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Historical Developments in the Music Theory Discourse in Norway

My recently finished PhD dissertation (Utne-Reitan, 2022) presents a historical study of music theory education in Norway in general, and Oslo in particular. It concentrates on the role of these disciplines in the mandatory portion of the conservatoire training of professional musicians in the tradition of Western classical music. The focus is on the Oslo Conservatoire, which opened in 1883 and became the Norwegian Academy of Music in 1973, but this case is also related to wider national and international contexts. More broadly, the dissertation investigates how the music theory discourse in Norway has been constructed and transformed from the late 19th century to the early 21st century.

The aim of the study was to develop a wide-ranging historical understanding of how music-theoretical disciplines such as harmony and counterpoint have been constructed and justified as part of higher music education. This understanding can challenge and inform current practices, as well as future developments, in conservatoire music theory. Theoretically, it is inspired by Michel Foucault's studies of historical discourse, specifically employing an early-Foucauldian – primarily 'archaeological' – perspective (cf. Foucault, 1969/2002, 1971/1981). The source material encompasses a wide range of historical documents, including formal curricula, textbooks and periodicals.

After presenting a survey and close readings of the source material, the dissertation discusses how the construction of the music theory discourse in Norway transformed during the long 20th century. It is argued that several important ruptures and transformations occurred c. 1945–1975. What until then had almost exclusively been a craft-oriented discourse was transformed into a broader discourse that constructed music theory as, among other things, being about 'understanding music'. Connected to this, Roman numerals were replaced by function symbols in harmonic analysis and the theory training was renamed *satslære*. The dissertation highlights the complexity of these changes, showing how the idea of theory as craft, coupled with an aversion to theoretical complexity, nonetheless remained strong throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century.

References

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