Introduction to Research Materials in Music Theory

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This document is a brief initial guide to conducting research in music theory. It highlights significant reference sources and databases, lists some major journals and other resources in the field, and suggests some ways of beginning to look for information on a topic.

Reference Works

*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (accessible as Oxford Music Online)*

The major reference work for music in English. Comprehensive, gives great overviews and presents strong bibliographies. Online version continually updated.


This is one of the standard reference works for music theory. It’s got short biographies of all the major historical theorists, plus a lot of obscure ones. Gives a very comprehensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources up to 1990. It’s extremely useful for tracking down all of a given theorist’s treatises, and seeing if they have translations (which includes non-English translations…in case you’ve ever wanted to read Riemann in French…). Slightly handicapped by the fact that the secondary literature list is outdated, but still a good first stop.


One of the major collaborative efforts of the 1990s revival of historical music theory. Great overviews of most historical topics, and good bibliographies. Gives a more current place to start than Damschroder/Williams, with authoritative narratives on topics like Sonata Form, Rameau, Schenker, Pitch-Class Sets, along with older topics like chant, counterpoint, modes, tuning, etc.

*Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart (MGG)*

The major German music encyclopedia – their version of *Grove*. Useful for theory topics (particularly historical ones) that don’t get enough coverage in English sources.

A few other major books to know about…


Two volume set of translations of interesting analytical articles. Gives a good sampling of major approaches, and serves as a kind of history along the way.

Originally appeared in smaller volumes by century, which you can find floating around. Gives a good sampling of important texts. Useful for tastes of otherwise un-translated treatises. Very comprehensive, including things like ancient Greek texts on music, St. Augustine, etc., all the way up through the twentieth century.

**Oxford Handbooks**

Over the past several years, the *Oxford Handbooks* series has become a major force in music theory. Especially useful titles include the Oxford Handbooks of Neo-Riemannian Music Theories; Topic Theory; Film Music Studies; and the ongoing, currently online-only handbook of Concepts in Music Theory.

**Other Books**

While music theory isn’t really a “book field” like literature, history or musicology, there are many useful monographs. Edited collections are a major force in theory, and many of them contain fascinating and important articles. The universe of such titles is too vast to summarize here, but it’s useful to search for series like *Oxford Studies in Music Theory*, *Eastman Studies in Music*, and Cambridge’s *Studies in Music Theory and Analysis*.

**Databases**

**RILM** (Repertoire International de Littérature Musicale) Abstracts of Music Literature

The most comprehensive database on musical academia. That said, almost too wide-ranging to be that useful. It’s a place to track down every last detail, not a place to start. Doesn’t always provide full text access

**JSTOR**

Major depository of scholarly articles, includes most of the relevant music theory journals listed below. Good search function, including ability to search full-text, or by author or publication. Easy pdf access to nearly everything.

**ProQuest Dissertations and Theses**

Based in Ann Arbor, this is the national clearinghouse for dissertations. Most of them are up here in full text, with the exceptions of very new work, very old work, and occasionally older dissertations that were turned into books, more or less unchanged. Very useful to get to the research behind a book or article, to find translations that were never fully published (for example, a lot of Indiana students translated Rameau’s smaller treatises in the 1970s, and they’re only found here), and to access the few dissertations that seem to have entered scholarly currency without being published as books or major articles (such as Brian Hyer, Edward Gollin, and Kevin Mooney, who all have major Riemann-related dissertations that never became books).
Google Books/Internet Archive/IMSLP

Don’t forget about these – many old treatises like Helmholtz and Hauptmann are available free in full text, along with relevant old journals like Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung. Sometimes even provide full-text search, and often downloadable PDFs, both of which can be very helpful. And they don’t always overlap, so check all of them. IMSLP is increasingly posting theoretical and historical works, especially if their authors happened also to be composers (such as Carl Czerny and Jean-Philippe Rameau).

List of major theory (and some relevant history) journals

The big four:

*Music Theory Spectrum* (official journal of the Society for Music Theory)
*Music Theory Online* (also SMT, but open access: mtosmt.org)
*Journal of Music Theory* (the original theory journal; published at Yale since the 1950s)
*Music Analysis* (journal of the British Society for Music Analysis [SMA])

Smaller theory journals:

*Perspectives of New Music* (really a big one, though it’s been somewhat off my radar. Strong coverage of the era in which both theorists and composers were trying to deal with Schoenberg and his circle.)
*Music Theory and Analysis* (formerly the Dutch *Journal of Music Theory*; a fairly US-centric European journal, with articles now mostly in English; I suppose the name change reinforces that.)
*Integral* (published by Eastman School of Music)
*Indiana Theory Review* (guess where it’s published!)
*Theory and Practice* (official journal of the Music Theory Society of New York State, the founding of which actually predates SMT)
*Theoria* (great journal for the history of music theory)
*Journal of Mathematics and Music* (just what it sounds like!)
*GAMUT* (journal of the Mid-Atlantic chapter of SMT). Open access, online.
*Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* (German SMT-equivalent. German/English bi-lingual, open access online)
*Analitica: Rivista online di studi musicali* (Italian SMT-equivalent. Italian/English bi-lingual, open access online)
*In Theory Only* (now defunct; published by Michigan in the 70s and 80s. It’s really quirky and well worth looking through. All open access on the UM website. Some great articles, plus the occasional word search. Not kidding!)

Some major music history journals:

*Journal of the American Musicological Society*
*Journal of Musicology*
*Journal of the Royal Musical Association*
19th-Century Music (used to be a very common outlet for theory papers. Lewin published there in the 80s, and Cohn in the 90s)  
Journal of Musicological Research

The world of musicology journals is vast! Beyond this basic list, you can find specialty journals for different centuries and repertoires; journals devoted to individual composers (i.e. BACH: The Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute; HAYDN; and so forth); and many other titles.

Other titles of interest

Music Perception (a fascinating journal that publishes research on the psychology of music; much of it is theory-adjacent)  
Critical Inquiry (interdisciplinary humanities journal published at the University of Chicago. Terminally hip. Frequently includes musical stuff.)  
Journal of Aesthetics and Art History (seems to publish a decent number of music articles as well)

Recommended working order:

1. If you’re researching the work of a particular music theorist, use Grove + Damschroder/Williams + Christensen to start and get the lay of the land. If you’re interested in particular theoretical topics (rhythm, form, etc.), it’s often easiest to start with Christensen (which is organized topically) and then work through the above list in reverse order.  
2. Follow up with JSTOR search + exploration of bibliographies from relevant articles.  
3. Library catalog or WorldCat search for books, including composer biographies, research monographs, and essay collections.  
4. Finally, RILM lets you be most comprehensive, once you get to the point of trying to track down every last source.

Citing Your Work in Music Theory

Most music theorists use the guidelines in the Chicago Manual of Style. Many journals tend to use the author/date system for brevity’s sake. JAMS and most dissertations will use full humanities-style citations with extensive footnotes. This is what I ask you to use for your papers—author date exerts a lot of pressure on your writing style, and structuring your references properly is a skill in itself. You can find the Chicago Manual of Style in the library, or consult its guidelines online.