During the 1976-77 academic year, I was a high-school senior in suburban Detroit. My dream was to be a professional rock musician, and I was determined to get the best training I could in preparation for that career. I had already taken a year’s worth of music theory, a year of composition, played a movement of a guitar concerto with an orchestra, and was enrolled in music courses part time at the local community college.

Considering myself reasonably qualified, I began the process of applying for music programs. I contacted a number of universities, including the University of Michigan. A member of the admissions staff asked what my instrument was. "Guitar," I said. Awkward pause. "I can send you the application," she said, "but you’ll never get in."

Disappointed and somewhat offended, I didn’t apply there and ended up enrolling elsewhere. I later transferred to Michigan, however, and earned my B.Mus., M.Mus., and Ph.D. there, declaring my principal instrument as piano (I wasn’t very good, but hey, it got me in). I received a wonderful education, spending weekdays as an earnest and dedicated student of classical music and weekends sneaking off to play Top 40 gigs in Detroit. A Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde musical existence if ever there was one, it was Arnold Schoenberg meets "Boogie Oogie Oogie." Though I persevered in my efforts to find a way into music school, many pop musicians of my generation simply gave up on a music education when greeted by similar discouragement and dismissiveness from admissions offices.
What will the new undergraduate music degree look like?

But that was nearly 40 years ago. Surely things are better now? For the most part, no. High-school musicians are playing in rock bands, practicing hard, and performing at ever-higher levels. But these talented and dedicated students are too often unwelcome at our postsecondary schools of music, even though many of those programs are facing enrollment challenges. If students do enroll, they will very likely be asked to check their pop passion at the door. Do not come as you are.

Something is fundamentally wrong with this picture. Professional opportunities for classical and jazz musicians have declined precipitously in the past 20 years, but we still teach a curriculum focusing primarily on those traditions. I teach performance workshops for high-school rock musicians, many talented and accomplished, every summer. But they needn’t bother applying to America’s leading music programs.

These problems have not gone unnoticed in America’s approximately 1,800 music departments and schools of music. Changes in the curriculum are a familiar topic among administrators and faculty members. Writing in *The Chronicle* in August, Robert Freeman, a former director of the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music, called for a number of reforms—ideas greatly expanded in his recent book, *The Crisis of Classical Music in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

Freeman deals principally with how classical music can find a broader audience and how schools of music can better serve students. His proposals are innovative: among them, encouraging double majors for some music students; emphasizing greater development of communication, writing, and administrative skills; putting undergraduate musical education above more expensive, more specialized graduate studies; colleges’ commissioning works accessible and exciting to varied audiences and incorporating multimedia elements. But Freeman does not go far enough. Even if his ideas were widely adopted, they would slow but not halt the decline of classical music.

A curriculum revision was proposed in November 2014 by the College Music Society’s Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major. A recent session at the annual conference of the American Musicological Society titled "The End of the Undergraduate Music
History Sequence?" drew a capacity audience and prompted a spirited discussion. Even among the most conservative-minded faculty members and administrators, it is clear that change is in the air. The crucial point of discussion is not whether things will change, but rather what those changes will be. What will the new undergraduate music degree look like?

While undergraduate music study has not changed much, the past 20 years have seen a marked increase in scholarly attention to popular music. When I was in graduate school, during the 1980s, one had to be careful about expressing any serious academic interest in pop music. Even in the mid-1990s, as I was preparing to go up for tenure at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, some well-meaning colleagues advised me to lay off my rock scholarship until after tenure. Back then the only way a scholar could get away with working on pop was to cast it as a secondary scholarly interest. Consequently, most of us who wrote on pop during those days also published a considerable amount on Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Wagner, Debussy, Schoenberg, Berg, or other established composers.

Since then, research in popular music has become so mainstream that not only can scholars make pop their specialty, but an expertise in pop music can count as a big plus on the job market. One result is that music departments are offering many more courses on pop. Long the province of English, history, and cultural-studies departments, these music programs include entry-level appreciation courses for nonmajors, undergraduate courses for majors, and graduate seminars for doctoral students. This is healthy progress.

As the scholarly interest in pop was developing, a mostly separate handful of schools began offering programs devoted to the performance of popular music. The Berklee College of Music has led this pack, having awarded pop-performance degrees for decades. Over the past decade, a few other undergrad pop-performance programs have been established, with those at the University of Southern California’s Thornton School of Music and the University of Miami’s Frost School making the most waves. The idea is fairly simple and, perhaps paradoxically, modeled on the study of traditional music to which they stand in such stark contrast: Students take lessons on their instrument; learn
theory and history focused on pop music; and study arranging, improvisation, recording techniques and technology, and songwriting. It’s the pop version of the traditional B.Mus. in performance.

While the growth in those programs might seem like good news, it is not without its problems. On the academic front, courses in pop are almost always add-ons to a traditional musical education. Core curricula are still dominated by classical music, giving popular music second-class standing. As it was in scholarship 20 years ago, it is acceptable for students to study pop on the side provided they focus primarily on some area within classical music or jazz.

With pop-performance programs, an opposite kind of problem arises: Many students have little or no meaningful exposure to classical music, and not much significant interaction with the students who study classical music and performance. Such programs have also tended to be perceived as weak academically, with their severest critics accusing them of pandering to students, the schools’ eye on goals more financial than educational.

Rather than existing at the margins of the standard musical education, pop should be at the heart of it. But it shouldn’t dominate, as classical music has for so many years. The ideal solution is not to create a series of parallel majors (one for pop, one for jazz, yet another for classical), but rather to create a major that has music at its core and specialties as its features. Students who study various styles should sit side by side in the same classrooms as much as possible. In today’s world, musicians need to adapt quickly to professional and artistic opportunities, and it is crucial that they be versatile and flexible.

Students studying rock, for instance, need significant exposure to classical music and musicians. Classical musicians need to know about jazz and recording technology. Jazz musicians need to know more about musical theater and world music. All students need to understand the business of music and to develop entrepreneurial skills. Keeping those aspects of music-making and creative activity in separate boxes and segregating students by program hurts them both artistically and practically.
Granting pop a more central position in music curricula won’t pose a threat to classical music. Without a significant broadening of the curriculum, many music programs across the country will struggle, and some will fail. Highly selective schools will be the last to feel these pressures in a substantial way. The collapse of some traditional programs may even benefit the top programs for a time, as students are driven to a smaller number offering specialized classical training. But a general weakening of musical higher education would erode America’s musical training over all.

I am devoted to and invested in the European art-music tradition; I have studied and taught this music for decades. But classical music can’t continue to thrive within music programs on its own. The integration of popular music into the curriculum offers the prospect not only of making significant advances in musical education, diversity, and inclusion, but also of protecting and preserving the rich accomplishments of the American music-school tradition. United we stand, divided we fall.

Can faculty members embrace such shifts in the curriculum? Can they teach the kinds of courses, lessons, and ensembles that will be required? Are there resources to restructure programs, faculties, and facilities? The challenges are many.

The reforms will be easier, though, if prestigious music schools lead the effort. Don’t bury your head in the sand and hope that these issues will go away, or that you won’t be affected. A few top schools are already stepping forward. Curricular revisions at the University of Southern California, for instance, will create significantly more genre integration in its programs.

Rethinking our field is a little scary but also an exciting opportunity. Music educators, of all people, should be able to change our playlist.

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