



# Curriculum, Genre, and Power: Interdisciplinary Challenges in Ghanaian Music Theory, Composition, and Sound Engineering

Alfred Patrick Addaquay

*University of Ghana*

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## Abstract

This study analyses the interdisciplinary challenges and genre bias present in Ghanaian tertiary music education, specifically addressing music theory, composition, and sound engineering. The study employs a mixed-methods approach with 200 participants, including students, alumni, and instructors, revealing notable dissatisfaction with curricula that favour Western (in theory) and popular genres (in sound engineering) at the expense of other forms. This study, rooted in genre-neutral pedagogy and Freirean critical pedagogy, demonstrates that faculty specialisation, institutional rigidity, and uneven exposure across disciplines lead to structural inequities in music instruction. Quantitative data indicate significant student dissatisfaction, especially among those focused on theory and composition, whereas qualitative findings emphasise the influence of lecturer training on curriculum design. Participants suggested various reforms, such as modular course structures, interdisciplinary teaching teams, faculty development initiatives, and student participation in curriculum governance. The research advocates for a curricular philosophy that integrates global adaptability with local musical traditions. By focusing on student experience and addressing genre hierarchies, Ghanaian institutions can create a more inclusive and dynamic model for music education that aligns with cultural diversity and the practical needs of the 21st-century music environment.

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## Introduction

African tertiary institutions must conduct music research to sustain and develop the continent's intellectual and cultural legacy (Idolor, 2005; Lyons & Kelly, 2016). Music theory and composition have remained fundamental subjects in these institutions, serving as the theoretical and practical foundation of music education. Nonetheless, these topics have been taught in Ghana using a pedagogical framework that favours Western art music for a period, leading to a limited scholarly concentration that ignores popular and indigenous forms. This restriction is criticised by Howard (2018), who calls for improved teacher preparation in teaching a variety of genres and emphasises the significance of recognising the individuals and customs that create the music (p. 26). His demand for variety underscores the urgent need for a curriculum that represents diverse cultural perspectives rather than a single dominant standard.

On the other hand, in African music departments, orchestration and ensemble studies often lack focus on diverse ensemble types, predominantly teaching Western orchestral arrangements. This reflects insufficient institutional resources and expertise, leaving students unprepared to compose for African traditional ensembles or collaborate with jazz and fusion bands. Most of the time, students struggle



with instrument-specific techniques and improvisation, impeding the development of adaptable composers. Similarly, current advancements in sound engineering and research methodologies highlight the need for inclusive educational approaches. Expanding curricula to include classical, traditional, and contemporary genres will better equip students for success in a dynamic musical environment, addressing instructional gaps in ensemble studies.

### **Literature Review**

In line with the arguments presented above, Addaquay (2024) advocates for Ghanaian languages to be taught in music theory classes. He highlights how Western frameworks limit Ghanaian musical idioms and linguistic variation, even as he affirms the usefulness of these frameworks as a globally shared medium. Ligeti (2022) and other scholars address the absence of integration of African cultural components in art music composition education and the prevalence of Western approaches in this area (also, see Chapman, 2007).

It is important to note here that the issue is not limited to Ghana. A similar issue is noted by Feng and Damdindorj (2024) in Chinese institutions, where jazz, pop, and folk music are marginalised, and classical music dominates courses (also see Krikun, 2008). To foster innovation and student involvement, they support the inclusion of modern teaching technologies and a wider representation of genres. Their reasoning supports the growing body of evidence that suggests music education should accurately represent the variety of musical realities students experience, which requires changes in teacher skills.

In music theory and composition, genre prejudice is especially harmful, as students working in traditional or popular forms are unintentionally excluded by instructor specialisations and curriculum designs. Related disciplines, such as sound engineering, orchestration, and research methodologies, where genre prejudice also exists, exacerbate this feeling of exclusion. For instance, popular music production is frequently overemphasised in sound engineering courses, leaving students unprepared to manage the acoustic requirements of orchestras or choirs. Similarly, courses on research methods tend to focus on ethnomusicology or music education, often ignoring analytical or experimental techniques that are better suited for students studying music theory, composition, and performance. This disciplinary self-replication is criticised by Ramsey (2012), who contends that teachers frequently stick to their comfort zones, restricting exposure to new customs and impeding interdisciplinary innovation. Borbye (2009) also emphasises the importance of students and teachers engaging in new and challenging scenarios that replicate real-world experiences in workplaces worldwide. On the contrary, Rasmussen (2016) discusses the dilemma of teachers being asked to instruct or teach topics beyond their area of competence. Rasmussen delineates a pedagogical experiment in which he was confronted with teaching beyond his area of expertise. In this case, he chose to employ diverse instructional practices such as think-pair-share and role-playing exercises.

Structural change is just as significant as genre inclusion in terms of transformation. Instead of focusing on the preferences of individual lecturers, a redesigned music education must promote intellectual and creative plurality through institutional openness. For students studying theory and composition, whose education necessitates exposure to a variety of musical logics, structures, and aesthetics, this is especially important. By examining pedagogical bias in Ghanaian institutions, namely how faculty specialisation and curriculum influence what students may access, learn, and produce, this paper takes on that challenge.

### **Theoretical framework**

This article is based on two interconnected theoretical frameworks: genre-neutral pedagogy and critical pedagogy, both of which challenge prevailing norms in music education and advocate for inclusive, transformative learning.



The opening framework, genre-neutral pedagogy, is informed by the research of Godfrey (2022) and Attas (2019), who argue that music theory and composition should not be confined solely to Western art music traditions. Attas (2019) proposes modular “plug-and-play” strategies that incorporate various musical traditions, including popular music artists such as Kendrick Lamar, to teach harmonic and formal concepts. Godfrey (2022) critiques the prevalence of Western theoretical models. He proposes an adaptable curriculum model, termed “tabula fecunda”—a “fertile table” that accommodates a diverse range of student musical identities and aspirations. This agenda positions theory and composition as intellectually rigorous yet stylistically neutral disciplines, which serve as tools for the analysis and generation of music across various traditions.

The following framework, critical pedagogy, is based on the philosophy of Paulo Freire (1978, 2020), whose dialogical and emancipatory educational model emphasises the need to dismantle oppressive curricular structures. Freire’s approach conceptualises the lecture hall as a participatory environment in which students critically engage with and interrogate prevailing knowledge systems, particularly the emphasis on Western classical idioms. His concepts establish a basis for reconceptualising music classrooms as environments where students engaged in theory, composition, or sound engineering collaborate across multiple genres and traditions, enhancing both local and global musical lexicons. Freirean pedagogy informs inclusion politics and supports pedagogical experimentation and interdisciplinarity.

These frameworks offer two perspectives: genre-neutral pedagogy focuses on curricular content, while critical pedagogy examines the methodologies and motivations behind the teaching process. This study argues that music theory and composition in Ghanaian institutions must be stylistically inclusive and structurally liberatory. This paper synthesises various perspectives, framing music theory and composition as adaptable and interactive domains that enable students to engage with the multifaceted musical landscapes of the 21st century.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate genre bias and interdisciplinary challenges in Ghanaian tertiary music education, focusing on the areas of music theory, composition, and sound engineering. The design of the paper aims to capture the statistical patterns of student satisfaction and inclusion, as well as the nuanced perspectives of individuals within the current pedagogical landscape. The quantitative aspect of the research identified trends across a broad sample, while the qualitative aspect enhanced the contextual understanding of curricular experiences.

Two hundred participants were selected (purposefully) from music departments in universities and tertiary institutions throughout Ghana. The sample consisted of 185 students and alumni from theory, composition, and sound engineering specialisations, along with 15 instructors who have acquired varied teaching portfolios. It is essential to note that not all instructors are employed by the University, as the primary objective of the research was to determine whether a specific approach could facilitate the attainment of the research purpose. Furthermore, the involvement of alumni introduced a longitudinal aspect to the data, demonstrating the influence of educational experiences on professional trajectories. Stratified purposive sampling facilitated representation across diverse musical genre orientations—art music, popular music, and traditional African music—thereby allowing for a thorough analysis of curriculum responsiveness.

Data collection was conducted over three months in the year 2024, utilising two main instruments. A structured survey was conducted to gather data on perceptions of inclusivity, satisfaction with teaching methods, and the alignment of course content with students' musical interests. Responses on the Likert scale formed the foundation for descriptive statistics, whereas open-ended responses



offered restricted qualitative insights. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants, comprising 25 students or alumni and five instructors. The interviews examined the experiences of participants regarding pedagogical inclusion or exclusion, the impact of lecturer specialisation, and their perceived readiness for various musical careers.

The data analysis occurred in two phases. Descriptive statistical tools were used to analyse survey responses, detecting satisfaction levels across genre categories and tracking patterns by specialisation. A notable trend has been observed: students who focus on theory and composition frequently express dissatisfaction with the prevalence of Western classical models and the underrepresentation of traditional or popular music. Interviews were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis, revealing recurring themes including genre alignment, curricular imbalance, and faculty limitations. The findings enhanced the statistical results and facilitated triangulation.

This methodology was chosen to ascertain a strong empirical basis for analysing structural challenges in music education reform. The integration of various data sources and perspectives provided a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical landscape, especially regarding the development of inclusive, interdisciplinary curricula in Ghanaian higher education.

### **Results and Discussion**

The quantitative analysis of survey responses indicated significant dissatisfaction among students concerning the representation of musical genres in their courses. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents reported that their curricula predominantly focused on a single genre, typically popular or art music, neglecting other musical traditions. The imbalance was notably pronounced among students who concentrate on theory and composition, with 62% indicating dissatisfaction regarding the insufficient inclusion of traditional and popular music in their curriculum. In contrast, 75% of sound engineering students expressed concerns regarding the predominant focus on popular music, indicating a deficiency in the consideration of classical and art music techniques essential for orchestral or choral production.

Table 1 presents students' levels of agreement regarding the treatment of various genres in their instruction. Approximately 85% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that popular music received considerable attention, whereas only 25% expressed a similar sentiment regarding classical music. Notably, 30% of respondents expressed neutrality regarding traditional music instruction, indicating potential ambiguity or inconsistency in the implementation of these materials across various institutions.

Neutral responses regarding traditional music were more prevalent among alumni compared to current students, indicating that retrospective evaluations result in a more measured assessment. Alumni observed that traditional music, although occasionally referenced in historical or ethnomusicological discussions, was infrequently incorporated into compositional or theoretical analyses. Conversely, current students, particularly in composition, demonstrated a higher tendency to articulate dissatisfaction, identifying the restricted opportunity to compose in non-Western idioms as a primary source of frustration. Lecturers recognised these deficiencies, attributing them to resource constraints and insufficient institutional training in traditional ensemble notation and performance methods.

Table 1 indicates a significant division in students' satisfaction with teaching in theory and composition. Only 10% reported high levels of satisfaction, while 30% expressed moderate satisfaction. Nonetheless, 25% reported dissatisfaction, with an additional 15% indicating strong dissatisfaction, highlighting significant concerns regarding curricular balance. The responses were



particularly notable among theory students, who characterised their courses as "overly canonical" and lacking relevance to contemporary or African creative practices.

Table 2, titled "Proposed Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model for Music Education," presents an optimal distribution of genre representation as indicated by the participants. Survey feedback indicates that the proposed model should comprise 30% popular music, 25% classical music, 20% traditional music, 15% jazz, and 10% fusion. This model was developed from survey feedback and interview themes, with students and alumni advocating for more balanced curricula that move beyond strict genre hierarchies. Multiple participants suggested the development of interdisciplinary modules co-instructed by faculty from various specialisations, such as a collaborative course featuring a jazz pianist, a choral conductor, and a traditional drum instructor.

*Table 1: Satisfaction of students*

Satisfaction Level	Percentage
Very satisfied	10
Satisfied	30
Dissatisfied	25
Very dissatisfied	15

*Table 2: Proposed Curriculum Model*

Genre	Percentage
Popular Music	30
Classical Music	25
Traditional Music	20
Jazz	15
Fusion	10

The proposed model indicates a shift towards flexibility and diversity in Ghanaian music education, transitioning from isolated genre instruction to a more integrative and career-oriented training approach. The statement emphasises the necessity for theory and composition programs to incorporate a broader spectrum of musical logics, especially those rooted in Ghanaian traditional forms, while maintaining global competencies.

A more thorough examination revealed a robust correlation between the expertise of lecturers and students' perceptions of course relevance. For instance, students who were instructed by ethnomusicologists perceived that their courses frequently prioritised African traditional music over popular and classical genres. In contrast, classical music specialists reported that they were not adequately acquainted with both traditional and contemporary African music. These results highlight a systemic bias in which the curriculum is significantly influenced by the areas of expertise of lecturers, resulting in student dissatisfaction and unequal representation of genres.

Thematic analysis of interview data offered a more profound understanding of the obstacles encountered by students in sound engineering, composition, and theory. The following were the primary themes:

**1. Challenges in Interdisciplinary Courses:** In interdisciplinary courses, students who specialise in theory and composition observed a lack of support for their academic and creative development. For instance, numerous individuals reported experiencing challenges when attempting to apply theoretical concepts to practical modules such as sound engineering. This was because the emphasis on popular music limited opportunities for researching classical or experimental compositions.



**2. Lack of Emphasis on Classical and Art Music:** Sound engineering students conveyed their dissatisfaction with the inadequate emphasis on classical and art music techniques in practical modules. They emphasised the difficulties associated with recording and mixing for choirs or orchestras, as the course content primarily focused on the production of popular music. These discrepancies necessitated the utilisation of external resources to address their skill deficiencies.

These qualitative findings emphasise the discrepancy between the curriculum's capacity to accommodate the diverse requirements of students and their educational aspirations.

Research involving students, alumni, and lecturers indicates significant tensions regarding the adequacy of Ghanaian music curricula in facilitating interdisciplinary learning. Numerous students indicated that the strict division of genres and specialisations obstructed their capacity to engage with contemporary musical contexts. Several composition students expressed frustration regarding their lack of exposure to practical sound engineering tools, whereas sound engineering students indicated limited engagement with theoretical concepts or traditional instrumentation. Lecturers recognised that curriculum design frequently mirrors their specialisations, resulting in inconsistent exposure across genres and disciplines.

This fragmentation of institutions reflects apprehensions within global academic discourse. Mellizo (2020) critiques the slow pace of reform in music education and emphasises the absence of actionable interdisciplinary frameworks. Zhang et al. (2023) observe that regional differences in music education are significant, with European institutions focusing on research-led innovation and North American schools emphasising technology. The observed patterns align with reports from students in Ghana, indicating a discrepancy between their creative needs and the frameworks of institutional training, which are often associated with restricted faculty expertise or conventional course limitations.

In the study, lecturers frequently justified existing curricula by referencing resource constraints or institutional requirements; however, students demonstrated a less thorough understanding. Alumni emphasised that their challenges in the job market resulted from a limited training approach that failed to equip them for diverse genres or roles. Kertz-Welzel (2019) argues that music education systems need to be globally adaptable while maintaining a cultural foundation.

Collectively, these findings suggest that although Ghanaian students and lecturers recognise the need for interdisciplinary reform, a unified strategy for its implementation is currently lacking. The international models presented by Mellizo, Zhang et al., and Kertz-Welzel serve as valuable reference points; however, the primary catalyst for change must be the engagement of students and faculty with reform at the institutional level. Integrating global trends with local contexts, exemplified by Ghana's traditional idioms and burgeoning popular music scenes, necessitates a curricular philosophy that is both expansive and introspective.

The findings emphasise the systemic disparities in genre representation within African music education and their implications for students in sound engineering, composition, and theory. To confront these obstacles, it is necessary to make a concerted effort to balance the curriculum, incorporate diverse genres, and implement interdisciplinary teaching practices. African universities have the opportunity to reimagine music education as a space that values diversity, fosters creativity, and prepares students for dynamic musical careers by drawing from global models.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The study's participants, comprising current students, alumni, and lecturers, offered diverse recommendations to improve music education in Ghanaian tertiary institutions, with an emphasis on addressing interdisciplinary gaps and minimising genre bias. A primary recommendation was to modularise curricula to accommodate various genres and career interests. Students suggested the



development of genre-specific modules, including orchestration for jazz and African traditional ensembles, to obtain training aligned with their strengths. Alumni highlighted the necessity for practical, sound engineering modules that encompass techniques for recording choirs, orchestras, and popular music (Refer to Addaquay 2025 for sound engineering for traditional African music).

Lecturers emphasised the significance of interdisciplinary team-teaching in rectifying curricular imbalances. It was proposed that courses such as orchestration be co-taught by experts from classical, jazz, and African traditional backgrounds to enhance exposure and promote adaptability. Numerous instructors identified their genre-specific training as a constraint and called for institutional backing for professional development, including workshops and partnerships with international entities.

Students frequently advocated for enhanced student-centred pedagogical methods, suggesting the implementation of regular feedback mechanisms to express their concerns and satisfaction with course content. Alumni expressed similar views, indicating that their perspectives were frequently omitted from curriculum development, thereby constraining the applicability of their education.

The establishment of curriculum advisory committees, comprising student and alumni representatives, was a common proposal aimed at fostering dialogue between learners and faculty to ensure responsiveness to evolving musical realities. The study advocates for aligning curriculum reforms with institutional strengths and resources to develop a viable interdisciplinary strategy. The integration of modular curriculum design, interdisciplinary teaching, faculty development, and participatory governance may enhance the inclusivity and dynamism of music education systems in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

This study uncovers the structural biases and pedagogical limitations inherent in Ghanaian tertiary music education, particularly affecting students in music theory, composition, and sound engineering. The findings reveal a consistent disparity in genre representation, fragmentation within the discipline caused by lecturer specialisation, and a curriculum that often prioritises Western idioms over traditional and contemporary African forms. These patterns alienate students with creative interests beyond canonical models and impede their preparedness for interdisciplinary and industry-relevant careers.

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach within genre-neutral and critical pedagogical frameworks to show that both students and lecturers recognise the need for reform; however, institutional inertia and resource limitations hinder progress. Participants from all groups proposed solutions, including modular curriculum design, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and the inclusion of student perspectives in curricular decision-making. These suggestions create a foundation for a context-sensitive approach to revitalising music education in Ghana and, by extension, in other African contexts.

The study advocates for a reconceptualisation of music theory and composition as flexible domains rather than strictly defined disciplines, allowing for the integration of diverse musical logics. Aligning global models with local realities enables Ghanaian institutions to develop a music education system that is inclusive, adaptive, and intellectually rigorous, preparing students to engage with and influence the global musical community.

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