

The Keys to Music

ACCORDING TO THE FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF MADE-UP STATISTICS, there are three kinds of people in the world:

- ▷ **Type I people.** These people have no interest in music. They simply don't care about it. This book is not for them.
- ▷ **Type II people.** For Type II people, music is interesting background noise. They may have a small stack of CDs, an account with an online streaming service, and probably an MP3 player. They know the names of a few artists. Some of them are curious about how music works, but not curious enough to do anything about it. This book is not for them either.
- ▷ **Type III people.** For Type III people, music is one of the most amazing things in the world. If you're in this lucky group, you may be studying music full-time, and perhaps working at a full-time day job, too. You may already have a career in music. You have the kind of music collection that could eat Manhattan. You can play at least one instrument—probably two or three—and you may own a small home studio. You know that music takes you to places it's impossible to get to any other way. You get obsessive about gear and technique and whether or not you're good enough. Sometimes you get so famous the public knows your name, but you worry anyway. You read books about music theory. If this sounds like you, welcome.

Music Theory Is Not Music

The next sentence is one of the most important things you'll learn from this book: Music theory is not music.

Music is a super-secret blend of passion, emotional expression, intelligence, charisma, fashion, creativity, sexiness, courage, instinct, politics, chutzpah, athletic dexterity, self-control, and obsession. With a few exceptions—think blockbuster movie scoring, professional arranging, some kinds of session work, and academia—you'll do more to improve your career prospects by developing those qualities than by becoming a theory expert. Plenty of musicians have built successful careers with a non-expert understanding of theory.

So why learn theory? Because it's a useful tool. It's almost an instrument in its own right. To understand why, you need to know more about what music *is* and how theory can make it better—or worse, if you do it wrong.

NOTE: Music theory isn't music. It's more like a musical instrument you play with your brain. The more you can do with it, the more options you have.

The Language of Music

You have to learn words and letters before you can write poetry, novels, or books about music theory. Similarly, even if you play the simplest music in the world, you need some way to describe what you're doing. Pointing at random notes

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and saying “That one there” soon gets old, especially if you don’t know where “there” is on another instrument. Now try to play many notes together and tell someone else what you’re doing. Are you having fun? I’m guessing not....

Theory makes it easier to talk to other musicians. You can understand what they’re doing, they can understand what you’re doing, and no one needs to point at notes and say “That one.... No *that* one.”

Music notation, sometimes known as *dots*, is one standard way to do this. But writing out dots takes a long time, and not everyone knows how to interpret them. Other ways include writing note names, sketching rhythms, writing guitar tab, listing chord changes, or even printing out a sequencer piano roll display.

The jackpot win is a situation in which everyone can play by ear and no one needs to use words. This is harder than it sounds, however, and happens less often than maybe it should. Often, it’s easier to sketch out a plan or guide on paper, in whatever way works for you and/or the band. Basic theory means you know enough to write ideas on paper in ways that collaborators can understand. Don’t worry—it doesn’t mean you have to create a blizzard of dots. Getting to this level is easier than you think. There’s more about this level later in this book. You’ll get a basic introduction to dots, and tips on other ways you can sketch ideas on paper or on a computer monitor.

Getting Organized

At the next level of theory, you start to learn some of the rules of the styles you want to play. Unfortunately, for reasons science has yet to understand, many theory books teach you the rules for exactly one kind of music—the one created by musicians between around 1650 and 1850, written in Northern Europe, in a style that’s now called “classical.” This isn’t a good way to learn about popular music, for all kinds of reasons.

First, if you try to use classical theory to work out how a track by Beyoncé, Skrillex, or Miles Davis is put together, your brain will explode, and someone is going to have to clean that up.

Second, classical theory thinks about music in a way that spends more time looking at how notes are organized into structures, and less about qualities like mood, vibe, and groove. It’s not that classical musicians ignore them. It’s more that many performers and composers have good instincts for mood and vibe to start with, and if they’re lucky, training sharpens their instincts. If they’re not, they get other jobs.

Some music courses even teach you that music is “organized sound.” Wrong! Most listeners don’t care about organization. (“That was just... *awesomely organized*,” said no one ever after watching their favorite band or artist.)

NOTE: The “organized sound” quote comes from experimental composer Edgard Varèse, who wrote “orchestra trying to escape death by food-blender” music, and some very early electronic pieces. He was a big influence on Frank Zappa and Hollywood horror scoring. See music.arts.uci.edu/dobrian/CMC2009/Liberation.pdf for some words, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM4ALq9-Y1g> for an example of his music.

Why Are We Doing This?

What makes good art? Everyone has an opinion, so here’s another: Good art gives an audience intense, memorable, creative experiences. As Brian Eno put it, “Stop thinking about art works as objects, and start thinking about them as triggers for experiences.” Incidentally, Eno credits Roy Ascott, a not-so-famous experimental musician, for the insight.

Unusual inventiveness and cleverness help. But if an experience is technically clever but emotionally “meh,” most audiences don’t care enough to repeat it.

ON WINGS OF SONG.
AUF FLÜGELN DES GESANGES.

(Op. 34, N^o 2.)

Composed in 1834.

Heine.

Andante tranquillo. *p*

1. On wings of song I'll bear thee, en-
ben - ding vi - o - lets whis - - per their

Andante tranquillo. *p*

1. Auf Flü - geln des... Go - san - - ges, Herz-
Veil - chen hi - chern und ko - - sen, und

pp *sempre piano e legato*

-chant - ed realms to see; come, oh my love, — pre -
fra : grant se - crets there, wait - ing for thee, their

-lieb - chen trag' ich dich fort, fort nach den Flu - ren des
schaun nach den Ster - nen em - por, heim - lich er - zäh - len die

-pare thee in dreamland to wan - der with me. *p* A
sis - - ter, still clos'd are the blos - soms rare. *p* With

Gan - - ges, dort weiss ich den schön - sten Ort, da
Ro - - sen sich duf - ten - de Mähr - chen in's Ohr. Es

sf *p*

Figure 1.1 19th century pop music, written in 1834. This chart-topping English edition was printed around 1900. Anyone who knows dots can still play it today. To hear what it sounds like, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xfj4thZrFj4. There are more than 10,000 versions of this song on YouTube.

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Figure 1.2 A different kind of music: a random guitarist playing a random chord. A lot of people learn music by watching, listening, and copying.

Art is subjective. Audiences change over time. So do audience members. This year's sensation is next year's where-are-they-now. You probably won't be listening to the same music at 80 as you listened to at 18. And if you wait long enough and ask enough people, no one agrees about anything.

None of this matters. As long as there's some audience interest at least some of the time, something interesting is happening. And the better the music gets, the more it can captivate an audience and make them feel passionate about what they're hearing.

That's Entertainment

This doesn't mean music works like a fairground roller-coaster. You don't strap in your audience at the start of a track, send them up, down, and around, and let them off at the end. Interesting music makes audiences work for a reward. It creates an experience that stays with them for a long time—sometimes for a lifetime. If they've forgotten what you did to them five minutes after you stopped doing it and they're queuing by the burger stand, you were doing it wrong.

The best artists don't give everything away for nothing. Good music has plenty of detail and surprises hiding under the surface, forcing the audience to pay attention. A combination of rich detail, emotional kick, and effortless presence will give most audiences everything they want. This is what theory is for: helping you capture audience attention with detail, emotion, and confidence.

Deeper Understanding

The best classical music is so good at capturing audience interest, audiences are still fascinated by it hundreds of years after it was written. The best jazz, the best electronica, the best rock, and so on, for any style you can think of, are just as good.

Theory mistake #1 is trying to understand one style using the rules of another. To classical listeners, pop sounds silly and simple. To pop listeners, classical music sounds boring and stiff. Both audiences aren't hearing the detail and creativity because they're listening using one set of rules to music that uses another set of rules.

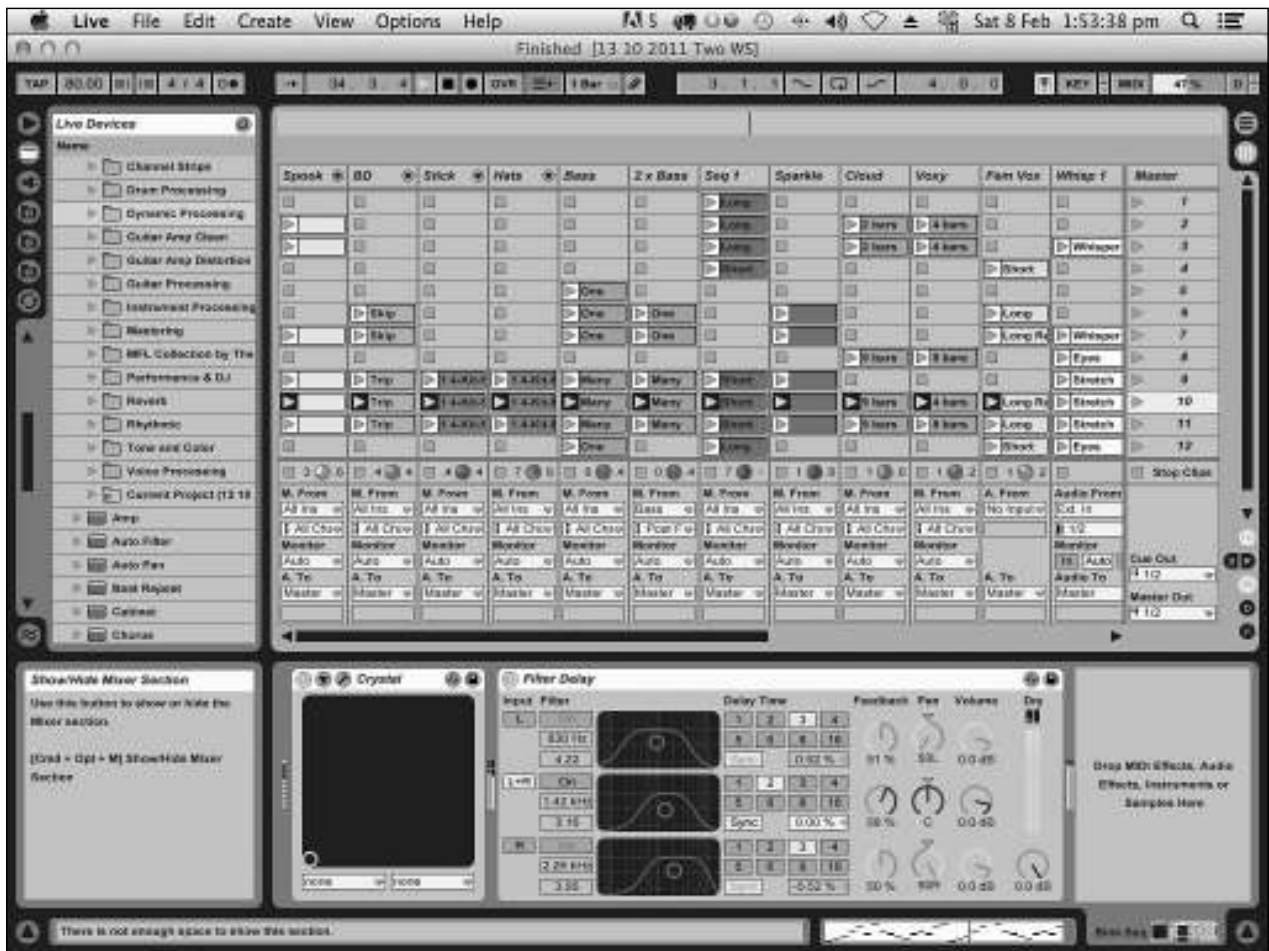


Figure 1.3 And another kind of music: a track made in Ableton Live. Like a page of dots, it defines what listeners eventually hear. Unlike a page of dots, however, it probably won't be playable a couple of centuries from now, although the rendered file may still be in an archive somewhere.

Source: Ableton.

NOTE: Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JKIG46FqZs#t=141 to hear Function's *Variance 1*. It sounds like the kind of stripped-down wireframe not-reggae you'd hear in a seedy club on the Planet of the Floor Cleaning Robots. It's made of maybe eight sounds, six of which are broken. Does it create a mood and vibe? Does it keep changing?

Hands-on theory means understanding music as paragraphs and poetry, not as an alphabet of letters or a dictionary of words. This is why there is no one-size-fits-all book of theory, and no one is ever going to write one.

If you really understand theory, you can pick out what makes styles different from each other. You can do it as they appear, and either copy them for fun or distort them for fun and profit, maybe creating yet another style for other writers to borrow from. This matters more than ever. In classical times, music theory changed at the speed of a man on

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a tired horse. Now that you can argue about modal harmony with someone from Moscow or Kiribati on Internet Relay Chat (IRC), music changes so quickly that genres are over before you notice them.

Some genres, like seapunk, vaporwave, and witch house, are Internet in-jokes that took on a life of their own, but also provide a home for quirked-out creativity. (All three may have been forgotten by the time this book hits the shelves.) Other styles, like dubstep, have been around for longer than some fans realize, but still sound new to many audiences. (Dubstep has been echoing around South London sound systems since the late 1990s. It's almost as old as Euro-trance.)

You don't have to surf the Internet whitecaps to be creative. Traditional rock, jazz, and electronica will keep you busy for a while. But it's limiting to learn about just one style when there are so many others to listen to and be influenced by.

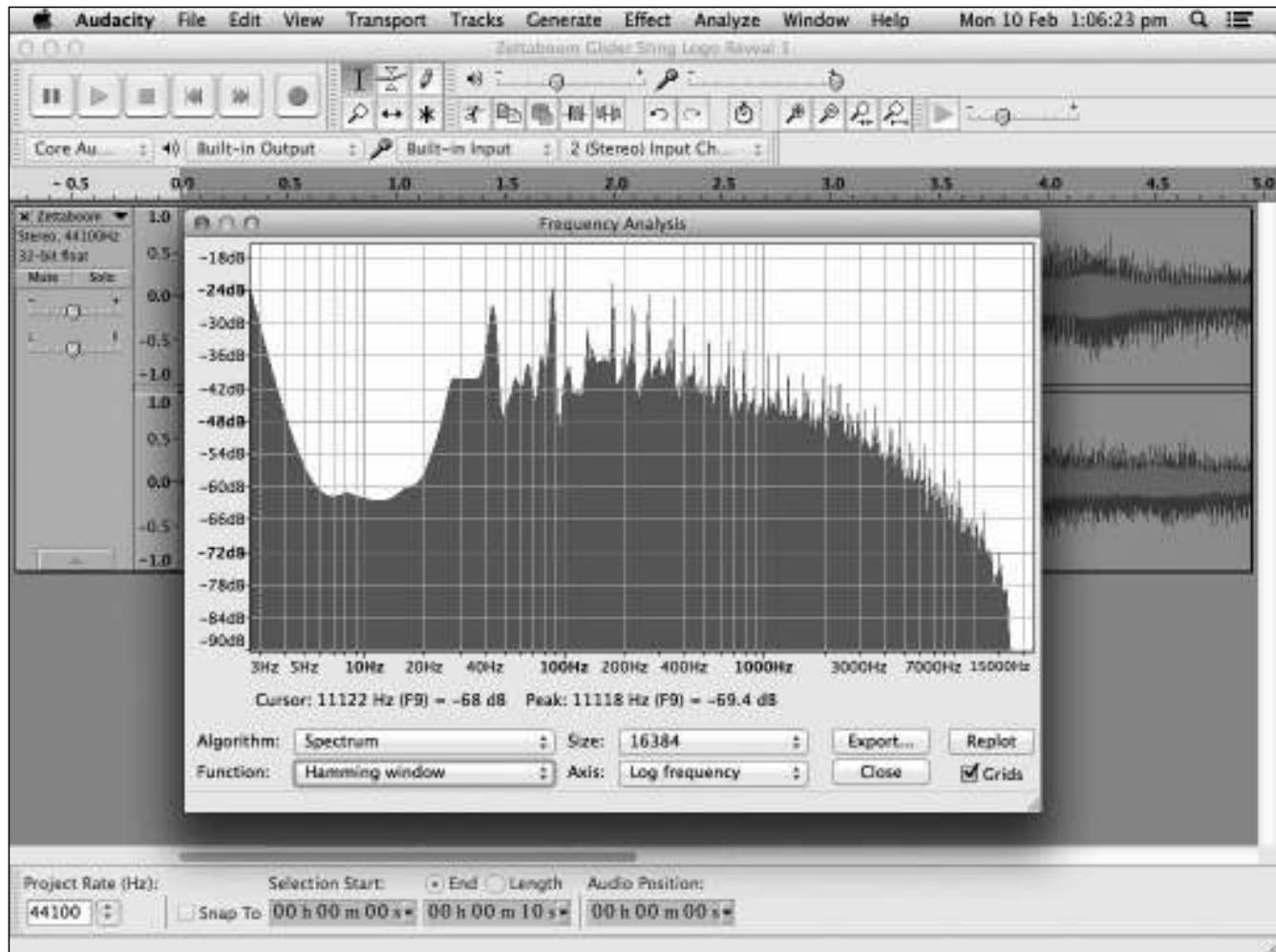


Figure 1.4 Still more music: a rendered file opened in an audio editor called Audacity. Like the other examples, it includes all the information a performance system needs to play the music. Instead of a list of dots you play by hand, however, it's a list of numbers you play through a converter and speakers.

Source: Audacity.

Ye Ancient Order of Musicians: If you love music, you're lucky, because this is a golden age. You can open a Web browser and listen to music from almost any time in history and any place in the world. *This has never happened before.*

One of the benefits of easy access to so much music and music history is that it makes it obvious how musicians have always been more similar than different.

Some kinds of music teaching can leave you thinking that all the important music was written by starchy old guys in wigs who died a long time ago, just before musical time stopped. Everything since is noise created by delinquent teenagers. But if you learn more about those starchy old guys, you'll discover they weren't so starchy and full-time straight-edge after all. Most of them had delinquent—indeed, outright bad-ass—moments.

For example, J.S. Bach was arrested for drinking and fighting. He had all the usual problems with money and local politics. It's rumored that he walked 250 miles across Germany in November to spend a few months with a teacher, before walking the 250 miles back in February. (Would you walk 250 miles through snow to learn music?)

For most of history, music has mostly been made for the same old human reasons. If you've been persuaded that some music is old and good, or old and bad, or new and good, or new and bad, you'll want to reconsider. It's all music, made by people who loved making music. You can learn something from all of it.

This is why you will find links to YouTube videos throughout this book. They're an easy way to include examples without having to drive the lawyers down in the legal department insane with licensing issues or to stick a DVD in the back, which you'll probably lose anyway. Also, some of the videos are kind of fun.

Singer, Sound, Song

Not all theory is about notes. One popular idea is that every track has three elements: the singer, the sound, and the song. Hits have all three. Misses don't. There's enough meat on this idea to make it worth looking at in more detail.

The Singer

Singers need vocal quality, talent, and charisma, and all performers need stagecraft. Even instrumentalists need to know how to speak to an audience and how to look the part, whether they're red-meat guitar-posing gods, sweaty air-punching DJs, or understated classical maestros who tease the audience with epic finger dexterity and a hint of finely controlled hair-tossing.

Being a popular artist is a full-time public performance. It's about how you dress, how you act in front of the cameras, and how you work to stay in the headlines. Mostly, it's about standing out in a way that gets you recognized. Daft Punk don't need to wear helmets on stage. They do it because it's a gimmick, like a corporate logo, and it makes them instantly recognizable.