration of each harmony doubled in comparison with previous choruses. The sense of variation is further reinforced by a change of rhythmic feel in the drums in comparison with the two previously sung verses, as the snare now shifts to a repeated sixteenth-note pattern reminiscent of the hi-hat pattern from the introduction and the bass employs running eighth notes.

The musical features of “Smoke on the Water” noted here, while distinctive in their own way, are very much in keeping with the practices of 1970s rock music. It is nonetheless difficult to imagine – and perhaps precisely because they are indicative of the differences between pop and classical – how classroom discussion of the features noted here could be used to amplify, enrich, or expand the core topics in the mild revision approach. It might be useful to present an example like “Smoke on the Water” occasionally, maybe to emphasize how musical materials can play a role in defining stylistic difference – but a fuller understanding of the norms of the rock style would require that topics such as pentatonic harmonic and melodic usage, stratified and coordinated textures, and approaches to rhythmic feel (among others) be introduced and supported with a wide variety of examples. Including popular music in the curriculum in this more fundamental way would require significant class time – time not spent on traditional topics. One challenge posed by the fundamental revision thus comes down to determining a balance between how much of the traditional curriculum to retain and how much to remove in order to make room for new topics. After all, incorporating popular music into the curriculum does not mean abandoning classical music, but it does mean spending less time on it.

Both “Can’t Get Enough” and “Smoke on the Water” offer additional opportunities to discuss features of popular music, and features of the 1970s blues-rock style in particular. In the discussion of “Can’t Get Enough,” I noted that the guitar solo (1:43–2:20) is mostly not stratified. But stratification does occur later in the track. From 2:20 forward, the lead vocal and then the lead guitar introduce melodic material in these repeated choruses that is primarily based on the C minor pentatonic scale without much concern for the specific harmonies in the accompaniment. The vocal melody in the previous choruses was not stratified; this new stratified texture in these later choruses illustrates how stratified and coordinated textures can occur not only in the same song (or in the same section, as we saw in the introduction of “Smoke on the Water”) but also between different instances of the same section. Our discussion of “Smoke on the Water” highlighted the changes in the accompaniment during the central guitar solo that create a fresh rhythmic feel for that section (2:58–3:39); a similar change can be seen during the central guitar solo in “Can’t Get Enough” (1:43–2:20), as the drums provide a new and strong emphasis on beats two and four during the instrumental verse, while the bass breaks into a new walking pattern during the instrumental chorus. A focus on tracking the relationship between stratification and coordination is not normally a concern in traditional theory instruction, nor is taking into account changes in rhythmic feel that arise in repeated material. Both topics, however, would enrich any consideration of these tracks that understands them on their own stylistic terms.
Attention to recording and production can also be integrated into theory instruction. Recording technology and production play a significant role in popular music, especially in music recorded after the mid-1960s. By the late 1960s/early 1970s, stereo had eclipsed mono as the standard technology for both artists and listeners. Stereo creates an audio field in the space between the left and right speakers; though sound is actually only coming from these two sources, nevertheless can hear sounds that seem to be coming from the center, as well as to various degrees from the left and right. Classical recordings often use this “panning” to simulate the way an ensemble would sound in a concert hall, with instruments panned at some position from left to right according to where they would be placed on stage. Popular music sometimes uses this “aural snapshot” approach, but often the mix on a pop recording will take advantage of opportunities offered by the recording studio. Figures 49.1 and 49.2 provide “mix scene” analyses, and each situates the vocal and instrument parts as they are heard in stereo. The mix on “Can’t Get Enough” is perhaps the more interesting of the two: while it is fairly typical to place the lead vocal, bass, and drums in the center position, “Can’t Get Enough” features two rhythm guitars panned to the left and right. The guitar on the left plays higher voicings while the one on the right plays lower ones. These positions remain throughout the track, though when two additional guitars enter during the central solo, they are panned left center (higher part) and right center (lower part). When the lead guitar enters at 2:36, it is positioned in the center, where it remains throughout the rest of the track. By contrast, the mix for “Smoke on the Water” remains close to the aural snapshot mode, with the vocals, bass, and drums in the center while the guitar is to the left and the organ to the right. The only change is during the guitar solo, when this added guitar part is panned to the center, filling the spot otherwise held by the lead vocal. The mix scene analyses in Figures 49.1 and 49.2 draw our attention to the music in ways that do not arise much in the consideration of classical music – at least not in the theory classroom. While the mixes presented here are relatively uncomplicated ones, mix scene analyses can be much more involved. As with other aspects of these two tracks discussed thus far, the traditional approach would avoid such mix analysis altogether, the mild revision might introduce it as a special topic but not pursue it in depth, and the fundamental revision would likely include it as a core topic.

Curricular Change?

Elsewhere I have argued for both the traditional perspective (Covach et al. 2012) and the fundamental revision (Covach 2017). I have resisted the mild revision principally on two counts. First, the mild revision risks casting popular music as a variant of classical, as mentioned earlier in the discussion of “Can’t Get Enough.” It views pop through a music-theoretical lens created for classical, possibly producing a distorted image and seemingly serving an understanding of classical while doing a disservice – however unintentionally – to pop. Second, because the mild revision is guided by the concerns of classical, it opens the potential for placing popular music in a secondary position in terms of value. Using classical as the model casts popular music as a style of lesser cultural worth and reinforces the biases inherent in the divide between highbrow and lowbrow (or even middlebrow) culture. While the mild revision certainly can be executed with a sensitivity that avoids such pitfalls, its cautious approach to the pedagogical use of popular music renders it, to adapt Arnold Schoenberg’s well-known phrase, the middle road that does not lead to Rome. If one is committed to emphasizing the important features of common-practice music, it is best to keep popular music largely out of the discussion, perhaps reserving consideration of this music to a course devoted exclusively to pop.

I have embraced the fundamental revision in my discussion of the Integrated Curriculum (Covach 2017). The Integrated Curriculum offers a revision of the entire undergraduate music major, both for the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Music degrees, and encompasses theory,
musicianship, history, ensemble, and lessons. The core idea driving the Integrated Curriculum is that students are musicians first and specialists second. Departments and music schools are urged to revise their programs so that they may welcome a broad range of musicians and not only those whose experience is in classical or jazz. Theory and history courses, especially in the first year, ought to present a wide range of styles without creating any sense that one style is superior to another. Such courses can still be demanding: the goal is to challenge all but privilege none. For students whose principal background is in popular music, ensembles and studio lessons in pop must be established, as well as courses in songwriting, arranging, music business, and recording and production techniques. Pop students should be challenged to engage other styles of music, and classical and jazz students should be challenged to engage pop. In such a context, the fundamental revision becomes not only a way of rethinking theory but also a guide to rethinking other aspects of the music curriculum.12

Curricular change can be difficult, and especially changes that require rethinking the fundamental purpose of a degree. It is also important to acknowledge that all departments and music schools are not the same: they can have very different students, faculty, goals, and purposes. While there are advantages to standardization across the discipline, the diverse range of programs makes a one-size-fits-all solution seem too limiting. Popular music can be incorporated into programs in various ways. The traditionalist may prefer to have devoted classes in pop theory, maintaining her focus on classical music and preserving the resultant depth. Others may want to add a bit of pop to diversify the teaching repertory and introduce new ways of thinking about the music. Still others will opt to refashion their courses to include popular music in a more fundamental way. No matter the scenario, it seems certain that we will be seeing more popular music in the theory classroom.

Notes
1 See Clendinning (2017) for a detailed discussion of traditional curricula (including the use of popular music in leading textbooks), as well as for consideration of the many issues that introducing popular music into the curriculum raises.
2 For a discussion of the harmonic practices that can be found in rock, see Everett (2004). Fuller treatments of rock harmony may be found in Everett (2009) and Doll (2017). See also Moore (2012), Tagg (2016), and Temperley (2018). For a detailed treatment of pentatonic elements in rock music, see Biamonte (2010).
3 The term “harmonic-melodic divorce” is first used by Moore (1995), who cites Winkler (1978) for the idea. The term is then developed by Temperley (2007) and Noble (2015).
4 The guitar duet in the last four bars of the instrumental verse (1:58–2:04) “divorces” the accompanying harmony through an emphasis on the C minor pentatonic scale, but falls back into “reconciliation” with the harmony for the instrumental chorus.
5 I discuss the ideas of stratification, coordination, and textural rhythm more fully in Covach (2018). My use of the terms “stratification” and “coordination” are employed to account for a broad range of possibilities, including more than two layers and not limited only to the melody and accompaniment. See also the harmony guitar solo in “Can’t Get Enough” (endnote 4) for another instance of stratification and coordination in a single section.
6 Temperley (2007, 335) cites this feature in “Smoke on the Water” as an instance of what he terms the “loose verse, tight chorus” model.
7 See Clendinning (2017) for a similar discussion of Katy Perry’s “Roar” (292–296) and Queen’s “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” (297–301).
8 See Zak (2001) for a detailed discussion of recording techniques in popular music.
9 Moylan (2009) uses the term “lateral positioning” in his discussion of mix scenes. See also Dockwray and Moore (2010).
10 See Palfy and Gilson (2018) for an extended discussion of the “hidden curriculum” in the music theory classroom, as well as data collected from undergraduate students that reinforce the idea that students perceive classical music as being more influential than other types of music in the study of theory, even
when this value is not made explicit in the teaching and examples from other styles have been used.
The authors also suggest four categories of action (2018, 104) that in some ways parallel my traditional, mild revision, and fundamental revision categories.

11 This phrase arises in Schoenberg’s 1926 critique of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism. He writes: “I wanted to attack anyone who seeks his personal salvation by taking the middle road, because the middle road is only road that does not lead to Rome” (Jenkins 2015, 283–284).

12 For an outline of the Integrated Curriculum and discussion of each of its components, see Covach (2017, 324–330).

**Bibliography**


