# Laying the Foundations for a New Approach to Music Theory at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Creating isiZulu Terms to Foster Deep Learning and Challenging the Western Gravity of Staff Notation<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the Introduction to Music Fundamentals modules at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and consider why their pedagogical aims are not met. I suggest possible corrective measures to align the modules more closely with the general aims of the university; primarily accessibility to knowledge through mother tongue teaching or tutoring, and creating a learning environment which is receptive to and reflective of multiculturalism. To address these appropriate corrective measures, I reflect on the nature of languages, particularly their interdependency; how they relate to and describe music; and how the transfer of musical knowledge can be effected as deeply as possible through bilingual mixed-media interventions. Finally, I propose challenging the semantic gravity of the western staff notation system so that it can operate within the worldview of the majority of UKZN students. The proposals of this article aim to encourage deep learning at the foundational level of university education, with the hope that, as students progress, their knowledge retention and ability to transfer or adapt knowledge will increase, strengthening their chances of academic success.

**Keywords**: Music theory, IsiZulu terms, Knowledge transfer, Western staff notation.

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### 1. Introduction

In 2018 I taught the two successive Introduction to Music Fundamentals modules at UKZN for the first time. The modules:

... are aimed at high school graduates who have been auditioned for the [music degree or diploma and who] show potential as performers (or who are already proficient performers), but who have no, or little, musical notation background ... (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2018a: 4).

The first module aims to equip 'students with the core theoretical and practical basics of the staff notation system' (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2018a: 3) and to concurrently develop their aural skills. The second builds more abstracted knowledge upon these basics by training students:

to achieve proficiency in five competencies while relating them to diverse contexts: conventions of pitch organisation; measuring complex musical intervals; conventions in basic musical harmonisation; conventions in notating complex musical rhythms and metres; and conventions in musical performance directions ... (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2018b: 3).

The modules have traditionally been taught to students specializing in both the western-classical and African-music-and-dance (AMD) traditions, although from 2020, jazz students also joined this class.

At the time I was teaching these modules, two concerns were beginning to inform my thinking on university music education. Firstly, I was becoming increasingly aware of the aspirations of UKZN's language policy (originally created in 2006 and updated in 2014). In essence, the university aims to achieve parity between English and isiZulu as languages of teaching, learning, research and administration (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2014: 2). The UKZN Teaching and Learning policy supports the language ambitions of the university by promoting bilingual tuition as a foundational principle (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2017: 4). It envisions:

 Developing a teaching and learning environment that encourages active learning to improve understanding and retention of knowledge and skills;

- o Cultivating curiosity and critical thinking in students in relation to all aspects of their activities, including research; and
- o Enabling students to integrate theory and practice ... (extract from Principle 5 in University of KwaZulu-Natal 2017:5).

The demographics of the modules indicate that isiZulu is the mother tongue of the majority of students. Given that none of the content of these modules has been delivered in isiZulu, it was clear to me that I was falling short of a specific university mandate. Additionally, as I will articulate below, active learning (as demonstrated by knowledge retention and application) did not appear to be occurring for the majority of students – evidenced not only in their assessment results, but also in their abilities with the notational system. As a result, I began to wonder if language was at the heart of the lack of deep learning. Buthelezi, Hlongwa and Gumbi (2019) articulate the situation well, 'You can teach, but nobody learns'. They go on to ask, tongue in cheek, how lecturers can get paid if they do not actually achieve their primary role. A pertinent question!

My second concern was that South African university music curricula tend to be structured broadly along the lines of western conservatories and universities, which usually favour western forms of pedagogy and western genres. Indeed, my own training was within this context. Two questions emerged in my mind. What kind of musical future will my students encounter and *require* in post-colonial South Africa? Is a pedagogy grounded in western musical logic useful in this space and time? When contemplating the realities of language and curriculum in relation to the context at UKZN, I wondered if in some way I was contributing to the 'colonising of the mind' which Tharoor (2017) warns against<sup>2</sup>.

It was against this background that I reviewed the assessments and aims for both modules at the end of 2018. My overwhelming conclusion was that there was a glaring gap between the content I had tried to teach, what students had actually appeared to absorb, and what they were able to convert into applied musical technique. I began contemplating the numerous roots of the problem, so that a holistic solution could be developed to ensure effective learning. This article presents some of my responses and future plans to address the problem as it manifests at UKZN. It does not address related complex

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Tharoor (2017) discusses how a colonising language such as English has the potential to colonise patterns of logic and thinking.

issues such as rising student absenteeism (and the factors which lead to this phenomenon); regular student protest action and the knock-on effects this has on curriculum implementation.

# 2. Teaching Philosophy

Let me briefly outline my pedagogical philosophy to provide some context to the ensuing discussions. My overarching aim is to create a learning-centred environment where the students *and* lecturer are able to incrementally absorb relevant knowledge and develop requisite skills through a model of reciprocation. My premise is that I, as a lecturer, learn just as much from my students as they do from me: my field of learning is effective knowledge transfer; theirs is music notation and ear training. Communally we learn about the dynamics of successful (or unsuccessful) group interaction. Through this negotiated space of reciprocity, both students and lecturer find spaces of vulnerability where a lack of understanding or experience can interrupt the current of learning. While it may seem from the surface that interruptions to learning through misunderstanding are potential academic disasters, I have increasingly found that such breaks are the catalysts for deep learning opportunities. An example will demonstrate what I mean.

I am often aware that my limitations as a linguist (with English as my mother tongue and Afrikaans as my second language) mean that I am unable to find the most adequate linguistic means to transfer musical knowledge during my lectures. While concrete skills (like playing an instrument) are often demonstrable with very little use of language, and thus slightly easier to teach to a multilingual class, explaining the abstract concepts which underpin music notation seldom are (Carver 2017: 131). However, some of my students appear to perceive my linguistic deficiencies as an opportunity to display their own skills in understanding and translation – they understand a concept as taught in English and are able to transfer it immediately to their peers in a local language. This empowers them in the eyes of their peers and also me. Interestingly, these particular students also sometimes act as intermediaries between the western cultural orientation of the staff notation system and its application within their own local worldview. It is this reciprocity which I am keen to tap into through a larger and more systematic music education project. Unintentionally, it also seems to embody certain aspects of traditional amabubo songs which I have recently been including in my teaching, namely the attributes of hlonipha (respect) and *ukuzithoba* (humility) (Cele 1997: 14). The benefit of this method is that it fosters the kind of student which Buthelezi *et al.* (2019) describe as 'active, self-regulated and self-reliant'.

# 3. Language and Musical Knowledge Transfer

Given this student-lecturer team effort in the learning process through language and cultural interpretation, one real obstacle which presented itself was that a technical vocabulary for music in isiZulu (and for most Southern African indigenous languages) did not officially exist. As a result, quite a few words and concepts had no explicit equivalent in the vernacular, and the English term was simply adopted for want of a local alternative. However, the real underlying problem of finding cultural equivalency, so that concepts can have some chance of taking cognitive root, still remained. In other words, retaining the English term for a concept did not necessarily ensure its wholehearted acceptance or understandability by the students. Thus, ideally, locally conceived terminology would be an important component to deep learning. As Khumalo (2019) has noted, intellectualization of a language 'gives speakers ... pride, self-assurance and resourcefulness in the (new) ability to discuss issues ranging from the mundane to academic, and beyond'. But it also provides a stronger chance of becoming relevant and meaningful on a higher intellectual level. Could an isiZulu music vocabulary strengthen the desire to learn in local music students?

Thankfully, problems surrounding terminology are not insurmountable. As the theory of the 'interdependency of languages' posits, languages draw on common concepts (Cummins 1979). The implication is that those who are linguistically strong in their mother tongue are likely to develop confidence and fluency in their second language because both languages will draw on similar foundational concepts. When languages share similarities in structure, this interdependency increases. Nkondo (2019) argues that from a structural point of view, English and isiZulu are potentially complementary, not oppositional — an added bonus in this context. This is a positive philosophical underpinning to address the problem of translating technical terminology. Similarly, in the realm of music there are commonalities that form a basic congruency between western and African soundscapes (Carver 2017; Agawu 2003; 2016) — an interdependency of musical semantics, if you like. Thus, the philosophical foundations *and* the practical possibilities for finding equivalent

terminology in isiZulu for deep learning in music exist. They just need active cultivation in order for students to be able to embody the knowledge they are acquiring.

English-speaking, western-oriented musicians have engaged in similar processes of technical language acquisition over the centuries. Many English terms for music are borrowed directly from Italian, French or German. Because the cultures in which these terms originated share an overwhelming number of similarities, such direct terminology transfer has been possible and sometimes even desirable. Indeed, since the English language itself is a conglomerate of Latin, French and German, technical terminology from European languages could be absorbed without much difficulty. Borrowing terminology had the added benefit of creating a standardised continental technical vocabulary which began to transcend linguistic boundaries.

Given these positive philosophical linguistic underpinnings, my initial plan was to create a learning space which would encourage the deep learning of the basics of staff notation with isiZulu as a co-pedagogical transmission language. This included two main initiatives: the introduction of multilingual videos addressing each of the module topics as an important secondary resource for students whose first language is not English; and offering bilingual texts and examinations. Thus, the main lecture will still be in English, but vernacular backup would exist online. A secondary, but no less important goal is making the actual lecture space conducive to multilingualism through encouraging students to translate concepts for one another.

The first part of this plan is to create short bilingual videos (recorded with the help of UKZN Technology Enhanced Learning and made available through the online platform Moodle), along with supporting bilingual written material, to allow for blended modes of learning or as a means of regular revision. The idea is to break theoretical concepts into small components which can be delivered within 5 – 10 minute bites. Cumulatively these theoretical components will present the modules in summary. Part of the initiative is to involve senior isiZulu mother-tongue music students as co-lecturers along with me. They will not simply translate concepts directly into isiZulu but, through training, concentrate on embedding knowledge within a cultural worldview that will resonate with students. In this way, not only will students have concepts presented in their mother tongue and in a culturally relevant manner with which they can identify, but also by fellow students who are already familiar with and competent in staff notation. The implicit message is, learning

music notation is possible because it can be relevant to our lives.

The second aspect of the plan is to provide bilingual test and examination papers. In the discipline of music theory, where answers to test questions are not language based (the answers are notated with musical symbols) but heavily dependent on the correct interpretation of a question, bilingual question papers may go a long way towards improving general performance, especially in the foundation and first years of tuition.

It is plain to see just how important a glossary of musical terms in isiZulu is to effect such a plan. In some cases, Zulu musicians have created their own terms to describe certain techniques, but these terms have never been standardised. In answer to this gap in vocabulary, the UKZN Language Planning and Development Office (ULPDO) teamed with two Discipline of Music staff members<sup>3</sup> to create a 500-word glossary for use in music theory, history and practical studies.

# 4. isiZulu/ English Music Glossary

The first stage of creating the glossary involved 'harvesting' useful musical words that cover a broad spectrum of music pedagogy. This process took place early in 2019 in consultation with the full-time and part-time staff of the Discipline of Music. In 2018 the Discipline had begun the lengthy process of a thorough recurriculation project. The benefit of having considered the core content of the curriculum was that it had been fairly clearly articulated in the new programme and module templates. Thus, a wide selection of module-specific terms was already available *and* current. The ULPDO filled in some of the gaps by garnering a number of terms to supplement the Discipline's initial list. The final list represents a wide variety of terms which can be used effectively to teach and learn. Importantly, it has tried to include terms and concepts which have been highlighted by scholars who have critiqued the contemporary western-oriented secondary school curriculum, such as Carver (2017) and McConnachie (2016).

The second stage of the process was a three-day consultation where preliminary isiZulu terms could be coined for English terms. The third stage included two meetings to verify and standardize the isiZulu words from the harvested terms. During these consultations and verification meetings I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Dr. Andrew-John Bethke and Dr. Sazi Dlamini.

realized how valuable some kind of working knowledge of a local language other than English or Afrikaans is in South Africa, especially for university lecturers. What also became apparent to me during the process of coining the terms, was how deeply rooted in western culture the pedagogy of music in South Africa is. As a result, finding some sense of cultural equivalency was, in some cases, almost impossible (see below). Yet, because of what I have called the interdependency of music semantics above, there are some important corollaries between the musical worldviews which made some terms fairly simple to coin. A few examples will demonstrate this.

Consider the English terms 'harmonics' (the partials of the harmonic series including the fundamental or originating tone) and 'partials' (a harmonic given off by a note when it is played, not including the fundamental or originating tone). The terms are related to each other; the one being a slightly fuller technical term than the other. The concepts of harmonics and partials already exist in Zulu music-making praxis, particularly in *umakhweyana* bow playing, so terms could easily be adapted to the nuanced meaning of the English terms. Indeed, the root *-kwenyaya* forms the basis for the terms, relating them directly to the bow tradition from which they are derived. Thus, harmonics are *amakhweyana* and partials are *ikhweyana*. In isiZulu the relationship between the two terms is more explicit than in English *and* they can be directly linked to a living bow tradition with which students will be familiar.

Another concept inherent in the structure of traditional Southern African music is hocketing, common in Venda *tshikona* and Pedi *dinaka* single-note pipe traditions (Carver 2017: 132). In Zulu music, such flute traditions also exist, e.g. *umtshingo*, *igemfe* and *igekele*. A hocket is:

A technique of spreading the notes of a melody between two or more performers alternately. When one performer plays/ sings a note, the other/s is/are silent. Thus, even though there may be multiple performers, only one note is played by one performer at a time (University Language Planning and Development Office 2019: 23).

The word created by the committee to embody this technique is *ukushiyelana*. However, while the technique exists in local music-making, this term is not derived from the technique, nor is it explicitly linked to music, but rather it describes an activity along with the instruments which create it.

Examples of where the worldviews of two independent music traditions do not coincide are also necessary. Consider the terms 'scale' (a succession of notes with the same recurring intervallic properties in each octave); 'mode' (a type of eight note scale with specific intervallic properties and usually related melodic tendencies); 'key' (the key is the scale or mode in which a piece of music is set, usually identified by a key signature) and 'modulation' (a transition from one key to another). All of these terms are integrally linked to each other in western music. Zulu music, and other local music traditions, can derive scales from existing music and, indeed, this has been done by scholars. Thus, it is fairly common to speak of the hexatonic scale which is derived from the Xhosa uhadi bow tradition (cf. Dargie 1988). Similar scales have been derived from Zulu music (cf. Rycroft 1957; 1967; 1971; 1975). However, the tempered nature of western scales and their related system of keys and modulation do not explicitly exist in local tradition, because the notion of pitch tends to be much more flexible. So while the terms 'scale' and 'mode' can be created fairly easily (isikhawumanothi), the words 'key' and 'modulation' are more difficult. In fact, the concept of key is so foreign that its Zulu equivalent is ukhiye, a phonetic equivalent of 'key'. The idea of 'modulation' (uwelelo) is not completely foreign in a wider sense and meaning of the word (e.g. to modulate your voice), although its musical cognate is not available in terms of pitch in the Zulu soundscape.

Together the Discipline of Music and the ULPDO are now in the final stage of producing the glossary. Yet this is only the background work to effect the greater plan of deep learning described above. Perhaps this is indicative of how long the process of change is at its deepest levels.

# 5. Weakening the Semantic Gravity of Staff Notation

Staff notation, whichever way we approach it, is a western construct, originally designed to convey western musical ideals. For that reason, just like language, it privileges the musical elements that have been culturally relevant in the west for the past five hundred years, starting with the notation of Christian plainsong. Yet, despite this western bias, the staff notation system has been appropriated and successfully adapted across the globe so that today it is a global currency of musical transfer in symbolic form (much like the Latin alphabet is). African scholars themselves have tended to use staff notation in a number of pedagogical and scholastic endeavours. Philosophically, for

example, Agawu has argued 'that creating special terms for African music, or rejecting the use of Western staff notation in transcriptions of African music, only serves to exoticize the music and thus to subordinate it' (Agawu in Carver 2017: 133). Thus, learning this system, and being able to apply it to local musical genres, is an incredibly valuable skill. Furthermore, being able to teach and share this system with others is equally important. But how can this western system be taught so that its strengths can be appropriated and successfully used by students at UKZN?

The second part of my overall plan seeks to answer this question by using common local musical traditions to teach notation. It is a goal shared by Lucia in her textbook *Music Notation: A South African Guide* (2011). She says, 'The purpose of this book is to introduce staff notation and theory of music through music familiar in South Africa among various communities of music-makers' (Lucia 2011:xv). But how can this be effected successfully? The concept of semantic gravity is helpful in philosophising this process:

Maton conceptualises semantic gravity as the quality that affords knowledge a greater or lesser degree of context independence. Knowledge can be context dependent and limited to the immediate context, or context independent and have the potential to apply in new settings (Carver 2017: 129).

Can western musical notation have weaker semantic gravity, i.e. can it be removed from its western context and work equally well in another? Scholars are undecided. It seems clear from the number of publications by African authors (both black and white) relating to and using staff notation for local music, that its gravity can be weakened (cf. Lucia 2011; Nzewi 2005; 2007; Carver 2012, all discussed below). For example, Nzewi, in his textbook series on musical arts in Africa, says,

The texts [in these textbooks] incorporate knowledge of conventional European classical music as they relate to unique features of African musical arts thinking and theoretical content. The contemporary African musical arts specialist needs secure grounding in his/her own human-cultural knowledge authority in order to contribute with original intellectual integrity to African as well as global discourse and knowledge creation (Nzewi 2007: vii).

There are two important points to highlight here. Firstly, Nzewi suggests that a thorough knowledge of an individual's local worldview is imperative. This accords with the general understanding today that primary education should take place in a person's mother-tongue; thus, affording a person a greater chance for absorbing and transforming a second culture or language. The same is true for music, namely a person's home musical culture needs to be deeply embedded before a foreign music culture can be adequately understood and appreciated. Secondly, he includes western classical music, but *as it relates to* African systems of knowledge, i.e. the semantic gravity of western music is weakened.

There are scholars who think quite differently about western musical notation. Schippers mentions some of their arguments:

[There are] endless controversies between those ethnomusicologists who see staff notation as a blunt but necessary instrument for conveying something of the music to readers unfamiliar with the notational system (if any) of the musical cultures in question, and those who regard its use as a kind of neo-colonial exercise in which Western notation is set up as a universal standard (Cook, in Schippers 2010: 77).

[The] essential aspects of Africanness in music making include the oral-aural and practical approaches. Indeed, traditional African music has survived not because of the development of written notation but in spite of it (Flolu, in Schippers 2010: 78).

In context, it is fair to say that the quotes above share a genuine concern for the integrity of local music traditions without subjecting them to the mediation of colonial forces such as staff notation. And yet, as projective hermeneutics has taught us, since scholars (largely schooled in western concepts of ethnomusicology) study these music traditions and write about them in academic discourse, there is a degree of subjectivity which negates the 'pristine' nature of their subject. Nevertheless, their critique of the potential for staff notation to act as a colonising force is important and needs to be carefully and sensitively considered in relation to local contexts such as UKZN.

Ideally, then, I aim to create a model in which western musical notation's semantic gravity can be weakened to the extent that it can serve some of local music's aims and structures, *but* while maintaining it gravi-

tational strength for western music at the same time. Consider again the context of the modules in question: AMD, classical and jazz students will need to learn this content. For those who work primarily in the classical stream, the notation's original gravity needs to be maintained, while the other two genres need varying degrees of gravitational weakening (jazz less so than AMD, because jazz theory is derived from and shares many commonalities with classical theory).

The most obvious way to weaken the western staff notation system is by using local musical examples to demonstrate congruent musical attributes. Through my study of Zulu and Xhosa music and my own original research in local hymnody, I have discovered numerous traditional and popular songs that can be used to introduce concepts of pitch, rhythm, intervallic distance, and scales (using local instruments – particularly the bow and ox horn – and the hexatonic scale as introductory points). Language, and its distinctive local use, contributes enormously to the structure of culturally informed music. So, for example, traditional *amahubo* songs, according to Cele (1997) and Pewa (1995: 158), are characterised by descending melodies that broadly 'reflect the descending tonal structure of the Zulu language' (Cele 1997). Using notated Zulu traditional songs along with their lyrics helps to integrate such local knowledge into mainstream music pedagogy.

Based on this knowledge and background, another important venture has been to revise and resituate the content of the Introduction to Music Fundamentals modules so that it points more noticeably towards a local worldview. Several pedagogical approaches and reflections about music education in Africa have been consulted as an initial step in this direction (Lucia 2011; Nzewi 2005; Herbst 2003). These sources all seek to understand the contextual strengths and constraints which music teachers in Africa encounter. Lucia demonstrates that staff and tonic sol-fa notation can be taught concurrently using entirely local music; primarily hymns, choral anthems, local popular music genres and traditional folk music. Thus, the sonic world in which both systems are situated is specifically Southern African. My own method uses similar contextual underpinning, but with different musical examples. Nzewi (2005: 66-68) uses a graded system of introducing staff notation through specifically oral means, using the sound of language as the initial point of contact. This is particularly helpful in cultures which support tonal languages, such as the Nguni language group. Given this important similarity, his study has proven a stimulating springboard from which to

conceive introductions to rhythm and pitch. Most importantly, he incorporates indigenous knowledge systems into his pedagogical approach – an area in which I have little knowledge and experience. Another helpful source, which has a similar philosophical and pedagogical approach is Carver's (2012) *Understanding African Music*. Her method is not as detailed as Nzewi's, but it provides a far wider spectrum of African musical examples and highlights common characteristics over a wide geographical area. However, her examples and method are best used later in musical theory training, as fluency in staff notation is taken for granted. Herbst's (2003) collection seeks to situate the teaching of music in Africa within a framework of philosophical, practical and pedagogical enquiry.

Finally, I have tried to learn as much as possible about local forms of music and how they can be used in order to teach musical concepts: traditional Nguni musical genres with particular reference to research by Dargie (2016; 1988); Rycroft (1957; 1967; 1971; 1975); the recordings made by Hugh Tracey (made in the 1960s-1970s and stored at the International Library of African Music); the proceedings of the 1st International Bow Conference (Dlamini 2017); isicathamiya and maskanda (Erlmann 1996; Muller 2008); and locally composed choral music (Khumalo 1998). For example, the *uhadi* (Xhosa) and ugubhu (Zulu) bows can be used to demonstrate the aural difference between tones and semitones. I fully recognise that approaching Nguni music traditions mainly through book knowledge and watching live performances is not ideal, since I cannot understand their deepest essence adequately. However, it is my sincere hope that in attempting to acquaint myself with local traditions, I will begin to understand the process my students go through when they encounter the 'otherness' of western music. In this way I can identify some of the interdependencies of the western and local traditions and highlight them in my teaching. I acknowledge that only a person who is bilingual in local and western music traditions will ever be able to accomplish this task fully. I envision my task as laying a foundation for that person to emerge and take this project to its ultimate conclusion.

### 6. Conclusion

This article has proposed a new approach to the teaching of the fundamentals of music theory at UKZN by introducing a newly created glossary of technical musical terms in isiZulu (as an instrument of tutoring students as clearly as

possible in their mother tongue), and by situating the content more clearly in local musical cultures. I have found that the interdependency of language cultures has a similar corollary in music cultures, such that a basic common musical syntax is evident. I call this 'the interdependency of musical cultures'. It is this interdependency of languages and music traditions which forms the basis for my method of approaching staff notation and introducing it to students. It is also the basis for the isiZulu/English technical glossary which has been produced to support the teaching of music in isiZulu. Furthermore, I argue that for deep learning to take place, translating concepts into the mother tongue of the students is not sufficient. The content must resonate with them to some degree in order to take root meaningfully. To accomplish this, I position my content more intentionally in local cultures from a philosophical and practical stance. In this way the staff notation system, with its western origins, operates more authentically within the local context, and may, I hope, generate a stronger local appropriation of the notation system itself, and consequently stronger academic performances.

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