What do Beethoven’s hand, the gay modernist composers of America, the percussive attack of a Hammond B-3 organ, the musical growth of the interpretive listener, the funeral marches of Beethoven and Chopin, the social construction of Johnny Rotten, large-scale metric relationships in recent British concert music, the meaning within a performer’s gesture, the influence of one poet upon those that come after, the tonal qualities of Chopin’s Pleyel piano, and the bop-rock harmony of Steely Dan have in common? These are among the interests that have occupied on a daily basis the eleven members of the University of Michigan faculty in music theory. This group, for which I am privileged to serve as Chair, pursues vibrant new directions in a field not long ago restricted to the teaching of rudiments and chord relationships to performers and future teachers, a field devoted in earlier decades almost entirely to the training of composers in counterpoint, and an enterprise of centuries past aimed at unlocking the mysteries of harmony both celestial and mundane.

In the music theorist, the imaginative eloquence of the artist combines with the rigors of mathematical proof in advancing a variety of ways of thinking about all matters musical, from the novice’s first exposure to the concept of a major scale through the violinist’s journey in shaping the performance of a nineteenth-century sonata’s development section, to leading the field’s professionals in exploring new repertoires, new methods, and new modes of questioning. While students at Michigan still gain from daily discussions that grow from their solutions to figured-bass problems, the contrasting tonal possibilities of an oboe and a soprano sax, or the textural conversations within a Webern chamber piece, all of this work is contextualized as never before by larger questions of interest to our student performers, composers, educators, musicologists, and technologists. And the students’ backgrounds that combine conservatory-level musical training, the highest academic qualifications demanded by this university, and a great and growing diversity of life experiences make it a joyous challenge for our faculty to work alongside them in our classes, seminars, and colloquia.
Most members of the music community at Michigan come into contact with the Department of Music Theory through our undergraduate core courses; we also keep a good number of analysis- and readings-based seminars in ready rotation for graduate students of all musical disciplines, and all of us teach at all levels. Some undergraduates will choose to major in music theory, but they’re encouraged to complete performance degrees as well because most theorists rely heavily upon these skills. We thrive on music-making in the classroom; not only do student-performers play in order to help demonstrate one concept or another, but so do the faculty, many of whom remain active as performers. Kevin Korsyn learned to play all of Chopin as a child and keeps an enthralling repertory at his fingers. Sandra Vojic took first prize in numerous piano competitions before embarking on a Juilliard-based performance career, all valuable preparation for joining our group this fall. Andy Mead, organist and minister of music for an area congregation, played a Bach trio sonata for a masterclass in Portland, Maine, this past summer after having performed three movements of Messiaen’s Pentecostal Mass for Marilyn Mason’s International Organ and Church Music Institute. Ramon Satyendra is currently working his way through the entire Beethoven piano sonata cycle for an Ann Arbor assisted-living center; Nadine Hubbs, a Brussels-trained hornist, plays bass and accordion in a local Louisiana-styled band. If virtuosic display is your cup of tea, try to catch an Alan Gosman performance of the “Yankee Doodle” variations. The rest of us try to keep a hand in when we can; for example, I took sabbatical time last fall to get back into shape enough to perform Brahms as part of a lecture. But whereas sounding music lies at the core of what we do, our classroom hothouse is devoted to the development, exchange, and critiquing of ideas about that music and about the ways we conceptualize our art, and I think it’s these ideas turning through the musical air that nourishes and refreshes all of us most fully . . . partly because our ideas in turn animate our music, itself a carrier of concepts that cannot be expressed directly in words.

Our Ph.D. program draws students who arrive with excellent preparation and leads them directly into the profession as they present their prize-winning work at conference meetings. In 2007, Daniel Stevens was given the Karl Geiringer Award by the American Brahms Society; a summer 2008 presentation in England on Brahms’s song collections precedes his beginning a tenure-track teaching job at the University of Delaware. Blair Johnston joins the faculty at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University this fall following his 2007 presentation of Rachmaninoff research to the Society of Music Theory in Baltimore. Our 2007 graduate, René Daley, joined the McGill faculty following her acceptance of Music Theory Midwest’s Arthur Komar Award of 2006 for her work on Schubert. Phil Duker won the 2008 Dorothy Payne Award, given by the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic for his paper on Reich, whereas he has also spoken on Feldman in Washington, D.C., and on Aperghis in England.

Our faculty builds upon Michigan’s field-leading tradition by investigating the roles of composer, performer, and listener through a mix of speculative, contemplative, and exacting techniques; we strive to be impressionistic storytellers as well as prudent analysts. At some times we find our core audience among a very few highly specialized peers in a pursuit of the most highly focused questions, whereas at others we find fulfillment in introducing our pleasures to a large and general audience, many of whom might have no theory-related experience whatsoever. My own current book project exemplifies the latter approach: encouraged by mail received from readers from all walks of life who’ve found enrichment in my Beatles books (The Beatles as Musicians, in two volumes from Oxford University Press), I’ve just finished writing The Foundations of Rock from “Blue Suede Shoes” to “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” (also Oxford) for those who wish to explore the early rock repertoire deeply without a need for reading musical notation. I was able to forego the usual written musical illustrations largely by recording about 300 audio performances by dozens of student and faculty colleagues, all of which will accompany the book on a companion website.

A good stone’s throw away from this sort of effort is Andrew Mead’s deeply developed book, An Introduction to...
the Music of Milton Babbitt (Princeton University Press); Andy is perhaps the field’s preeminent explicator of what is most musically interesting in the twelve-tone works of Babbitt, Carter, Schönberg, and Webern. Somewhere in between these approaches lies Kevin Korsyn’s Decentering Music (Oxford), a philosophical and controversial evaluation of our field as a debate-centered and institutional enterprise, informed by recent theories of science scholarship and proclaimed as valuable in many domains of musical studies.

Nadine Hubbs’s insightful The Queer Composition of American’s Sound (University of California Press), recognized by the American Musicological Society’s Philip Brett Award, has excited an audience across the entire humanistic gamut. Our books-in-progress include Marion Guck’s Between Music and Its Lovers, a look at how listeners create ties to particular musical works heard as renderings of human behaviors in sound; Alan Gosman’s collaborative study with Lewis Lockwood on Beethoven’s compositional process as revealed in the radical Evoica sketchbook; and Wayne Petty’s reconstruction and completion of Heinrich Schenker’s monumental analysis of Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata.

In our articles, Ramon Satyendra has written of such widely varying issues as Liszt’s interest in the Romantic fragment and his unique approach to chromaticism, the improvisational art of Chick Corea, transformational theory and other applications of mathematical models, and formal relationships in tabla solos. Karen Fournier has thus far been most interested in cultural, social and even biological politics as factors in musical research, and in the competing roles of formalism and subjectivity in the construction of musical meaning, but she has recently turned to the music of British punk rock to formulate a critical reevaluation of how surprisingly conservative and borrowed musical materials may be heard to undermine the anarchic pose adopted by these musicians and their fans. All of this research informs our classroom work directly, an environment that allows our research to draw from student insights as well.

We enjoy a vigorous interaction with our peers in all sorts of written and verbal collaboration and debate. Many of our essays, some translated into other languages, have been published and reprinted in various collections. This past spring, Kevin Korsyn’s work generated a response from a panel of six distinguished academics in a conference at the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia); I’ve recently learned that my Beatles books have inspired a new theory of harmony at the Sorbonne. (Rather a surprise—the Beatles themselves were never much of a hit in Paris.) In presenting our work on other campuses, we enjoy meeting with faculty and students with widely varying interests, and in turn we host such visitors through the Michigan Distinguished Residency in Music Theory, which has brought Edward Laufer here to lecture on Chopin, Patrick McCreless on Elgar, and Brian Alegant on Dallapiccola; all three met individually with our dissertation writers while here. Twice in recent years we’ve collected a dozen or so well-prepared graduate students from across the continent to probe one topic or another with a member of our faculty for an afternoon. A number of us have taken leading roles in various stagings of the Mannes Institute, our field’s preeminent think-tank that meets annually in the exploration of such topics as chromaticism, Schönberg, transformational theory, and popular music. Nadine Hubbs has a joint appointment with Women’s Studies, providing a supportive network for her investigations into gender and sexuality domains, and Michigan theorists have held positions in such interdisciplinary bodies as the Institute for the Humanities, the Society of Fellows, and the Provost’s Council. Semester-long visiting professorships at sister institutions have had us share Marion Guck with Columbia University, and Andy Mead with the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Because peer review is so central to our work, we all make time to serve as editors and adjudicators in various publication- and competition-based endeavors.

And with all this, we strive to make every Michigan student’s theory experience as fulfilling as possible, whether it means reserving time to grade meticulously every last student fugue or trouble-shooting a pesky scheduling conflict. It is an absolute pleasure to work with such consummate musicians, thinkers, teachers, and friends.