



## A Musical World: Music Theorist Issa Aji

Interview Conducted by Stephen J. Trygar  
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Today, I have the pleasure of introducing you to a friend and peer of mine, Issa Aji. Issa recently graduated with a Master of Music in Music History from Temple University. His thesis, titled “Understanding Music Frisson: A Methodological Study in Musical Semiotics and Hermeneutics”, allowed him to study specific moments of frisson in music during his studies at Temple. After his hard work at Temple, he has been accepted to the University of Texas at Austin to obtain his PhD in Music Theory. Issa and I took a few classes together during our time at Temple University. The more time went by, the more frequently we began to converse about our class work and our career aspirations. We would periodically bounce thesis ideas off each other, and we would in turn become friends. I asked Issa to do an interview with me because while the roots of our careers are quite similar, they are reasonably different in the end. I wanted to share what it's like to be a music theorist from someone who is currently going through it and solidifying a career in the practice for himself.

**To start, congratulations on your graduation! It is an incredible achievement! Can you elaborate on what it took to get your degree in music theory?**

Thanks, Stephen. I'm happy that our paths crossed, and we were able to take a few classes together. Getting a master's degree in music theory has been a full-on academic sprint that has been endlessly rewarding. To jump right into it, every graduate student deciding to pursue music theory should, at the very least, expect classes in Schenkerian analysis (an analytical theory developed by Heinrich Schenker to analyze tonal music of the common-practice period), post-tonal theory (analysis of twentieth-century music), and fugue/counterpoint (primarily through the analysis of Bach fugues); these classes are standard, regardless of the institution. I also took as many seminars as I could. The topics of these seminars really depends on the research interests of the faculty. At Temple, there are some top-tier theorists offering seminars that emphasize interdisciplinary approaches to music (i.e. critical theory and narrative). These were some of the best classes I've ever taken. To name a few: Music and the Freudian Tradition, The Concerto, Music and Narrative, and Sonata Theory. As with most institutions, Temple's degree culminates with a thesis on a topic of one's choosing, a piano exam, a language exam (German, in my case), and a comprehensive exit exam. All the while, I was teaching freshman and sophomore theory classes as well.

**Your masters thesis was on moments of frisson in music. What led you to this project, and can you tell us a little bit about it?**

That's right. Well, for as long as I can remember, I have been equally fascinated and moved by music and its ability to evoke emotions in its listeners. There is no other artistic medium that I feel more deeply connected to than music. I had (and still have) a lot of questions about it...a lot. What exactly is happening when we are moved to tears by a certain musical moment? What is happening to the psyche when this phenomenon occurs? Can we identify the conditions that make these highly expressive moments possible? Are there any commonalities between these moments? What makes music "expressive"?

These are the types of questions that led me to study music theory in the first place and to my thesis on music-induced frisson. Frisson is a term that the English language has adopted from French to describe the goosebumps we feel when listening to certain musical works. I came across this term while reading cognitive theorists like David Huron and John Sloboda. In my thesis, I explore two specific moments that induce a strong sense of frisson in me: Sibelius's Second Symphony (the second theme in the second movement) and Debussy's Cello Sonata (the piano introduction of the first four bars).

In my early years of study, I thought that if I learned the traditional modes of analysis such as harmonic analysis, counterpoint, form, etc. that it would lead me to the answers I so desired. Well...I was wrong. These methodologies only get us so far with regard to music's emotions. They are certainly valid mechanisms to uncover music's structures, but if you are concerned with emotional affect, as I am, it does not account for the complex psychological weight that I feel during these moments. There are too many gaps left missing that leave out processes of the mind, whether that be psychological or philosophical. But, one thing that's great about the theoretical community today is that there are people who are thinking and writing about these things.

So, to account for these deeper levels of emotional affect, my thesis adopts two methodologies that were introduced to me by my professor at Temple: hermeneutics and semiotics. These methodologies are concerned with meaning and expressivity. They address questions like, what does a piece of music mean? And, how does it express that meaning? These methodologies are not directly concerned with music's emotions, but they at least take into consideration the human condition (subjectivity), which is what interests me most. Admittedly, I can't say that I've found any grand conclusions. I'm not sure if there will ever be one. There's a lot more work to be done, and these are at least my thoughts right now. They will change. I hope they do.

### **What can someone do with a degree in music theory, and why is it so important?**

Most of my colleagues and I are all en route to teach. This, of course, can take many different forms, but I'd say that the majority will be teaching at the university level. A prerequisite to teach at university is now a Ph.D. That may not have been the case twenty years ago, but it certainly is now. For the theorist, this educational journey is important not only to grow your theoretical skills (written and aural), but also to hone in on some research interests. There is so much music to be listened to, and so much to read about. I can't fathom consuming it all. I keep multiple "listening" journals to keep my thoughts straight about what I have and have not listened to. But, it's only through this journey that I was able to get things wrong and redirect my thoughts. Most of my time has been me clumsily bumping up against some academic or mental block and having to course correct. This is the way I learn and think.



## **What are some of your favorite things to study/who are your favorite composers to study?**

Well, I feel fortunate in the sense that I have a very particular set of research interests. So, in one way or another, I'm always reading or thinking about music and emotions. This has not only kept me grounded in a world where so much is at our disposal, but it also makes it more feasible to learn all there is to know about a particular topic. As I mentioned earlier, emotions in music can be approached in many different ways. What interests me these days are narrative and philosophical/psychoanalytic approaches to the topic. Things like Robert Hatten's virtual agency and Kaja Silverman's acoustic mirror have been on my mind a lot lately. I was recently having a conversation with my professor where we were discussing the benefits of reading "classic" books, and books outside of music. I love this idea. It will only inform your work in unexpected and unique ways. So, for me right now, that looks like Dostoevsky, Jung, Roger Scruton, and Jenefer Robinson, even though two out of the four are music related. I can't escape it!

Throughout my time at Temple, I was looking at a lot of Sibelius and Debussy. There are just so many different facets to observe in a musical work. Sometimes I have to pull myself away from it. Mahler has become (and will always be) a fascination for me. Outside of all this though, I'd be lying if I said I didn't like pop music. I'm a bass player, so I love any music centered around groove: soul, jazz, fusion, to name a few. I love Arabic music as well. There is just so much great music out there. We will never run out of things to listen to.

## **Do you have any current projects you're working on or do you have anything else you'd like to share?**

Once the world returns to some sense of normalcy, I will be heading to Austin, Texas to pursue doctoral work. I plan to arrive there with conference paper ready to go. It will be an adaptation of the work I've done on my thesis. What excites me most about that, is hearing what other scholars have to say so I can go back to the drawing board and continue to refine my work.

Thank you once again, Issa, for taking the time to discuss your involvement in the classical music scene with me. Congratulations on all your accomplishments thus far, and good luck with all your endeavors!