teaching composition in the 21st-century

By Kyle Gann

A PROFESSOR WONDERS IF A COLLEGE THEORY COURSE CAN BE MADE MORE NEARLY UNIVERSAL—SO THAT EUROPEAN MUSIC IS UNDERSTOOD NOT AS THE ONLY WAY THINGS COULD HAVE HAPPENED, BUT AS A SPECIAL CASE.

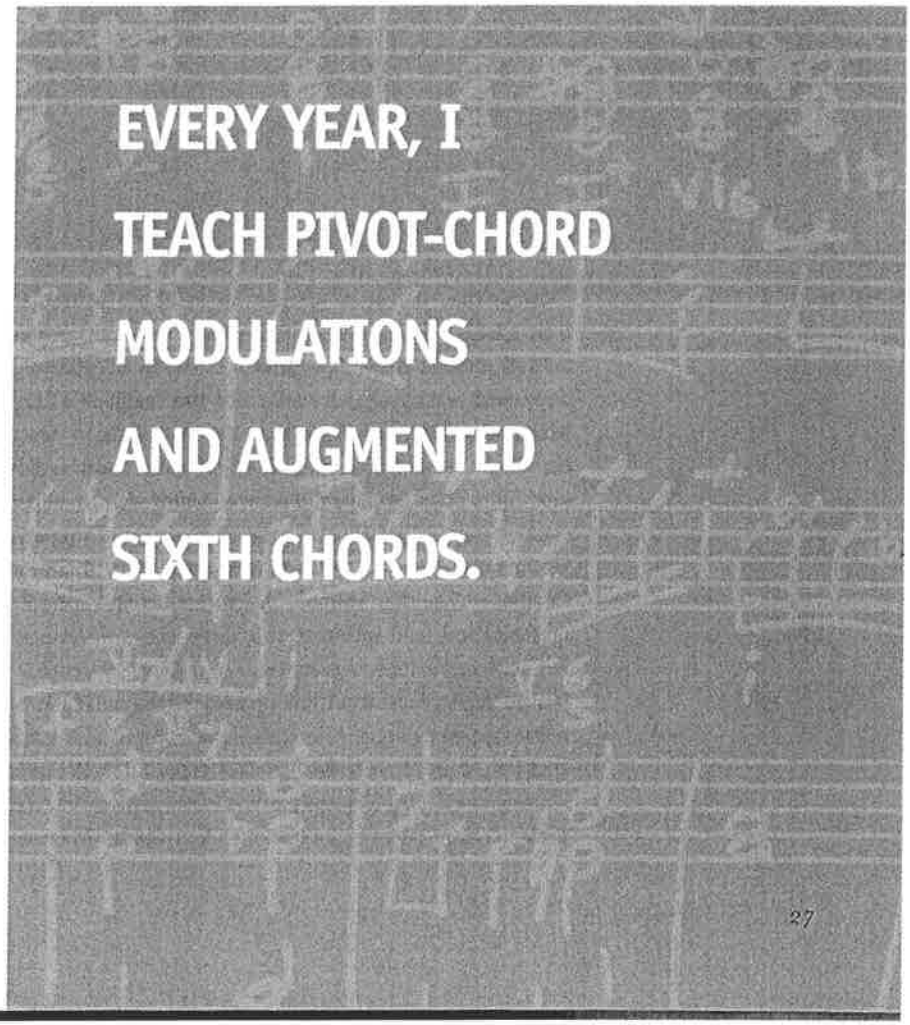
My students carry iPods full of Ani DiFranco, Bjork, Radiohead, God Speed You Black Emperor, maybe Thelonious Monk. I teach them chords out of the Pathétique Sonata, Schubert's G-flat major Impromptu, the Brahms waltzes. The feeling of being looked at as though I just arrived from Mars is one with which I am all too familiar.

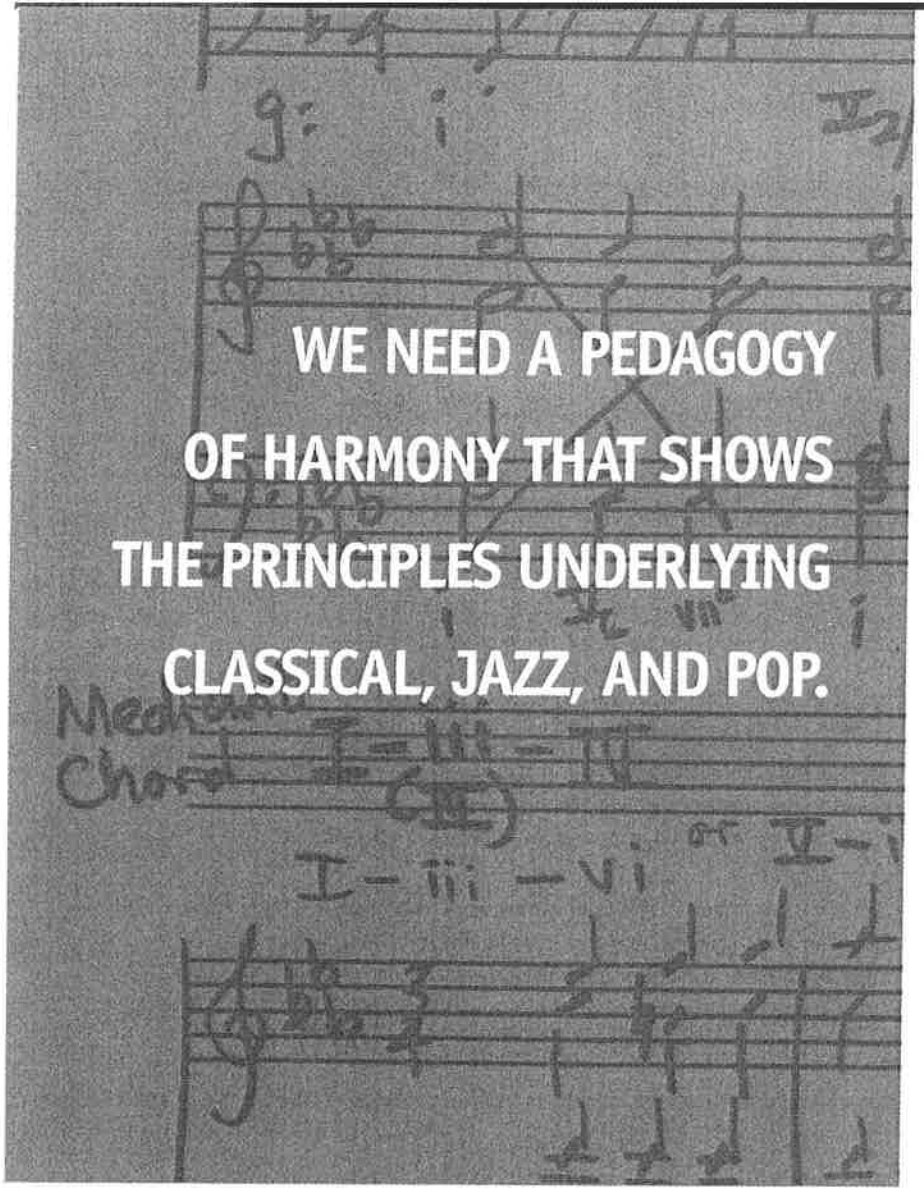
It's not that these students have no interest in classical music: a good half of them are cellists, violinists, flutists, composers. They major in classical music, but they don't seem to have much connection to it. They're in a liberal arts college, not a conservatory. What mystifies my colleagues and me most is the number of them who don't seem to consciously listen to any music at all, who can't name you any favorite pieces. One student studied composition with me and wanted to write an atonal string quartet. I asked him if he had ever heard an atonal string quartet, and he couldn't think of one. Somehow they form a conception of the kind of music they're supposed to admire and play and compose in music school and know that it's not the kind that they're going to run into outside the classroom.

But the point here is not to criticize my students. They're smart, conscientious, creative kids with absorbing interests in economic history and Eastern religions, and they didn't create the world they grew up in. My concern is with the subject of music theory itself. Music theory ought to be the study of how music works. Period. But of course, it isn't that: for most of us in musical academia, it's the study of how a certain small body of music works. Every year since I've been teaching, I've taught pivot-chord modulations and augmented sixth chords. The reader can probably recite with me the names of the creative musicians whose music is driven by those phenomena: Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms. They're not iPod names.

Have no fear that I'm going to hit you with some anti-traditionalist agenda. The president of my college, who happens to be a musicologist—Leon Botstein—loves to say that our purpose as educators is not to anticipate what our students will need in the 21st century and give it to them, but to pass on to them the knowledge that was given to us. I absolutely agree. I have no crystal ball to tell me what musical skills will prove useful in 2040 A.D. I want my students going out into the world with a strong, deep sense of the past. What they need for the great unknown future is their lookout.

At the same time, I think that we classical musicians have been unconscionably remiss in reconfiguring our study of theory to make it more nearly universal, and to understand European music not as the only way things could have happened, but as a special case. There are musical





universals: the octave, the perfect fifth, melody, the sense of a tonic, double and triple divisions of a pulse. Some of these arise from the nature of acoustics, others from the natural tendencies of the human voice or body. I begin every first freshman class with the familiar term "A 440," showing that the other pitches we associate with that tone—A 220, E 330, C-sharp 550—have a natural, mathematical relation to it that is recognized by all relatively developed musics of the world. But the textbook I use, which is no better or worse than the rest of them, never mentions the harmonic series. It starts instead with a diagram of a piano keyboard, which is admittedly a familiar starting point. The acoustic basis of music—and this was just as true when I studied the subject in 1973 at Oberlin—is quickly shunted aside as being exotically mathematical, and within two or three weeks we're looking at Mozart minuets.

I do everything I can think of to make the principles of music appear to govern not only the European classical tradition. I analyze the Beatles' "Yesterday," Don McLean's "American Pie," Cat Stevens's arrangement of "Morning Has Broken," even parodies by humorist Tom Lehrer. When we get to secondary dominants I wrench from the students' collective memories the correct harmonization of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," one of the few songs left for which I can count on universal recognition (thank God for baseball). We are honored to possess a superb jazz pedagogue, John Esposito, and a few years ago I took his jazz harmony course so I could better learn how jazz works. So now I compare near-identical passages from Beethoven and Thelonious Monk, and prove triumphantly that what we classicals call the "German Sixth" is also a tritone substitution chord for a V7 of V. I show that Wagner and Liszt were just as excited to discover the possibilities of a "flat five" chord as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were.

But elsewhere I fall into trouble. Jazz and classical music observe the gravity of the circle of fifths—vi ii V I—but popular music often plays against it. Pop and folk music regularly stick a IV chord between a cadential V and I, just after I've told my students never to do that. I hit my head against a wall trying to make them always sharp the seventh scale degree in a minor key, and "Scarborough Fair" (not to mention "Greensleeves") makes them wonder if I know what I'm talking about.

Our duty is to pass on to students what we know about music of the past, but that past looks awfully limited to them. It leaves out the august history of Indian music, the rhythmic cycles of Indonesian gamelan, the intonation and exotic meters of Balkan folksinging, let alone the rhythmic patterns of Caribbean music that are quite familiar to student ears. Teaching history, one can safely ignore those traditions and leave them to the ethnomusicology program. But theory is supposed to be the science of music, and science is supposed to be true in all cases.

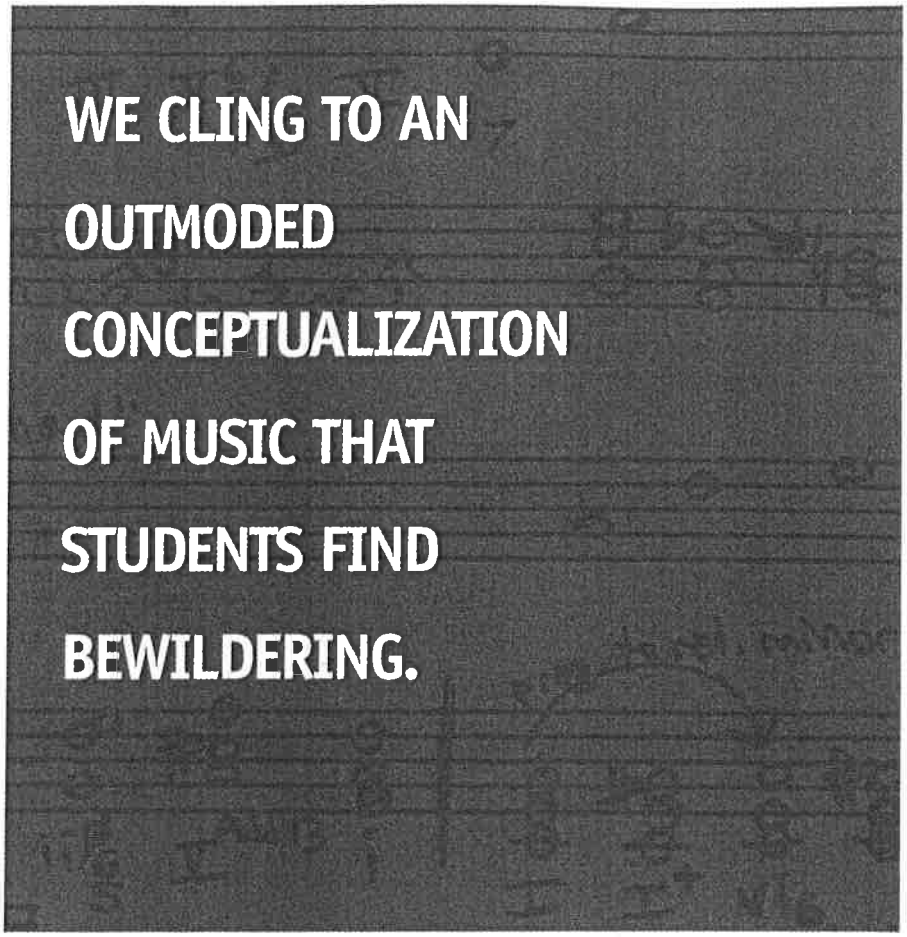
In the 1930s, American composer and ethnomusicologist Henry Cowell made a laudable attempt to write the first multicultural theory of music. Titled *The Nature of Melody*, it was a total flop. Cowell had the right idea: teach melody before anything else, because almost every musical tradition of the world has a concept of melody, and some melodic principles can be generalized. Inexplicably, he took his examples all from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier—he was incarcerated at San Quentin at the time, and perhaps he didn't have much else available to him. In any case, he never returned to the manuscript once he got out, and it remains irredeemably flawed as a textbook. More recently, friends of mine have made attempts to write a theory textbook from multicultural premises. What they've found is that publishers, at the moment, aren't interested. Musical academia, as a whole, has dug in its heels, and seems determined to hold up the European tradition as the one every serious musician in America will be exclusively schooled in.

Even within our own cultural history, there is evidence that other routes would work better than ours. Charles Rosen has shown that the Paris Conservatoire, in the 1810s, was the first school in Europe to start students on harmony rather than counterpoint. When Chopin, who had been more conservatively schooled in Warsaw, visited Paris, he looked scornfully at Berlioz's eccentric voice-leading and said something like, "This is what comes of learning harmony before counterpoint." And I have found that students who take my entry-level Renaissance counterpoint course before taking first-year theory have a better understanding of why harmony works the way it does than those who start out on harmony, because counterpoint begins, first, with melodic theory, and then proceeds to the natural arithmetic of consonant intervals. Follow those contrapuntal rules, and you internalize the DNA of all subsequent Western music.

Also, because I am given somewhat broader latitude than most theory professors, I teach a course in the acoustics of pitch, which traces both European and non-Western scales through history, accounting just as much for the 22-pitch scale of Indian music as for the well temperament of Mozart's era, the 43-tone scale of Harry Partch, and the five-tone scale of our school Balinese gamelan. So many phenomena that seem obscure or arbitrary in purely classical classes (the unsingability of the diminished fourth, the avoidance of F-sharp major in 18th-century music) become common sense when the arithmetic of tuning is explained. The students respond with relief. It's almost as though, for the first time in their theory education, they don't feel like they're being lied to.

Every classical musician agrees that classical performers should know advanced harmony, but everyone also concedes that the advantages of knowing it are subtle and somewhat intangible, difficult to pinpoint. That seems to me good reason for harmony not to be the foundation of a musical education, but the finishing touch, saved for senior year and for the students who are clearly headed toward a life involved with 18th- and 19th-century music. One could start instead with the acoustics of pitch, world traditions and concepts of rhythm, basic triads used in pop music, and general contrapuntal principles. Electronically generated sound is now common enough on laptops to use as a teaching tool, and we need a pedagogy of harmony that shows the underlying principles behind classical, jazz, and pop music. Some such mix as this could give students faith that they're learning THE theory of music, how it really works. After that, those who choose could follow the ornate development of these principles in the European tradition, and the peculiar German/Italian bastard that is Roman numeral analysis.

The problem, of course, is that we in the music education business are rather forced to move in lockstep. My justification for everything I teach is, "If you're going to be able to communicate with other musicians after you get out of college, these are the terms you need." Knowing how a French sixth chord resolves is not a very useful piece of information, but I admit I'm scared to send a young musician out into the world without it. We cling to an outmoded conceptualization of music that our students find bewildering and absurd because no one can afford to be the first to lay it to rest. History is history, but the science of music needs to be universal enough to fit the musical phenomena that students encounter in their daily lives. Let us pass on our knowledge of the past, but not arbitrarily cherry-pick elements of that past to make Brahms look like the center of the known world. Any possibility we can all make the first move—together?



Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College and the new music critic for the Village Voice. *He is the author of* The Music of Conlon Nancarrow *(Cambridge University Press) and* American Music in the Twentieth Century *(Schirmer Books). His music is recorded on the Lovely Music, New Tone, and Monroe Street labels.*