

Songwriting as Musicological Inquiry: Examples from the Popular Music Classroom

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Can composition have a place in music history and appreciation curricula? We contend that courses exploring various popular music traditions offer particularly rich opportunities for the development of composition assignments and that such assignments can offer students a valuable opportunity to integrate historical inquiry and artistic expression. First, students frequently bring a relatively strong, if unarticulated, working knowledge of popular music conventions to the course, permitting them to apply prior experiences in academic settings and to refine knowledge that may have been developed in less formal settings.¹ Second, students with limited musical expertise may learn musical concepts through the composition of lyrics and collaboration with more musically-inclined classmates. Third, the recent development of low-cost audio recording and editing software and the increasing capabilities of computing technologies permit students to create and share high-quality recordings and to build important technological skills with minimal capital investment on the part of the students or the institution.² Finally, popular music courses have the potential to expose a broad array of students to composition because they are typically in high demand. Although the currently available scholarship focuses on composition in secondary schools, recent research suggests that pedagogies deploying music composition result in increased achievement in a variety of areas, including aural

1. Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) and Johan Söderman and Göran Folkestad, "How Hip-Hop Musicians Learn: Strategies in Informal Creative Music Making," *Music Education Research* 6, no. 3 (November 2004): 313–26.

2. David Beckstead, "Will Technology Transform Music Education?," *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 6 (May 2011): 44–49; Bo Nilsson and Göran Folkestad, "Children's Practice of Computer-Based Composition," *Music Education Research* 7, no. 1 (March 2005): 21–37; Liz Mellor, "Creativity, Originality, Identity: Investigating Computer-Based Composition in the Secondary School," *Music Education Research* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 451–72; and Stuart Wise, Janinka Greenwood, and Niki Davis, "Teachers' Use of Digital Technology in Secondary Music Education: Illustrations of Changing Classrooms," *British Journal of Music Education* 28, no. 2 (July 2011): 117–34.

perception, performance, creativity, and attitude.³ Consequently, popular music history courses at the undergraduate level would seem to be an ideal venue for exposing students to the benefits of compositional training.

In this article, we describe two songwriting assignments that have been developed for two different courses, the first a large-enrollment (c. 300 students) introductory rock history course for non-majors at a comprehensive state research university and the second an upper-level undergraduate country music history course for music majors offered to approximately fifteen students at a small liberal arts college. It is our belief that the successful development and implementation of such assignments does not require specialized training in songwriting, composition, or recording. Although both authors claim amateur experience in various popular music traditions (including rock, country, and hip-hop), neither are accomplished songwriters, recordists, or performers. Rather, the projects that we have developed build upon musician-ship skills that are considered essential in most undergraduate music curricula and which college and university music instructors should already possess.

After summarizing recent research on the pedagogy of composition, we briefly describe the two assignments, drawing particular attention to the ways that they emphasize key learning objectives for their respective courses. We then discuss some of the lessons that the authors have learned regarding the implementation and assessment of these projects before offering some final thoughts concerning ways in which these projects might be adapted for other instructional settings.

3. See, for instance: Timothy S. Brophy, "Building Music Literacy with Guided Composition," *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 3 (November 1996): 15–18; Pamela Burnard, "How Children Ascribe Meaning to Improvisation and Composition: Rethinking Pedagogy in Music Education," *Music Education Research* 2, no. 1 (March 2000): 7–23; Robert Faulkner, "Group Composing: Pupil Perceptions from a Social Psychological Study," *Music Education Research* 5, no. 2 (July 2003): 101–24; Patricia E. Riley, "Including Composition in Middle School Band: Effects on Achievement, Performance, and Attitude," *UPDATE: Applications of Research in Music Education* 25, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2006): 28–38; Margaret S. Barrett, "Inventing Songs, Inventing Worlds: The 'Genesis' of Creative Thought and Activity in Young Children's Lives," *International Journal of Early Years Education* 14, no. 3 (October 2006): 201–20; Kristin Turner, "Composition in Orchestra Class: How to Meet Standard 4 as You Prepare for Performance," *Teaching Music* 14, no. 2 (October 2006): 32–37; Gabriel Rusinek, "Students' Perspectives in a Collaborative Composition Project at a Spanish Secondary School," *Music Education Research* 9, no. 3 (November 2007): 323–35; Katherine Strand and Erica Newberry, "Teachers Share Practical Advice on Classroom Composing," *General Music Today* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 14–19; and Richard Williamson, "Demystifying Composition: Give Students Ideas to Build on, and Soon They'll be Writing Original Works," *Teaching Music* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 26–29.

Best Practices in Composition Pedagogy

Recent research in the pedagogy of music composition indicates that structured assignments can permit students to develop a deep understanding of compositional practices and to tap into their own creative instincts. Discussing pedagogical issues in undergraduate introductory composition courses, Mandy Lupton and Christine Bruce have noted that students learn composition by assimilating and applying compositional models (“craft”), developing musical ideas (“process”), and finding a compositional voice (“art”).⁴ Similarly, numerous models from the elementary and secondary levels suggest that students develop important musical skills when composition assignments strike a balance between structure—achieved through the use of precomposed bass lines, harmonic progressions, ostinati, rhythms, and/or forms—and unstructured components.⁵ The balance between structured and unstructured elements should change from one setting to another: the novice will likely need more models and clearer instructions than will a more advanced music major. Consequently, well-designed composition assignments in the music history and appreciation classrooms should account for the profile of the typical enrollee and work to meet the students at their particular skill level.

Sample Assignment #1: The Non-Major Course

“Introduction to Rock” is a 100-level course offered annually by the music department to non-majors, typically enrolling about 300 undergraduates (mostly juniors and seniors) from across the campus of a large state university. There are no prerequisites, and the course is taught with no expectation that students can read music or have any musical training. As taught between 2007 and 2009, the course required students to complete three short papers of between 1,000 and 1,250 words: an analytical paper comparing a cover song to the original, a concert report, and one titled, “Write Your Own Rock Song!” In this last assignment, which accounted for 15% of the semester grade, students were asked to write original lyrics to an imagined rock song and devote considerable attention to describing and interpreting this song. The assignment required students to demonstrate their knowledge

4. Mandy Lupton and Christine S. Bruce, “Craft, Process, and Art: Teaching and Learning Music Composition in Higher Education,” *British Journal of Music Education* 27, no. 3 (2010): 271–87.

5. Brophy, “Building Music Literacy with Guided Composition”; Strand and Newberry, “Teachers Share Practical Advice on Classroom Composing”; and Williamson, “Demystifying Composition.” David J. Brinkman also suggests that a balance between structured and unstructured activities can help students and teachers be more creative in a variety of settings in “Teaching Creatively and Teaching for Creativity,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 111, no. 2 (June 2010): 48–50.

of style, form, and instrumentation; to discuss text-music relationships; and to consider the possible ways in which a song might be received by listeners (Appendix A).

The approximately 900 songs collected over three years ran the stylistic and topical gamut. Many students wrote in a lighthearted or positive tone of cars, family, food, the love of God, girlfriends and boyfriends, and sports. (Perhaps the students self-censored, but there was virtually no explicit discussion of sex or drugs.) Often, the songwriters explored serious topics drawn from their own experiences: the death of a friend, family member, or pet; breakups; illness; depression; the anxiety of post-college life; and spiritual crises. (Occasionally, papers suggested that the writer was in distress, in which case the instructor and/or teaching assistants referred students to the university's counseling office.) Regardless of the topic, many students reported that the writing of the lyrics was a rewarding, even cathartic exercise. That so many students used the assignment to explore areas of deep personal significance was an initially unexpected, but welcome surprise.

Students tended to find the discussion of the musical characteristics of the song the most difficult aspect of the assignment; the particular challenge was to use what they learned of the "grammar" of rock for the creation of something wholly new. In this regard, the best papers offered detailed descriptions of style, form, texture, timbre, and instrumentation; used terminology accurately; related their compositions to songs studied in class; and carefully explained the ways in which the music related to the text (See Appendix B for a sample paper.) Formally speaking, most songs tended to adhere to some version of verse-chorus form; less common were strophic or AABA forms or through-composed songs. In contrast to this formal conservatism, a sizable number of papers showed an eclectic approach to genre and sound by, say, mixing disco and heavy metal or including a sitar in a punk song; this eclecticism might have reflected their own tastes or served to demonstrate their broad understanding of the course material.

The final component of the assignment—to discuss possible broader meanings and reception of the song—was meant to extend discussion of an important theme of the class: the multiplicity of meaning in music that arises out of the temporal, geographic, cultural, or political contexts in which it is experienced. Successful papers demonstrated the students' ability to experience their music as if from the outside.

The students' reactions to the assignment often traced the following trajectory: initial excitement (mixed with anxiety), dismay about the difficulty of creating and explaining a song, and finally, pride in the completed assignment. Many students reported that it was both the hardest and most gratifying assignment of the semester. The assignment served its purpose: to provide non-music students with an outlet for their creativity, to allow the

instructor to assess the students' grasp of the musical fundamentals of rock, and to reinforce the broad themes, issues, and perspectives explored over the course of the semester.

Sample Assignment #2: The Major Course

"History of Country Music" is an upper-level elective course that, since 2008, has been offered in alternate academic years to approximately fifteen upper-division music majors at a small liberal arts college. Typically, the enrollment comprises students representing all of the degree programs offered by the university's school of music, including commercial music, music business, music education, performance, and Bachelor of Arts students. Over the course of the semester, students complete two songwriting projects in addition to biweekly quizzes and weekly brief writing assignments that ask them to reflect on their own musical experiences, grapple with conflicting ideas, apply concepts to various case studies, and/or transcribe and analyze representative compositions (see, for example, Appendix C). Undertaken in small groups, the songwriting projects are intended to complement this array of assignments by requiring students to apply knowledge about the stylistic conventions of country music subgenres (including lyric tropes, formal conventions, and arranging and production practices) that they developed through the brief writing assignments and to deepen that understanding through the creation of new "sound-alike" works.⁶

Like the non-major assignment, this songwriting project requires that students model their original work on successful examples, much as they may imitate professional writing, performance, and/or teaching in other aspects of the music curriculum. The two "Country Music History" projects (see Appendix D) comprise four individual components: the transcription and analysis of a group of model songs in a representative country music style, the composition of a derivative song in the style of the model compositions, an essay that explains how their derivative song is related musically and lyrically to the models, and an evaluation of individual and group contributions to the project. For the first project, students engage with a predetermined group of model songs, while they are permitted to select the models for their second composition from the body of country songs written within the previous two decades. At the completion of each assignment, class time is devoted to student performances of their derivative compositions, at which point the students and the instructor offer informal constructive feedback for the revision of the composition and discuss the connections between their work and their

6. Tami J. Draves suggests that the social aspects of group composition and songwriting might encourage students to pursue their musical educations further in "Music Achievement, Self-Esteem, and Aptitude in a College Songwriting Class," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* no. 178 (Fall 2008): 35–46.

model compositions. Near the end of the term, each songwriting group records their compositions in collaboration with students enrolled in “Studio Pressure Night,” a course that prepares commercial music majors for work as session musicians and recording engineers. While the recording session is not assessed as part of the course grade, students frequently remark that the experience permitted them to develop new understandings of the genre through performance and, for students who had no prior recording experience, a new confidence to create music in the recording studio. Moreover, students occasionally use the demonstration-quality recordings that are created in these sessions to secure professional work as singers and songwriters.⁷

The songwriting projects support three of the six learning objectives developed for the “History of Country Music” course: “to develop an understanding of the origins, defining characteristics, and evolution of country music in America,” “to gain familiarity with a representative repertory of recorded country music from ca. 1922 to the present,” and “to develop active listening skills in order to respond more fully to music and writing skills to convey what [students] have learned.” The assessment strategy developed for the songwriting projects is informed by these key learning goals while also accounting for the students’ varying songwriting experience and expertise. In order to encourage students to take risks in their compositions, students receive full “participation” credit for each derivative song, contributing 30% to the total score for the project. Critical assessment is offered in the two prose writing assignments, each of which contributes 30% to the total score for the project, that are completed in conjunction with the song: the transcription and analysis of model songs and the reflection essay that connects the new composition to the models.

Successful examples of the former component offer accurate formal, harmonic, and lyrical transcriptions of the model songs; discuss the salient characteristics of those models and connect them to the characteristics musical conventions of the particular subgenre that those models represent; and display a clear, concise, and vigorous prose writing style. The reflection essay requires still further synthesis as students must draw connections between their original compositions, particular elements of the models, and the broader stylistic conventions of the subgenre within which they are working. Students occasionally struggle in the synthesis element of these components, as the mode of instruction in core undergraduate music theory courses rarely requires students to develop holistic understandings of a musical composition

7. Commercial music and music business majors often come to the course with advanced skills in songwriting, arranging, and recording; they frequently serve as mentors for students who have no prior experience in these areas.

or style, but marked improvement in this area has been noted between the first and second projects.

Assessment

In these assignments, assessments are tailored to the specific skill levels, course materials, and objectives for the given course. Both courses assess mastery of knowledge of the vocabulary, musical structures, and stylistic features of rock and country music. In the non-major course, assessment focused on three areas: lyrics, music, and writing (Appendix B). Given that this was not a literature or poetry class, lyrics were assessed less in terms of perceived quality or craftsmanship than in terms of the student's clear explication of them. The explanation of the sound of the song and the discussion of the text-music relationship was given the most weight—one-third of the assignment grade. It was here that students tended to lose the most points; incorrect or unexplained uses of terminology and vague or thin descriptions of form, genre, etc., were the most common transgressions. Students, however, did not need prior musical knowledge to excel in this area; they only had to demonstrate the mastery of the vocabulary and concepts taught in class. (Those who could describe complex chord progressions or even submit home recordings of their songs were certainly welcome to do so, but they were not given higher scores because of this extracurricular knowledge.) The discussion of the song's meanings was graded on the student's ability to imagine a multiplicity of ways in which the song could be interpreted. Class discussion often focused on the richness of a song's meanings—e.g., the different meanings Aretha Franklin's "Respect" would have depending on whether the listener were, say, female, African American, or Otis Redding—and the song composition assignment required students to apply this kind of approach to their own work. Finally, students were assessed on their writing; wordiness, poor grammar, vagueness, and typos were all grounds for point reductions. The sample paper in Appendix B, reprinted here with the author's permission, is an example of a strong paper, but one that certainly left some room for improvement, and was provided to students as a guide in their own work.

The projects submitted in the course for music majors were assessed along similar lines as those in the non-major course, but greater attention was devoted to the music-analytic component of their work. Specifically, assessment focused on three criteria: 1) the accuracy of transcriptions, including harmonic and formal structures; 2) the relevance of the students' model songs to their original composition as presented in both the analytic essays that accompanied each transcription and the explanatory paragraph(s) submitted with their songs; and 3) the degree to which the original compositions actually deployed the relevant characteristics of the model

songs. Students were permitted to offer their harmonic analyses in a variety of nomenclatures, including Roman numerals, chord symbols, and Nashville numbers; the strongest analytic essays carefully linked harmonic and formal structures, as the students had previously done in their song analysis project and in several in-class experiences. Moreover, students were expected not simply to include all of the details they uncovered in their transcriptions and analyses of model songs, but to discuss only those elements of the song that played an important role in shaping their own songs. Finally, the explanatory paragraphs that accompanied the students' original compositions were expected to draw explicit connections between their models and their original work. In order to account for the widely varied levels of songwriting experience that the students brought to the course, the original songs' lyrical and melodic content were not evaluated; rather, it was expected that the songs would exhibit the formal and/or thematic characteristics that the students identified as salient in their analyses and explanatory essays. An example of a strong overall project, including sample analytic and explanatory paragraphs and an original composition are included in Appendix E (reprinted with the students' permission). Additionally, because the assignment were undertaken as a group project, the students were expected to submit brief assessments of both their own and their partner's contributions to the assignment.

Discussion

When combined with strong analysis and reflection components, composition and songwriting assignments offer rich opportunities for students to engage creatively with key musical concepts, to learn about musical structure and style through hands-on activities, and to reach a strong understanding of the various ways that music can signify meaning across time and social settings. Although the projects discussed above have been implemented in popular music courses, similar assignments could easily be designed for use in a wide variety of undergraduate music appreciation and music history courses and at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum. Music majors who have taken some courses in harmony and musicianship are normally equipped to set a common text, and units on plainchant, Baroque opera, and German *Lieder* all lend themselves to such assignments, while students in a non-major world music course might write scenarios and musical cues for Orff instruments for shadow puppet plays along with a unit on Javanese gamelan or composing *contrafacta* in a unit on soul music. Moreover, although many institutions may not be equipped with recording studios and skilled instrumentalists, instructors can utilize such low-cost software as Audacity or Apple's GarageBand, which permit students to manipulate pre-recorded

samples and loops within which to record their vocals.⁸ By engaging student creativity within the music appreciation and music history classrooms, composition assignments such as the ones discussed here allow students to practice creative expression, to develop a deep understanding of stylistic conventions, to refine valuable critical faculties, and to connect theoretical and practical aspects of the study of music history.

Appendix A: Non-major Course Assignment

Short Paper 2 Write Your Own Rock Song! 150 points

For this assignment you are to compose an original rock song. Well, sort of. Specifically, write two (or more) verses of lyrics on the subject of your choice. The verses may be in any pattern or form. You may look at the song lyrics we've discussed in class as models, though you must compose original lyrics (Google will find you out if you don't!), and must do so for the purpose of this assignment (nothing from your back catalog, please). In a paper of 1,250 or fewer words (the lyrics are not part of the word count) you are to do the following:

- Provide a title.
- Explain the lyrics.
- Explain, in detail, the sound of your song (in terms of genre, instrumentation, melody, timbre, texture, possible studio effects, etc.).
- Explain how the lyrics and music relate to one another. How does the mood of the music match (or possibly at times not match) that of the lyrics? Provide specific correspondences between words and music.
- Discuss the meanings of the song: what does the song mean to you?, what kinds of social and cultural meanings, whether connected with (for example) gender, race, ethnicity, class, politics, or morality might it have?

As always, be clear and specific (especially in terms of the music).

8. Jack Siegel, "How One Class with One Computer Composed Music," *Teaching Music* 11, no. 5 (April 2004); Marina Gall and Nick Breeze, "Music Composition Lessons: The Multimodal Affordances of Technology," *Educational Review* 57, no. 4 (November 2005): 415–33; Jennifer Demski, "How Music Teachers Got Their Groove Back," *T.H.E. Journal* 37, no. 9 (October 2010); and Kenneth H. Smith, "Using Audacity and One Classroom Computer to Experiment with Timbre," *General Music Today* 24, no. 3 (April 2011): 23–27.

Submit assignments as a Word document through the Assignments section of Blackboard. Label attachments as follows: last name, first initial, “song” [no spaces], e.g.: katzmsong.doc.

Grading rubric:

Presence and discussion of the lyrics: 40

Discussion of the music and its connection to the lyrics: 50

Discussion of the song’s meanings: 35

Clarity, conciseness of writing: 25

Appendix B: “Write Your Own Rock Song!” Sample Paper (with comments from the instructor):⁹

Student Paper	Instructor Comments
<p>(1)</p> <p>Take a look through and tell me what it is that you see, A world filled with affectionate beauty, how about hateful treachery? Light or dark, but what about the in between Your classification has no significance to me</p> <p>And you’d like me to think That it is black or white, left or right, That I must remain calm, oh no, get ready to fight When definition only fades like a shadow in the fog (2)</p> <p>It is important that the focus of the song be on the music, not the lyrics. The lyrics of the song consist only of the two verses typed above. The lyrics are not meant to give the song any sort of direction or definition. Rather, they are only provided to inspire some type of thought in the listener and to add musical complexity with vocals. Although the lyrics are not meant to have any strict</p>	<p>(1) <i>Needs a title.</i></p> <p>(2) <i>These are interesting, evocative lyrics. On the practical side, though, notice that the line lengths are very different. Will each line have a different number of bars devoted to it? (Not very typical.) Or will the singer use lots of melismas on the shorter lines to make up for their brevity? These are the</i></p>

9. The comments are not the same as those given to the author, but were written for the sake of other students preparing to complete the assignment in subsequent semesters.

meaning to the listener, they relate to the common fault of peoples' tendency to rely on oversimplifications. Society all too often has a tendency to organize complex issues into strict extremes, or labels, when in reality, the issues are much more universally related and interconnected.

Musically, the song consists of five instruments: three electric guitars, an electric bass, and a drum kit. Guitar one is a rhythm guitar, which plays the chords of the melody of the song in varying rhythms with a full-bodied, heavy and thick timbre. Guitar two is the lead guitar, which has slight distortion and a sharp, almost twangy sound, and occasional use of a wa-wa pedal. Guitar three plays mostly accompaniment (3) with occasionally more sound effects provided by tremolo and pedals such as delay, phase and echo. The bass line will be free and distinct, playing mostly funk and jazz styles. The drums will also be fairly free, using unconventional beats (4) and heavy crash and ride cymbals.

The song will start with an extended, building introduction. The introduction is the most important part of the song, because it sets the feel for the rest of the song. The intro will open with a light, high-pitched droning hum of feedback provided by guitar three. After a few seconds of this, the lead guitar will start in lightly picking the individual notes of each chord in progression. After four measures, the drums will come in and play a simple rhythm emphasizing the high-hat. After an additional eight measures of guitar one, guitar two and the drums playing their individual parts, the bass and rhythm guitar enter. For the next eight measures, the tempo and complexity of the sound will slowly build until an expected climax. The climax, however, will never truly break out; instead the music will basically die down just as the vocals enter.

types of things you need to think about.

(3) This suggests a country influence. Given that there are jazz and funk influences, too, this song could end up sounding like a mish-mash. Avoid the temptation to throw everything you know into the song. (Unless you want it to sound like a mish-mash.) Whatever you do, make sure to explain/justify yourself.

(4) This is a bit vague.

Vocally, the song will be sung in a winy (5) but melodic tone. (6) The vocals draw a great deal of emphasis from the vocal style of Neil Young. The timbre of the vocals will be smooth but not polished. The words will be difficult to understand, as the vocals will often slur and extend the words using melismas (7) and sometimes slurring and mumbling the speech. This effect adds to idea of the lyrics, (8) in that they are unclear, and serve more as a purpose to provoke individual meaning or thought than to deliver a message. (9) The form would not be confined to any type of conventional structure. There are only two verses in the song, but the music does not follow a strophic pattern. Only the two verses have the same musical content. In between the two verses the music extends the sounds of the intro, but now with much more complexity where the instruments become interlocked into a groove. In the jam between verses, each individual instrument extends the music a little further away from the melody in an experimental, improvisational type of texture. After a long extension of the jam, the bass will slowly work its way back to the original bass line from the melody of the song, and it will then be followed by the other instruments.

After the second and final verse, the instruments will die down to only a repeating bass line and a spare beat provided by the crash cymbal. (10) The tempo, sound and texture would again build on complexity and speed in a slow progression to build another climax. The climax will consist of an instrumental outbreak with fast tempo, heavy drums and powerful, crashing guitar and bass sections. The climax would give way to another, yet shorter, instrumental jam. The jam would eventually segue into a bridge that would slowly relax the song with slower

(5) *Whiny (make sure to proofread!).*

(6) *The meaning of this is unclear. Does it mean smooth timbre, as suggested in the next sentence?*

(7) *Good, but provide a specific example.*

(8) *I'd like more on the connection between the music and the lyrics. How might the music reflect or shape the meaning of the lyrics?*

(9) *It would be good to describe the expressive aspects of the vocal part—angry, confused, sleepy?*

(10) *The ride cymbal or hi-hat would probably be better for that. A crash cymbal doesn't have a very spare sound (it crashes!).*

tempo and more guitar effects. (11) This flow would continue to the outro of the song, where the texture would become more and more thin, as instruments would slowly fade out leaving only a light drum beat, bass line and spare guitar effects. The drums and guitar would also slowly fade out leaving only the repeating bass line to finish the song.

The song is not designated towards any specific audience, but rather to anyone who enjoys listening to energetic, guitar emphasized music. Although the song has not been made to fit into any specific genre, most people would probably describe it as some sort of mix between indie, grunge and jam music with influences from funk and jazz as well. The indie style will come from the raw, DIY production style, while the grunge style will be heard in the heavy use of powerful, electric distorted guitars, and finally the jam style will be heard in the improvisational-type, instrumental grooves that take up the majority of the length of the song. The song is most heavily influenced by bands such as Built to Spill, Wilco and Phish. (12) To me, the song should be more about the experience of creating the music than anything else. It is most important that all of the musicians would be able to find a creative groove where they can really build off the sound of each individual instrument in order to craft a complex style of musical innovation. Also, to me, the lyrics do have meaning. They express my frustration with societal categorizations, labels or oversimplifications of any subject. The music of the song relates to this feeling by expressing the frustration through the two dynamic climaxes of sound. The lyrics, however, are not to have an explicit meaning when used in the song. The true meaning of the song would be whatever meaning it inspired in each individual listener of the song. (13)

(11) For example?

(12) It's fine to invoke well-known groups in explaining your song, but don't let that substitute for a clear and detailed description of the music.

(13) Don't just leave it at that. Suggest some possible interpretations.

From the professor:

Overall, this is a good paper. The analysis of the music is, for the most part, thoughtful, clear, and detailed. (A few passages could be explained more clearly.) I think it's interesting that the author places much more emphasis on the music and uses words more for what they evoke or suggest rather than what they specifically denote. This is fine, but he/she should still explain how others might interpret the song. Also, as I mention in one of the comments, the author should say more about the relationship between the music and the lyrics.

Grading rubric:

Presence and discussion of the lyrics: 37/40

Discussion of the music and its connection to the lyrics: 45/50

Discussion of the song's meanings: 29/35

Clarity, conciseness of writing: 23/25

Overall grade: 134/150 B+

Appendix C: Music Major Course: Analysis Assignment

In this assignment, we will begin our investigation of the musical materials of country music by undertaking an analysis of an early hillbilly recording. We are interested in a variety of musical parameters, including the formal structure of the music and lyrics, harmonic structures, and arranging and production practices.

To complete this assignment successfully, you must:

1) Select one of the following recordings from our Moodle module:

- Vernon Dalhart's "Wreck of the Old 97"
- The Carter Family's "Keep on the Sunny Side"
- Jimmie Rodgers's "Blue Yodel No. 5"

2) Create a lead sheet for the song, transcribing the lyrics, harmonic structure, formal structure, and arrangement of the song.

3) Respond to the following questions in a brief, 2–3 page essay:

- Describe the ways in which the form, harmonic structure, and arrangement relate to the song's narrative.
- Characterize the vocal and instrumental arrangement, describing the instruments used and the ways that the arrangement relates to the formal and narrative structures of the song.

- Summarize the general characteristics of the production and the recording.

Your grade for this assignment will be assessed using the following rubric:

- Transcription: 30%.
 - An “A” transcription will offer complete and accurate lead sheet drawn from the commercial recording provided on Moodle.
 - A “B” transcription will be complete and nearly accurate, perhaps with minor errors in harmonic, lyrical, and/or formal transcription.
 - A “C” transcription will be mostly complete yet may exhibit one or two significant inaccuracies in harmonic and/or lyrical transcription and/or a minor error in formal transcription.
 - A “D” transcription will be mostly complete yet marked by several significant errors in harmonic, lyrical, and/or formal transcription.
 - An “F” transcription will be incomplete and marked by several significant errors in harmonic, lyrical, and/or formal transcription.
- Essay: 70%.
 - An “A” essay will address all of the questions outlined in the prompt, articulate a strong thesis, provide relevant supporting evidence from the transcription, and be free from grammatical errors.
 - A “B” essay will address all of the questions outlined in the prompt, but may articulate a somewhat weak thesis, provide occasional irrelevant supporting evidence, and/or demonstrate occasional grammatical errors.
 - A “C” essay will address all of the questions outlined in the prompt, but may articulate a weak thesis, provide much irrelevant supporting evidence, and/or demonstrate several grammatical errors.
 - A “D” essay will fail to address one of the questions outlined in the prompt, articulate a weak thesis, provide excessive irrelevant supporting evidence, and/or demonstrate excessive grammatical errors.
 - An “F” essay will fail to address more than one of the questions outlined in the prompt, fail to articulate a thesis, provide incomplete evidence, and/or demonstrate a poor command of written English.

Appendix D: Music Major Course: Song Analysis and Composition Project

- 1) With a partner, choose one of the following lists of songs (songs will be available on Moodle):

Honky Tonk

Ernest Tubb, "Walking the Floor Over You" (1941)

Lefty Frizzell, "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time" (1950)

Hank Williams, "Cold, Cold Heart" (1951)

Bluegrass

Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, "Blue Moon of Kentucky" (1947)

The Stanley Brothers, "Little Maggie" (1947/48)

Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys, "Rollin' in My Sweet Baby's Arms" (1950)

Rockabilly

Elvis Presley, "Mystery Train" (1955)

Carl Perkins, "Dixie Fried" (1956)

Jerry Lee Lewis, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" (1957)

- 2) Transcribe the lyrics, analyze the form, and provide a lead sheet (using either Roman numerals or Nashville numbers) for each song.
- 3) Write a song that borrows from specific elements of the songs on the list you've chosen.
- 4) Provide lyrics, formal structure, and lead sheet for your song.
- 5) Write a paragraph that explains how your song relates to the models you have chosen.
- 6) Complete the self-assessment and group assessment forms.

Grading Rubric:

Transcription and Analysis of Model Songs: 30%

Original Composition: 30%

Explanatory Paragraph: 30%

Self-assessment: 5%

Group assessment: 5%

Appendix E: Music Major Course: Sample Assignment (excerpts)

I. Explanatory paragraph.

We chose to analyze “Before He Cheats,” sung by Carrie Underwood, “Independence Day,” sung by Martina McBride, and “Mean” by Taylor Swift because they all showcase women being strong enough to stand up for themselves. We noticed that there was a common theme regarding the singer being treated poorly or disrespected by someone and choosing to speak out. Each one is very personal and specifically targets a certain situation or respect issue. We chose to do the same through our song, though we chose to allow our chorus to relate to more than one type of situation as a time shift narrative may apply to different situations. We each chose a specific person in our life who disrespected us and wrote a verse telling that person off for doing so. We decided not to include a bridge because “Independence Day” did not include one, and we felt that it was a powerful song. It also influenced our decision to include an interlude. We also chose to repeat the last line to bring us back to the I chord because both “Independence Day” and “Before He Cheats” include repeats of lines at the end of the piece and because “Mean” includes chord changes on repeated phrases in the bridge. We used an odd number of lines in the chorus because 2 out of 3 of the examples had odd numbers of lines, and we used longer verses both to allow us to say everything that we wanted to and to follow the examples we chose. We noticed a more complex chord structure in these songs, so we allowed ourselves to think outside of the I IV V pattern and use other chords in our chorus. We used a fair amount of rhyme, influenced by “Before He Cheats.” Our rhyme structure in the verses is AABBC, but in the first verse, one of the “rhymes” is a repeat of a word, and another is a slant rhyme. In the chorus, the rhyme scheme is AABCB. We also chose to use fewer words in the chorus and very text driven verses because all three examples we chose followed that pattern. We used two verses instead of three because we each wanted to contribute a story, and we wanted the distribution of stories to be even.

II. Analyses of sample songs (transcriptions not included here).

“Independence Day” (Martina McBride): This song has three verses, with the chorus delaying its appearance until after the second verse. Each verse has eight lines and could be divided into two separate verses, but I felt that the eight lines worked together as a unit with “It’s Independence Day” closing each set. There does not seem to be much rhyme in the verses, as the “rhyme scheme” (quoted because

G D
But I won't take the hurt you give,

D
Thought you could knock me down because I won't hit back,

G V: A
Too bad I give my blows with class you'll never have.

Chorus:

A
I'm better off, no doubt in my mind

A II: E
There's nothing you could do. Nobody likes your kind

A E
One day soon, you'll get your own,

A
I'll be happy,

A
you'll be alone.

Verse 2:

You told me once that I'm not good enough for you
Well now I'm strong, but then, you broke my heart in two
You said you needed more
So I showed you to the door
Four years gone, and all those memories down the drain
It took a while, but then I got it through my brain.

Chorus

Interlude

Chorus

From the professor:¹⁰

This project effectively ties the model songs to several key elements of their original composition, particularly thematic content, rhyme scheme, and formal structure. Yet, at the same time, the authors made conscious decisions to avoid strict imitation in their own song, demonstrating a mature approach to using models. Finally, the writing is generally clear and concise throughout, although some word choice issues are evident.

Grading Rubric:

Explanatory paragraph: 30/30

Original composition: 30/30

Transcriptions and analyses of model songs: 29/30

10. The comments published here are not those submitted to the students. Rather, they offer a summation of the specific comments provided in the professor's feedback.