

**Music Theory Concepts
June 25 Facebook Post
Mozart vs. Lil' Nas X**

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Warning: long post about Music Theory ahead, and how we perceive music written by minorities in various genres of popular music versus how we perceive music written by dead white European men.

It's been extremely gratifying to see how much people seem to appreciate the documents that I've created (available at <https://drive.google.com/.../1TqIwVbVqej0amKtJuyU8z2sVAVWxMva...>) involving the use of jazz songs by African American and Latin American composers to teach Music Theory concepts. The Stevie Wonder document in particular seems to have resonated with people. However, as I've followed the shares of these files, amidst the mostly overwhelmingly positive reactions, I've noticed two types of negative reactions. One is just general pushback of the "Sure, you can find some things here and there, but are we REALLY going to suggest that Stevie Wonder is a composer on the level of Debussy or Beethoven?"

Dealing with this one is easy. The answer is, "yes." Moving on.

The other is musical elitism of a different variety, where I've seen comments along the lines of "Well, of course Stevie Wonder is great. But my students wouldn't even know his music. They'd rather listen to 'Old Town Road.'" The implication here is that modern pop music, and particularly hip hop, has no musical validity. We've all heard the arguments: "rap isn't music," "all of it sounds the same," "it only has three chords," "there's no depth," "it's 'vulgar'." et cetera...

Seemingly Ludicrous Argument: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart vs. Lil Nas X

1. Do you know what else has three chords? A whole lot of Mozart's music. I'm a classical singer as well as a jazz one. I've sung a lot of classical music. Consider "Non più andrai," from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, an aria that nearly every baritone sings at some point in their career, and one of my personal favorites. Here's the harmonic structure of the main theme.

I V V I
I I I-V I
I I I-V I

Two chords. Well, there's a tonic chord in second inversion in there, so I guess you could call it three chords. On the other hand, the aforementioned "Old Town Road," written by Montero Hill (otherwise known as Lil Nas X) is built around a four-chord vamp employing mode mixture. If you think of the song in major, the progression (a sample from Nine Inch Nails' "Ghost IV") is:
I-bIII(add2)-bVII(sus4)-bVI Ma(add6)

If you think of the song in minor, the progression is:

I (Picardy Third borrowed from the parallel major)-III(add2)-VII(sus4)-VI Ma(add6)

Or you can call it harmony using bar chords, allowing a guitarist to keep the same hand position while moving along the fretboard, which is also true. Either way, you tell me which simple chord progression is more interesting.

2. "But!" (I'm already assuming certain reactions to this argument.) "But! But 'Non più andrai' changes keys! It modulates to the Dominant key!" This is true. And "Old Town Road" does not. But "Old Town Road" also uses a melody derived from a minor pentatonic scale, which when sung on

top of the four-chord vamp underpinning most of the song, creates bitonal dissonance at the beginning of every phrase.

As a teacher, I can use “Non più andrai” to teach things like intervals (the descending major third on the entrance of the melody), classical form (it’s basically a modified rondo form), chord arpeggiations (built into the melody), modulation (as mentioned before), and plenty of other things. And as a teacher, I can use “Old Town Road” to teach things like intervals (the descending major second at the beginning of the hook, the ascending perfect fourth at the beginning of the verse), hip hop form concepts (primary hook/verse/secondary hook/verse/secondary hook/primary hook), pentatonic scales (as mentioned earlier), bitonality (as mentioned earlier), syncopation, consonance/dissonance, countermelodic pedal points, and plenty of other things.

Ultimately, why wouldn’t we want to use music that our students are listening to as a way to help our students learn?

3. “But the lyrical content! You can’t compare them!” Well... “Non più andrai” is basically Figaro making fun of Cherubino, since Cherubino is going to be sent off by Count Almaviva to join the military, because the Count thinks Cherubino has the hots for his (the Count’s) wife and he disapproves of Cherubino’s lifestyle, even though the Count himself is trying to proposition Susanna...

Opera. Such wholesome storytelling.

Meanwhile, the lyrics of “Old Town Road” deal in large part with Lil Nas X’s personal struggles trying to pursue a music career. On top of that, the song is part of The Yeehaw Agenda, which is a fascinating story in and of itself (I highly recommend this article: <https://afropunk.com/2019/03/black-cowboys-yeehaw-agenda/>)

Sure, it’s a silly song, but it’s got some depth. Just like “Non più andrai.”

Also, both songs center heavily on rapid-fire rhyming, in a humorous fashion.

Mozart:

Ed invece del fandango, una marcia per il fango.
Per montagne, per valloni, con le nevi e i sollioni.
Al concerto di tromboni, di bombarde, di cannoni,
che le palle in tutti i tuoni all'orecchio fan fischiar.

(Translated: Instead of dancing the fandango, you’ll march through the mud, through mountains, through valleys, in snow and sun, to the sound of trumpets, with bombs and cannons making your ears ring. Have fun!)

Lil Nas X:

I got the horses in the back, horse tack is attached,
Hat is matte black, got the boots that’s black to match,
Ridin’ on a horse, ha, you can whip your Porsche,
I been in the valley, you ain’t been up off that porch, now.

Honestly, which set of rhymes is sillier?

4. “Well, you can’t compare classical orchestration to hip hop.” Why can’t you? It’s a different sort of orchestration, but whether it’s building layers and textures by writing for a chamber orchestra or building layers and textures by mixing samples, beats, synths, and acoustic instruments in the studio, it’s still orchestration.

Sidebar that’s too important to leave out: for anyone who says that sampling is just copying someone else’s work, I’d encourage them to review exactly what parody masses, paraphrase masses, cantus firmus, and themes and variations are and how they are created. Whether it’s Guillaume du Fay and his contemporaries using the popular 14th-century secular song “L’homme armé” to write one mass setting after another or the Sugarhill Gang using the bass line from Chic’s “Good Times” to create “Rapper’s Delight,” it’s the exact same principle; we just view them differently, because one is “high art” involving fifteenth-century Franco-Flemish church musicians, and one is hip hop.

5. Now, which song do I prefer personally? For me, it's "Non più andrai," but not because of any specific thoughts of one being "high art" versus "pop music." I just like the song better, but just that's me stating my personal preference. Unfortunately, much of the way that we teach music in general and theory in specific comes from a place of _____ is "high art," while _____ is a lesser art form. Whether that's elitism, racism, or a combination of both, it needs to stop.

Now, I went with the example above in part because it seemed like one of the most extreme comparisons that I could make. But there's a world in which modern R&B and hip hop can and should be used freely and easily to teach key points of Music Theory, and not from a position of "tokenism." A few examples:

Song #1: Provides excellent examples of melodic sequencing and rhythmic syncopation. Also features harmonic elements like chord inversion and mode mixture (use of the minor iv chord in major, approached by a I chord in first inversion) in its hook/chorus, along with parallel modulation in its bridge.

Song #2: Driven by a heavily-syncopated groove based on swung sixteenth notes, subdividing the beat by six. Also use of melodic minor in terms of both melodic and harmonic elements, including a chord structure that uses both a major VI chord (unaltered sixth degree of the minor scale) and a dominant IV7 chord (raised sixth scale degree) in the song's hook/chorus.

Song #3: Driven by a swing feel that also incorporates mode mixture (use of bVII in major), secondary dominants (V7/ii), and tri-tone substitution of secondary dominants (#IV7 in place of V7/IV). Extensive countermelodies are featured throughout and layered, and the song ends with a series of chromatic modulations.

These three songs? "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)," "Crazy In Love," and "Love On Top," all co-written and recorded by one Beyoncé Knowles-Carter.

And I haven't even started on Janelle Monáe's music yet..

I think it's about time to wrap up this post. Thanks for reading. Again, let's make our Music Theory courses more representative of MUSIC, in the broadest sense possible. (And let's make them less monochromatic. That, too.)