

DEREK KELLER
STATEMENT ON TEACHING:
INTEREST, EXPERIENCE, AND PHILOSOPHY

My teaching philosophy is grounded in the belief that musical knowledge develops most effectively when rigorous technical training is integrated with creative inquiry, historical awareness, and collaborative practice. Over the course of my career, I have taught in a wide range of educational settings—including community colleges, liberal arts institutions, research universities, conservatories, private studios, and master classes. These varied contexts have shaped my approach to teaching as one that emphasizes adaptability, mentorship, and intellectual engagement. I work with students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, from general education students encountering music study for the first time to highly accomplished conservatory students preparing for professional careers. In each case, my goal is to meet students where they are while challenging them to develop artistic independence, analytical insight, and professional agency.

Central to my teaching is the conviction that technical skills gain meaning when they are understood within broader musical and cultural contexts. Whether teaching theory, aural skills, composition, or music history, I emphasize the ways musical practices connect across genres, communities, and historical periods. For example, when teaching harmonic principles such as the tonic 6/4 chord, I demonstrate its function through examples that range from Bach and Ellington to Queen and Beyoncé. In aural skills courses, students might transcribe the hook from a contemporary popular song alongside traditional dictation exercises. These strategies help students recognize theoretical concepts not as abstract rules but as dynamic elements of musical practice that operate across stylistic traditions. By situating theory within the lived experience of music-making, students develop a deeper understanding of both the mechanics and the cultural significance of the music they study.

My commitment to musicianship pedagogy also extends to identifying and implementing contemporary web-based learning tools that are both academically rigorous and responsive to the ways students access course materials today. Many students expect immediate access to instructional resources across devices, and I view this not as a pedagogical obstacle but as an opportunity to design learning environments that are flexible, accessible, and intellectually demanding. At the same time, I remain attentive to the financial realities faced by students and seek ways to reduce unnecessary expenses without compromising academic rigor. To this end, I have adopted the web-based theory and aural skills platforms *Musition* and *Auralia* as integral components of my musicianship curriculum. These platforms are far more than “plug-and-play” supplements. I have designed nearly two years of structured coursework within them, carefully selecting and sequencing lessons and exercises so that they align closely with the theoretical topics presented in the primary textbook, *Music Theory for the 21st-Century Musician* by Hutchinson, as well as with the parallel development of skills in the aural skills sequence. This structure provides students with immediate feedback while generating measurable data that allows me to track progress and adjust instruction accordingly. The system also scales effectively for larger theory cohorts without sacrificing rigor or individual accountability.

In the composition studio, I approach teaching as a process of mentorship that supports students as they discover and articulate their artistic voices. I encourage students to explore the conceptual foundations of their work through listening, score study, experimentation, and revision while also emphasizing the practical dimensions of sustaining a creative practice. Students learn to organize rehearsals, prepare professional scores and parts, coordinate performances, and document their work through audio and video recordings. They also develop professional websites and digital portfolios that allow them to present their work effectively to performers, collaborators, and audiences.

Equally important is the cultivation of collaborative and entrepreneurial habits. Contemporary composers must often create the conditions that allow their work to exist. I encourage students to conduct or perform their own compositions when appropriate, work closely with performers during rehearsals, and collaborate with artists working in media, dance, and technology. Through these experiences they gain insight into the collaborative processes that bring new music to life while developing the professional skills necessary to navigate today's artistic landscape.

My composition seminars are designed to support both creative experimentation and critical engagement with contemporary musical practice. Topics may include notation, instrumentation and orchestration, counterpoint, electronic and interactive music, and analytical listening to twentieth- and twenty-first-century repertoire. Because students enter these courses with varying degrees of compositional experience, I structure assignments that build on their individual strengths while encouraging them to explore unfamiliar techniques and aesthetic perspectives. Collaboration with performers is central to this process. Students regularly workshop their compositions with instrumentalists and present completed works in performance, experiencing the full trajectory of a creative project from conception to rehearsal to public presentation.

During my appointment as Visiting Assistant Professor of Composition at Oberlin Conservatory, I mentored students pursuing degrees in both composition and the TIMARA (Technology in Music and Related Arts) program. Working with these students reinforced my interest in interdisciplinary practices that integrate technology, media, and performance. In one instance, a student created an interactive multimedia work involving electro-acoustic instruments, dance, and projected imagery. I helped him synthesize the sonic, visual, and choreographic elements of the project while developing the logistical and interpersonal skills necessary to coordinate a complex collaborative production.

At the research university level, teaching also involves mentoring students preparing for graduate study and professional careers. I particularly enjoy working with advanced undergraduate and graduate composers as they refine their artistic voices, develop substantial portfolios, and situate their work within contemporary musical discourse. In a large and active composition program, I see mentorship extending beyond the studio to collaboration with ensembles, new music groups, and recording initiatives that allow student composers to hear their work performed and documented at a high level. I also value participating in recruitment efforts that attract talented young composers and help build an engaged and diverse creative community within the program.

In addition to composition and musicianship courses, I have taught classes that explore music within its broader social, historical, and cultural contexts, including courses on Western art music, world music traditions, twentieth-century concert music, and popular music. In these courses, music becomes a lens through which students examine the social, political, and economic forces that shape artistic production. Through listening, discussion, and research, students learn to analyze music critically while considering questions of race, class, gender, and cultural identity.

My dedication to teaching has been recognized through several honors, including the Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award from the University of Georgia, induction into the Phi Beta Kappa Society (Beta Tau Chapter), and participation in the University of California San Diego's Summer Teaching Fellows program. These experiences have reinforced my belief that teaching is an evolving practice shaped through reflection, dialogue, and continued engagement with students and colleagues.

Ultimately, I believe that effective music education combines technical rigor, creative exploration, and critical awareness of the cultural contexts in which music is created and experienced. Each student arrives with unique experiences, strengths, and aspirations, and my role as an educator is to help them develop the skills and perspectives necessary to shape their own artistic paths. By fostering curiosity, collaboration, and creative independence, I seek to prepare students not only to succeed as musicians but also to contribute meaningfully to the evolving landscape of contemporary musical culture.