

**White Supremacy and the Major Scale:
Reframing Narratives to Teach the Blues, Improvise, and Check In with Students**

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Abstract

Increasing diversity and equity in secondary and college music programs is a common thread in the scholarship across disciplines in the field. While crucial work is being done to decolonize curricula broadly, students often express difficulty relating to formal music study and teachers struggle to balance desires to diversify repertoire and incorporate alternative pedagogical strategies with their own training. Narratives of white supremacy and music have intersected for over 400 years, but the effect goes beyond the composers and pieces we choose to program or teach. It influences foundational concepts of theory, tuning, and even what notes are (the major scale). This paper uses historical and pedagogical research methods to examine the connections between narratives of white supremacy and formal music study, and then shows how the practice of reframing these narratives can lead to a reframing of classroom and applied teaching strategies. Specific attention is given to teaching the blues and improvisation, but the concepts can be applied to different teaching situations as well. The goal is to offer suggestions to aid in the process of creating classroom settings that are more accessible and applicable to students and less daunting for educators.

White Supremacy and the Major Scale: Reframing Narratives to Teach the Blues, Improvise, and Check In with Students

What is your story with music?

This is a prompt that I use often as a check-in to begin classes, lectures, and meetings. Even among people who do not consider themselves musicians or particularly knowledgeable about music, I have never had anyone fail to come up with a meaningful answer to the question. The prompt also serves as a vehicle to help students begin to think critically about music and allows a cohort to write a collective musical story built from different perspectives. I too have a music story built upon the feeling I can still recall from hitting the opening riff of the Rolling Stones's "Honky Tonk Women" when I was thirteen and having someone recognize it. That feeling carried me through two jazz studies degrees, a Ph.D. in historical musicology, a career as a guitarist, and nearly two decades teaching music at a liberal arts college working at the intersection of secondary and higher education.

But that's not my only story. Another stems from my culpability as a white Southerner within the system of white supremacy and my recognition of how it intersects with my playing, informs my teaching, and colors my thinking. Growing up in Alabama in the 1980s, I attended an overwhelmingly white school. I don't remember much from my fourth grade Alabama History class except for one lesson about Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.¹ Our class was shown a picture of both men and told to notice how elegant and stately Lee looked in contrast to Grant's disheveled and unkempt appearance. I remember thinking this was strange at the time, not because I was a woke fourth grader—sadly the opposite—but because I couldn't see the difference. I remember thinking they just looked like old pictures of old dudes. I had to be taught to see the difference, and I accepted it was so. The need to have Southern fourth graders create value judgements of Civil War generals is not a reflection of bad teaching or faulty lesson plans,

but instead is a window into how narratives are used to reinforce systemic oppression. The way in which these narratives are framed and taught matters.

Narratives of white supremacy and music education have intersected for over 400 years, and this paper will examine this intersection and its lingering effects by using a theoretical framework built upon scholarship that has sprung from Phillip Ewell's critique of whiteness and music theory (2016), inspiration from Bettina Love's use of hip hop as a tool for pedagogical innovation (TEDx, 2014), and reflection on how Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality as a systemic force that creates different levels of bias and discrimination based on intersecting identities affect systems of music education (see also Coaston, 2019). The methodology combines historical and pedagogical research to explore connections between historical narratives of white supremacy and music education followed by examples of teaching strategies that can be developed through reframing narratives and reflecting upon how they affect everyday teaching. The goal is to offer one perspective in hopes of augmenting current research and encouraging further exploration among music educators across the discipline. Diversifying music history classes and concert programming is important and overdue, but bias runs deeper and affects even seemingly benign concepts like tuning, rhythm, and the major scale. Viewing and teaching music through a Western lens not only limits access to potential students, but it also has the effect of overcomplicating concepts like improvisation and "othering" alternate approaches to musical interpretations like the blues. By reframing perceptions of music to account for different perspectives, new approaches to teaching and learning can be developed that have the potential to make the study of music more applicable and accessible to students and less daunting for educators.

Historical Analysis: Reframing Narratives of Music Education and White Supremacy

Cultural suppression and indoctrination of people whose lived experiences fell outside of established norms have been critical tools in the proliferation of white supremacy over the past four centuries. This practice resulted in the establishment of a cultural hierarchy that included language, religion, names, social practices, and the arts. For music, not only was Western—or classical—music viewed as a higher art form, but Western theories of harmony, tuning, structure, and performance practice were codified as the proper way to teach and learn music, and, as Deborah Bradley's (2006) critiques of multiculturalism in music education have shown, this perception shapes efforts to decolonize curricula today. During the same period as the proliferation of formal systems of slavery and segregation in the United States and increased European colonization, roughly 1600-1950, systems of music education also went through processes of formalization. The timeline in Figure 1 shows a comparison of selected events between narratives of music education and the history of slavery in the United States outlined in *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones, Elliott, Hughes, Silverstein, et. al., 2020).

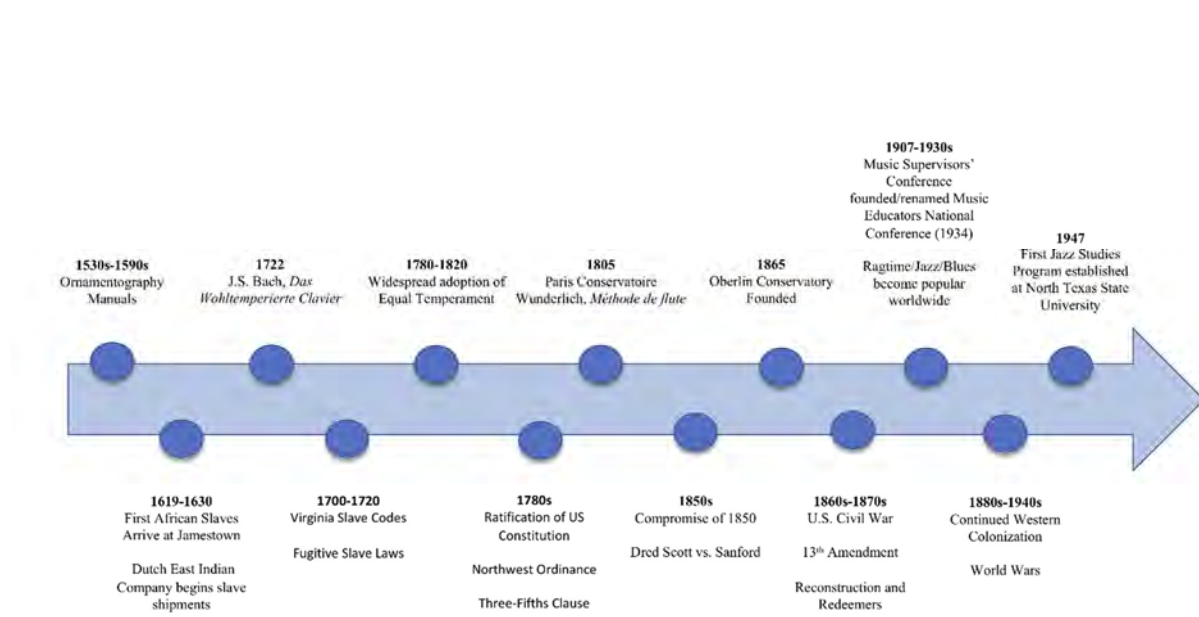
Rather than viewing these two narratives as parallel and independent of one another, as I was taught and viewed them for many years, they can be reframed as intersecting. This is not to suggest a direct correlation between these narratives—Bach likely had little to do with authoring fugitive slave laws, for example—but I would argue there is more here than historical coincidence.

As *The 1619 Project* shows, there are alternate narratives to history (2020). Well-known pillars of U.S. history, defined by armed conflicts such as the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and World Wars, happen in tandem with other historical events that reinforced systems of supremacy

and marginalized large groups of people, such as the Northwest Ordinance, Compromise of 1850, Redeemer movement, and increased global colonization.

Figure 1

Comparing Music Education Events and The 1619 Project Timeline



Narratives of music can be similarly reframed to study the effects of colonialism on the development of systems of music education. The points on the music side of the timeline represent examples of increased formalization of theory and education from ca. 1720-1920, which may seem unfamiliar, even for people who studied Western music or participated in a Music Appreciation class. Just as wars serve as pillars for Western history, the standard narrative of Western music is built upon the music of a select group of people--“Dead White Man Music” as composer Evan Williams calls it (2017)--whose works and careers serve the same chronological delineation purpose. The dominance of figures such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, among other men, is so entrenched that in 1922, musician, educator, and author

Harriett Moore Brower published a work detailing the lives and careers of great composers titled *The World's Great Men of Music* (1922/2019).²

As Kailan Rubinoff has shown, the establishment of the curriculum at the Paris Conservatoire in the first decades of the Nineteenth Century created a systematic model for music education that stressed strict formal study, discipline, obedience, and adherence to rules, which were drawn from military training practices (2017, pp. 476-477). The Conservatoire was lauded for producing musicians that excelled in precision and consistency, and this focus was reinforced throughout the curriculum, from approved method books to rigorous and methodical practice regimens to discipline procedures for wayward students that even included protocols for public shaming (p. 487). This military-style educational approach became a model for academic music study around the world that coincided with increased European nationalism in the nineteenth century and colonization of large regions of Africa, India, and Australia. Its influence can also be seen in the United States with founding of the Oberlin Conservatory in 1865 and the establishment of the Music Supervisors' Conference in 1907, which would evolve into the Music Supervisor's National Conference (1910), the Music Educator's National Conference (1934), and eventually the National Association for Music Education (2011) (Monlar, 1955; National Association for Music Education, 2022; Stanford, 2020).

Fueling oppression was not an explicit or even implied goal of the curricular developments that stemmed from the Paris Conservatoire, but it nonetheless had the effect of weaponizing music. In addition to repertoires, other developing theories and practices were absorbed into the teaching of emerging music schools, such as A=440Hz, standardization of orchestras, and ideas about correct vocal and instrumental techniques. Many of these elements had been fluid until around 1800, but that fluidity seems to slow and be replaced with a penchant

for consistency and order (Rubinoff, 2017). When this particular narrative of music education is viewed alongside that of *The 1619 Project*, it suggests an intersection that worked to serve a larger need. Establishing parameters would have been useful for differentiating music (and people) from outside of the tradition. The curriculum reinforced to generations of musicians that there is a correct system through which to write, study, and learn music—even music created outside of the parameters—and a proper place to go to acquire this knowledge.

The formalization of implied correctness of Western practices has had lasting effects on not only what music is played, but also how it is played and even tuned. Tuning and temperament have been the focus of considerable scholarship over the past 15 years (Duffin, 2007; Parkhurst & Hammel, 2019; Rasch, 2008). The use of equal temperament, a tuning system originally developed to account for tuning discrepancies idiomatic to the piano in the 18th and 19th centuries, is being debated in scholarly circles, but it is still the most common way to “get in tune” in practice. Electric tuners and computer programs are capable of alternative or historical tuning formulas, but these alternate tunings are features normally found on more expensive models and they require accessing settings that defeat the stock equally-tempered settings (e.g., Peterson Tuners, 2021).

The conservatory model of pedagogy has also influenced views on how to teach improvisation. The bookends of the music timeline may seem obscure and even further removed from the central narrative, but they represent points on either end of what is traditionally taught as the “Western Canon” where people attempted to document improvisatory practices. Improvisers, by nature, do not tend to write down what they do, and when they do, the written record leaves much to interpretation. Additionally, the idea of musical freedom has a long history of being questioned and even disparaged among music writers. In the preface to his 1602

publication *Le nuove musiche*, Giulio Caccini cited hearing his compositions “tattered and torn” by performers adding inappropriate embellishments as a reason for publishing his work (1602/1970, p. 47; see also Bass, 2008, pp. 81-82). As Rubinoff has shown, the curricular developments at the Paris Conservatoire “effectively curtailed the instruction of improvisation and other performative freedoms” (2017, p. 477).

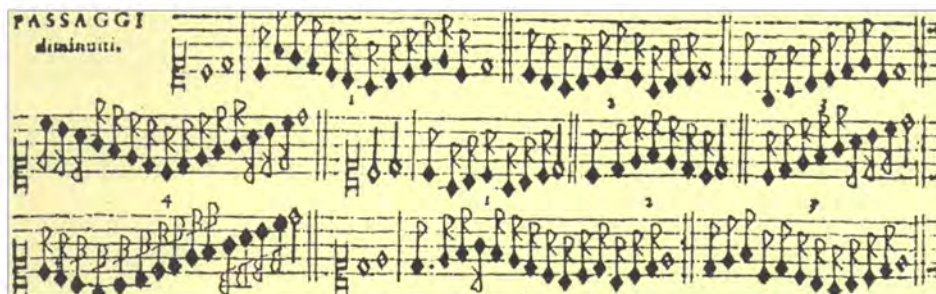
Music writers have long grappled with ways to document improvisation using tools of music notation. The first point on the timeline represents a series of treatises published in Italy between 1535-1594 that attempted to document approaches to adding layers of improvisation in performance (Bass, 2009). The excerpt in Figure 2, from Giovanni Bassano’s 1585 publication of *Ricercate, passaggi e cadiente per potersi*, is an example of a strategy that is characteristic of these manuals. Here, Bassano presents an interval of a second at a cadential point, and a list of *passaggi*, or out-of-context musical passages that might be used during performance.

This approach shares similarities with jazz pedagogy. Jazz, a largely improvisational African American style born out of systems and conditions of oppression detailed in the bottom of the timeline, went from being a disruptive cultural force in the 1920s and 1930s to being an academic course of study by the mid-twentieth century. Beginning with the establishment of the first Jazz Studies program at North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas) in 1947, which represents the last point on the music timeline, jazz was absorbed into the established conservatory model. As in the sixteenth century, performers/authors grappled with how to resolve an extemporaneous tradition with the written record. Pioneering works like Jerry Coker’s *Patterns for Jazz* (1970), offer similar approaches to those of the sixteenth-century Italian writers by presenting out-of-context examples of patterns intended to be used as models for developing one’s own improvisatory language (Figure 3). This approach can be found in

many jazz teaching sources, such as Mark Levine's *The Jazz Theory Book* (1995) and *The Berklee Book of Jazz* by Harmony Joe Mulholland and Tom Hojnacki (2013), as well as sources outside of formal education, such as the seemingly endless number of instructional YouTube videos of jazz licks (2021). Presenting examples of music with in-context improvised elements added is also a common strategy for documenting improvisation. Most of the 16th-century ornamentation treatises present well known songs, such as Cipriano de Rore's "Anchor che col partire," with ornamentation added (see Bass, 2009), and this approach shares similarities with the pedagogical approach of transcribing improvised solos for analysis and practice, as seen in publications like the *Charlie Parker Omnibook* (1978).

Figure 2

Excerpt from Giovanni Bassano Ricercate, passaggi e cadiente per potersi (Venice, 1585)

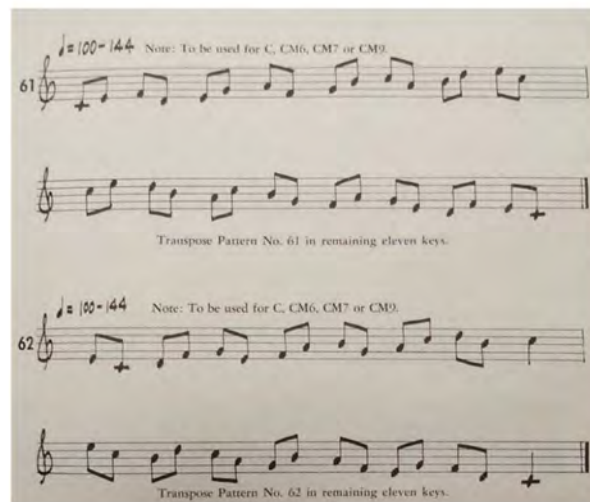


Both out-of-context patterns and in-context examples are valuable tools in teaching improvisatory language, but written music cannot convey all the needed information without additional context. A written-out solo by Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, for example, may convey basic pitches and rhythms, but it cannot account for the fluid nature of time commonly

known as “swing.” Often, additional textual instructions are needed, such as “lay back” or “play straight,” and it is a best practice in jazz pedagogy to use recordings to supplement written music. Of course, recordings cannot be used for the sixteenth-century sources, but the authors of the manuals included written commentary and guidance that suggested readers go beyond the page. Writing about the examples he gives in his 1553 *Trattado de glosas*, Diego Ortiz says that he gives numerous examples not to imply that readers should learn them all but “...in order to satisfy the different tastes, every one [sic] to take what seems best to him” (1553/2003, p. 76).³

Figure 3

Excerpt From Patterns for Jazz (Coker, 1970)



For teachers today, the tension between conservatory-based pedagogy and improvisation can be challenging. In practice, jazz study often requires a high level of prerequisite musical literacy and knowledge, which can limit access to students who may have learned to play by ear and/or have not had formal music study or don't read music well. Additionally, being able to

read and reproduce the written examples of the pedagogical sources does not really teach students how it *feels* to improvise or accomplish it in practice. This can cause anxiety for students and teachers who have never had experience improvising and reinforces the stereotype that classically trained musicians cannot improvise.

The reliance on educational systems built through and in support of Western perspectives has lingering effects that continue to this day (Bradley, 2006), and as Phillip Ewell states in the opening of his essay about the racial framework of music theory, “Music theory is white” (2016). Building from Ewell’s work, there is a growing body of research that is examining the effect of the continued use of Western musical models on higher education and working to decolonize music curricula (College Music Society, 2014; Rheding, 2020; Walker, 2020, pp. 1-19). Loren Kajikawa, for example, frames classical music as a property and possession of whiteness and shows a correlation between the reliance on the Western canon and perceptions of privilege and access among music students (2019, pp. 162-164). Music schools struggle to diversify, according to Kajikawa, not because of resistance to change, but because they were built to be exclusive (2019, pp. 162-164). Following the revision of the National Standards of Music in 1994 to include improvisation, there has been a simultaneous push in secondary music education to include more improvisation in curricula, as well as lessons built upon the blues and popular styles (Hall, 2017), in the hopes of helping more students relate to music study, but little guidance or training for teachers on how to go about meeting the standards in classrooms (Hickey, Ankney, Healy & Gallo, 2015, pp. 127-128). Nearly 30 years after the standards were adopted, implementation remains challenging (Song, 2013) and prospective teachers still report marginal—but improving—levels of confidence in teaching improvisation to students (Bernhard & Stringham, 2016).

Analysis and Application: Reframing Narratives to Develop Teaching Strategies

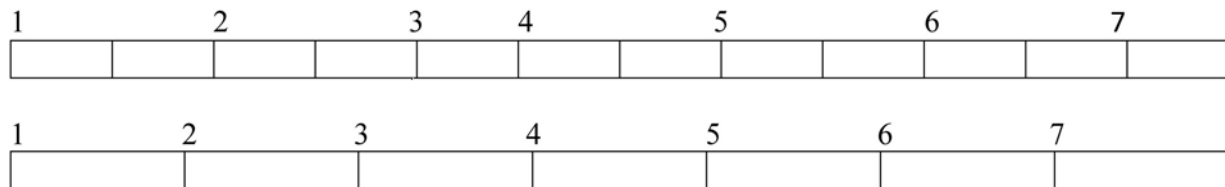
The *1619 Project* has inspired new pedagogies, such as the curriculum developed by the Pulitzer Center (2021), built from the premise of reframing basic narratives about United States history, and a similar reframing of music narratives can lead to new teaching strategies for both classroom and performance instruction. Different perspectives can also be gained by looking outside of music education for models as Juliet Hess has done by foregrounding the experiences of social activists in her research about the intersection of music and activism (2019). Similarly, Bettina Love shows how connecting with students through Hip Hop and using it as a pedagogical tool—a skill she did not develop through her own education or training—can lead to measured success (TEDx, 2014). As a jazz guitarist and instructor for over twenty years, my process of reframing started with something that I thought I knew: the blues.

Research has suggested that teaching lessons focused on the blues can serve to work against bias in music education, especially for beginning music students (Bitz, 1998; Hall, 2017). The effect of teaching the style through a Western lens, though, often simplifies the music and frames it as a training tool for both students and teachers (Seddon & Biasutti, 2008) that is intended to lead to more rigorous study. Many primary pedagogy methods, such as Kodaly and Orff-Schulwerk, encourage blues-derived examples and provide resources for educators (Benson, 2021; LeJune 2014). This approach does have technical advantages for beginning students, such as simple harmonic structure and repeating rhythmic patterns. These examples also do not sound like classical music, but they do not sound like the blues, either. From a Western perspective they should—the basic elements are there—but there is something missing. That something is not technique or theory, but perspective.

As a musical style, the blues emerged in the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century out of the lived experiences of African Americans in the southern United States. As enslaved Africans and their descendants experienced bodily, social, and cultural oppression through the increased systemization of white supremacy, new approaches to music emerged throughout North and South America that fused African and European elements, often in conjunction with indigenous musical traditions, such as son in Cuba, calypso in Trinidad and Tobago, and samba in Brazil.

The blues, though, is unique in that the cultural tension of its origins can be heard in the tuning of the music itself, and it can be viewed through a reframing of perspective. As shown earlier, equal temperament as well as the Western interpretation of the 12-tone chromatic scale and seven-tone major scale became entrenched as reference points for academic analysis and practical application of music across the world. Music traditions outside of a Western context, however, often show different approaches to tuning and scale structure, such as the balafon xylophone tradition from Gambia in West Africa, which employs a seven-tone scale like the Western scale but approaches the pitch structure in a different way. Rather than a division of half steps and whole steps, each pitch is roughly equidistant (Jesup, 1983).⁴ To visualize this, Figure 4 shows a theoretical comparison of a seven-note Western music scale and seven-note balafon tuning.

Comparisons such as this normally use the major scale as the constant and other tuning systems as alternate approaches. From this perspective, one might account for discrepancies by saying that the second degrees are similar (maybe “slightly out of tune”), the third degree is approximately a minor third, the fourth degrees are similar, the fifth is slightly lowered, as is the sixth degree, and the seventh is approximately a minor seventh.

Figure 4*Comparison of Seven-Note Major Scale with Seven-Note Balafon Tuning*

As with many folk traditions around the world (Robeson, 2013, pp. 4-7), much of the source material for the blues (hymns, folk music, etc.) exhibits melodies utilizing pentatonic scales, and a common technique for teaching the blues or approximating a blues sound is to use a minor pentatonic scale (degrees 1, b3, 4, 5, b7) with an added “blue” note (a #4 or b5). Figure 5 shows a similar comparison of this minor pentatonic/blues scale with a hypothetical pentatonic scale derived from the equidistant tuning. An equally valid comparison, however, could be made using the equidistant scale as the constant against which to compare the equally tempered scale, as in Figure 6, by placing it on top. Examinations of “blue notes” and blues-based harmony more broadly have been the subject of recent scholarship (Curry, 2015; Temperley, Ren, & Duan, 2017; Weischaunet, 2001), and the intention of this paper is not to suggest a new theoretical concept for tuning in the blues, but to suggest a new way to look at it and to present it to students.

Figure 5

Comparison of Blues Scale and Pentatonic Scale Derived from Equidistant Tuning

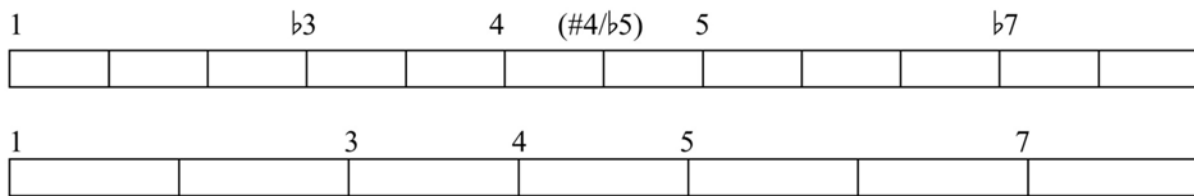
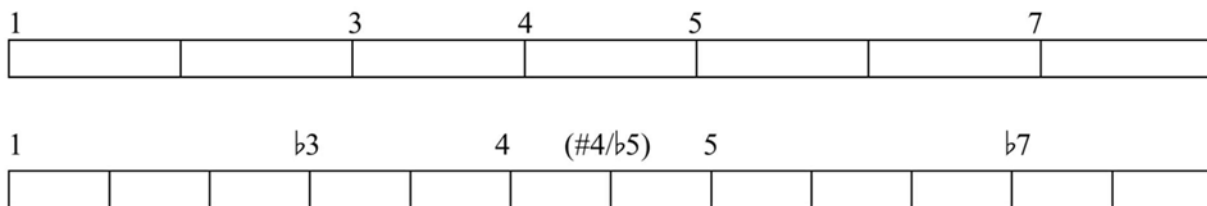


Figure 6

Reframed Comparison of Equidistant Pentatonic Scale with the Blues Scale



Attempts to resolve tuning discrepancies can be seen in historical accounts of people who heard different music and wrote about their encounters. W.C. Handy, for example, told a story of first hearing the blues performed by a musician at a train station in 1903 and described it as the “weirdest music I’d ever heard” (Banerjee, 2012). Handy is often referred to as the “Father of the Blues,” and it is worth noting that the first widespread dissemination of the blues was through his published music. The system of written music Handy had access to did not have the capability of accounting for tuning discrepancies, so approximations had to be made, such as the use of the minor third and minor seventh, which Handy himself noted as a compromise, saying “the transitional flat thirds and sevenths... by which I was attempting to suggest the typical slurs of the Negro voice” (Banerjee, 2012). Likewise, when ethnomusicology pioneer Hugh Tracey published his research and analysis of African music in the 1960s, he used a framework of

Western music theory. As an example, he identified the equidistant nature of balafon tuning but called it a “minor whole tone scale” (1969, pp. 73-77), which has a theoretical basis but adds an unintended layer of complexity that sounds like a lecture topic from a jazz theory class.

Rather than viewing and teaching the tuning discrepancy from the Western perspective as suggested by Figure 5, another option is to view it from an Africanist perspective as shown in Figure 6, a concept first suggested by Gerhard Kubik (2008) and Hans Weisethaunet (2001). If viewed in this way, the notes are not minor or major or out-of-tune to differing degrees but are in tune and properly placed. The concept can be demonstrated on a guitar by using the frets to play an equally-tempered major scale, major pentatonic scale (degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, 6), and minor pentatonic scale (1, b3, 4, 5, b7), and “blues” scale (1, b3, 4, #4/b5, 5, b7) scales from the same root, and then by using a slide on the guitar to defeat the tuning mechanism of the frets and play a pentatonic scale based upon equidistant tuning as shown in Figures 5 and 6. This is not to suggest that the balafon is a metaphorical key to unlocking blues tuning, or that African Americans in Mississippi had balafons at all, but that the ideas of “in tune” or “out of tune” are relative and based on points of view. This shift in perspective can be demonstrated by repeating equally-tempered major and minor thirds and showing how they now sound “out of tune” compared to the third tuned between them. [Example 1](https://youtu.be/KpITl8sjtNk) (https://youtu.be/KpITl8sjtNk) provides a recorded demonstration of this concept.

Following a common jazz teaching strategy, this concept can also be used in context by applying the alternate tuning perspective to a well-known song, such “Amazing Grace,” which is a song originally written by John Newton (1725-1807) and later adapted to its most well-known form based on the tune “New Britain” (Turner, 2003).⁵ After playing the song using Western tuning, it can be played with a guitar and slide to approximate the equidistant tuning. This creates

the aural effect of the blues, and the point I emphasize with students is that the sound wasn't created by using a minor pentatonic or blues scale, bending notes out of tune, or even using theory at all; it was created simply by looking at the tuning from a different perspective. A recording of this concept is provided in [Example 2](https://youtu.be/YtIM4iqzI5s) (<https://youtu.be/YtIM4iqzI5s>).

The tuning examples above can be used in history or theory classroom settings as a window into the importance of examining the development of the blues from multiple perspectives. Deviations from equally tempered tuning can be heard in countless early blues recordings, such as Charlie Patton's vocal line from his 1930 recording of "Rattlesnake Blues," (have students try to sing along to a stanza!) and it continues as a foundational principle of the blues to this day (Curry, 2005; Evans, 1982; Patton, 1930).⁶ B.B. King exhibits this point in an instructional guitar video originally released by DCI Music Video in 2002 ([Example 3](https://youtu.be/-rUWKMrPnQ); <https://youtu.be/-rUWKMrPnQ>). When demonstrating what he might do over a tonic chord, King plays through a musical idea and talks about the notes in relation to the harmony. When he plays a B \flat , he doesn't say anything about it but instinctively bends it slightly to a point in-between B \flat and B \natural . The interviewer, Askold Buk, comments saying "there's that bend again," which prompts a laugh from King and then he says "well, that's what I hear" (2002).

The bottom line is that either Patton, King, and others are singing and playing consistently out of tune, or they are hearing the tuning differently. The blues also works against other fundamental concepts of music theory. The music is not built upon resolution, which is a core principle of functional harmony, but rather is built upon underlying cultural dissonance. This dissonance is a powerful metaphor that suggests that Ralph Ellison's definition of the blues as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed through lyricism" (2001)

may run even deeper than the words and his “impulse of the blues” can be heard in tuning of the music itself (1966/1964, p. 90).

The process of reframing narratives has led me to re-examine my own positionality and teaching practices. When I teach classes that deal with improvisation, I often find myself in situations where students come to the room with different levels of experience and prior knowledge. Improvisation at its core is risk taking, and the social risk of stepping out and trying something new in a classroom setting is different for different people. As Vijay Iyer notes in his essay “Beneath Improvisation,” the perception of musical freedom must be contextualized in terms of the lived experiences of people from marginalized backgrounds (2019, pp. 760-780). Introducing risk within an educational setting can also serve to reinforce longstanding issues of gender bias, especially in terms of instrumental music (Streblin, 1995, pp. 128-130). Recent research and discourse have argued that males (especially white males) are normally the first ones among students to speak up in class or try experiments, because the risk of getting it wrong is not as detrimental as it would be for people from marginalized populations (Jaschik, 2019). In my own experience, I have noticed a similar phenomenon when teaching improvisation. It is almost always the case that male—mostly white—students who look and present like me are the ones who step up to improvise first, even at the risk of sounding foolish.⁷

I have found that leading with reframed narratives, rather than introducing them as counter-perspectives, can help. When teaching an African American Music survey class, for example, I spend the first classes discussing current issues faced by women in hip hop and use sources such as the *Grapevine* YouTube series (2018). This helps the class frame larger issues of the African American experience in music that we can keep returning to throughout the class. It also uses music the students are familiar with and words that give authority to black scholars,

artists, and professionals, instead of their white male professor. Likewise, in Jazz Theory, I use the blues tuning exercise shown earlier as our first lesson. Rather than beginning with all twelve major scales and discussing how modes are constructed or analyzing the functionality of the ii-V-I progression (we still do these, just later), I have students try to apply a different tuning system to a simple song that is familiar to them such as a hymn or even “Happy Birthday.” The assignment calls for them to record themselves playing, singing, or using technology such as pitch altering hardware or software while attempting to present the song through the perspective of a different tuning system and write a short reflection on their process. The point is to have students feel dissonance outside of a theoretical and harmonic construct and verbalize that feeling. From there, we can move through the class and tackle more theoretical concepts by building upon that feeling and referring to their initial reflections. A prompt from future lessons in the class might read something like this:

Think back to our first assignment and how it felt to create dissonance using a different tuning system as well as the spots in the music where you heard and felt tension and release. In those same spots, try to substitute the current concept we are studying [altered dominant harmony, tritone substitution, playing “outside,” etc.] and compare/contrast the experience of developing dissonance or color using the different tools.

The practice of reframing ideas of tuning led me down the path of questioning my thinking about other fundamental concepts like rhythm and time. As a student and well into my career, I dreaded practicing with a metronome. I always felt that the machine was judging me, and I would leave practice sessions feeling worse about myself. As a professional, I often perform as a rhythm guitarist in what is referred to “Freddie Green style,” which was named for Freddie Green (1911-1987), the original guitarist from the Count Basie Orchestra, and consists

of playing constant quarter notes.⁸ Through this imposed limitation of rhythm, which seemed stifling at first, I came to understand that time in music is fluid and not “right or wrong.” Now, when I play with a metronome, I challenge myself to see the machine not as a judge, but as a musical partner to interact with, and have students do the same. I will ask them to try to make the click feel different, for example long/short or fast/slow, even though the tempo of the machine remains constant (a demonstration can be seen in [Example 4](https://youtu.be/iOS8ViAKRq8); <https://youtu.be/iOS8ViAKRq8>). Developing skills that allow students to perceive time in different ways can be used in melodic playing as well. Slowing down difficult passages is a common and effective strategy, but I’ve found that having students think about passages slowly or try to feel them slower without actually lowering the tempo can help students resist rushing and can calm anxiety that often arises from trying to play fast.

Exercises like these can be effective tools in classroom settings where students come in with different levels of experience and can work to counter some of the implicit biases mentioned earlier. They help level the playing field in two ways. First, for less experienced improvisers or students with less prior formal music education, they offer clear ways to make music without having to catch up on theory or feeling inadequate because of a lack of prerequisite knowledge. And second, for experienced students, taking a step back and focusing on foundational elements outside of theory often causes them to be more intentional and not default to specific knowledge or technical facility they may have acquired through access to prior education. The greatest part, though, is that it allows people to play together and share in the collective experience of making music.

Conclusions: Moving Forward and Checking In

To move forward, it is helpful to take a step back and look at the way music is talked about and taught broadly. Terms like consonance and dissonance or tension and release aid in describing concepts such as functional harmony, but they carry connotations of value that can have unintended effects—a quest for consonance, for example, is not as applicable for music like the blues that is built upon musical and cultural dissonance. On a larger scale, there is a hierarchy implied by terms like classical (or art) music and popular (or commercial) music, or as H. Wiley Hitchcock framed American music, “cultivated” and “vernacular” (2019). In schools and universities, jazz is now taught and performed alongside more traditionally classical music but is often classified by itself or with popular music (rarely with art music). This designation is curious because the music itself hasn’t been popular in terms of commercial presence or cultural positioning for nearly a century. In fact, the rise and initial popularity of artists such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington will soon be closer in years to the first performances of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* than our own time.⁹

Just as the framing of southern history in elementary schools in Alabama reinforces systemic oppression, the framing and terminology used in music education reinforces systemic barriers. As I have worked to develop teaching strategies based on alternate perspectives, I have found that the most important perspectives are from the students themselves. I used to view check-ins or ice breakers as gimmicky and as something that took away class time from the material we were supposed to be studying. My thoughts had been evolving for several years but changed dramatically after the COVID-19 pandemic set in and forced us to move to remote learning. Check-ins no longer felt performative, but necessary. I was literally trying to figure out how and where students were. When I received my student evaluations for the semester, I was

surprised to see the high number of students who commented about how much they appreciated the check-ins and how it helped them feel like they were still a part of a class with others, even when physically separated. I now use check-ins at the beginning of all of my classroom sessions. It is important to me to hear everyone else's voice before I launch into material, but it also has practical applications. It helps facilitate class discussions and sets students at ease in terms of speaking up since they have already done it at the beginning of class.

I also use focused check-in questions to lead into the discussions for the day. As an example, on a day an assignment is due, I will ask a general question about how they are doing or feeling (one I use frequently is "what is your personal weather forecast today") but then have them share something interesting they learned or a point that they made in their paper. This helps create positive accountability and allows the cohort to write a collective narrative of the topic of the day built from multiple points of view. Recently, when sharing perspectives on a Memphis music playlist that a class had created collectively (Spotify, 2021), many of the students shared their thoughts on how diverse or even "worldly" the playlist seemed. A student from Mongolia shared a different perspective. She said that it did not seem worldly to her at all, but rather it sounded "American." Her response caught me off guard and it allowed me to share that my surprise was a result of my own bias. This moment opened the door for the class to have a broad conversation about how pervasive and deeply entrenched systems of oppression are in the music industry and how these perspectives color our thinking.

My own journey of learning about and confronting privilege has led me to question many of the things I was taught and strive to learn more and center multiple perspectives in how I present material. To be sure, I still teach students modes and functional harmony, we learn about the history of composers from the Western canon, and I tune my guitar using equal temperament.

That's my lived experience, and how I process music, but I understand that it's not the only way to process it, or maybe even the best.

The legacy of white supremacy looms large and intersects with narratives that may initially seem beyond its reach, such as music theory and education. It alters not only thoughts about who makes music, but also where it is made and who owns the knowledge. This is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with Western theory, conservatory models of education, or classical music. From the beginning of documented history, humans have been using tools to get art out of their bodies into the air, and these specific tools have been used to create some of the world's great art. But it is important to see that the tools have also been used in support of systems of oppression and that there are other equally valid approaches.

The problem is not that the major scale is wrong—the problem is that we have needed it to be right.

What is your story with music?

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Footnotes

¹ My vague and largely ambivalent memory of the class is an example of an option that was available to me as a white Southern student but not for others. To hear different viewpoints and memories of education, see John Archibald's opinion piece "Don't remember Alabama's racist textbooks? You're probably white" (2015).

² By Brower's own account, the book is intended for young audiences and it contains many peculiarities (such as her referring to Bach as "Sebastian"), but it is fascinating nonetheless as a window into prevailing attitudes toward music education in the early twentieth century. Perhaps most interesting is that the work has been reprinted, albeit through an online press, and continues to receive favorable reviews (4.13/5 on www.goodreads.com).

³ Reiners' translation, original: "...por satisfazer a diferentes fustos, caduano tome, lo que meior le pareçiere" (2003).

⁴ Jesup measures the tuning of several instruments in cents. She notes that even though the goal is for equidistant tuning, the method for tuning is relative and based on human perception. Experienced builders tune instruments based on their interpretation of the pitch structure (1983).

⁵ "Amazing Grace" is not used in this example in terms of its historical significance or to suggest that the song is a unique source of the Blues, but rather is used simply as a familiar tune for students and readers to help demonstrate the concept of applying an alternate tuning perspective.

⁶ Bending notes is a common practice in blues guitar, but it can also be seen in other interpretations of the blues. For example, listen to how Miles Davis bends the minor third (here a D \flat in the key of B \flat) to find the correct blue note in his 1959 recording of “Freddie the Freeloader” (2:20-2:23 is a good example of this).

⁷ Further reflection can be found in an opinion piece by the author (Bass, 2019).

⁸ An excellent resource for learning rhythm guitar in the style of Freddie Green is *Swing and Big Band Guitar: Four-to-the-Bar Comping in the Style of Freddie Green*, by Charlton Johnson (Hal Leonard, 1998).

⁹ Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9* premiered in Vienna in 1824. Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington had a number of hit records in the 1920s. Armstrong was featured on King Oliver’s recording of “Riverside Blues” in 1923 and had his own hit single, “Hotter than That,” in 1927. Ellington’s “Black and Tan Fantasy” was an early hit for the band in 1927, and his seminal “Mood Indigo” was released in 1930.