Graduate Music History Placement Examination

This examination is used both to recommend appropriate course work in Music History for incoming students pursuing master’s, doctor of musical arts, and doctor of philosophy degrees. The purpose of this exam is to evaluate the incoming student’s knowledge of the principal events, ideas, genres, composers and styles important to the history of Western classical music. Without a sufficiently broad understanding of the history of music, a student cannot hope to successfully complete graduate course work which builds on such knowledge. The examination is broad-based, with as many comprehensive questions as specific ones. However, there is a sizeable random selection of specific questions concerning individual works, treatises, composers, etc. The examination covers all periods and follows the common division into Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classic, Romantic, and Modern periods. A good starting point would be for the student to be certain that he/she knows these designations and their chronological limits, can define the features of music from each, and can cite outstanding composers and works.

This examination does not test music terminology, but knowledge of it is assumed and is, in fact, required to interpret some of the questions, as it is indeed used in graduate course work without explanation. Students who are deficient in their knowledge of musical terminology are at a distinct disadvantage, not only in taking this exam but also in doing graduate course work in general. A good way to review basic music terminology is to browse the glossary of any recent edition of Grout’s History of Western Music or similar text or to review the appropriate topics in any standard musical dictionary. (For a good sampling of such terms, see the description of Part III of this examination below).

Part I of the examination consists entirely of multiple-choice questions. The student is advised to review principles, forms, and major trends rather than to try to learn repertoire and isolated facts hurriedly. The questions in Part I all have this format:

- Which of the following is/was NOT concerned with the art of music criticism?
  (Choice c is the appropriate one.)
  a. George Bernard Shaw  b. Virgil Thomson  c. Andrew Porter  

- Joseph Haydn figures most prominently in the development of which of the following?
  (Choice c is the appropriate one.)
  a. opera buffa  b. piano concerto  c. symphony
  d. Singspiel  e. Lied  f. cantata

Part II is a listening identification section consisting of several excerpts. Some of these are taken from the standard concert repertory. You will not be asked to distinguish Haydn from early Beethoven or Ravel from Debussy, for example, but will be asked to suggest a possible composer and an approximate year of composition for each excerpt.
Part III of the exam includes excerpts for score analysis. For each you must estimate the date of composition and suggest a possible composer. More importantly, you must give reasons for your choices by commenting on the score and citing features which make your choice a logical one. Features of style might include such aspects as atonality, Sprechstimme, symmetrical phrase lengths, bitextuality, stretto, polymeter, chromaticism, modality, homophony, imitative counterpoint, thematic development, ostinato rhythm, whole-tone scales, word-painting, etc.


Among anthologies of music recommended for score study are Mark Evan Bonds, Anthology of Scores to A History of Music in Western Culture. 2 vols. (Prentice Hall, 2003); Claude Palisca, Norton Anthology of Western Music, 4th ed. 2 vols. (Norton, 2001) [this is designed to accompany Donald Grout, A History Of Western Music, 6th ed. (Norton, 2001)], and Sarah Fuller, The European Musical Heritage 800-1750 (Knopf, 1987). All of these contain scores, translations, commentary, and stylistic analysis. Companion sets of recordings are also available for each.

Given below in random order is a highly selective list of musical topics appropriate for review. This is not a comprehensive list of what will be on the exam.

| program vs. absolute music
| Aleatoric music
| Schubert and the Lied
| Nationalism in music
| musical traits associated with impressionism
| Mendelssohn revival of J. S. Bach
| Gregorian chant
| Mass Ordinary
| Guido d'Arezzo
| Reformation
| chorale
| continuo practice
| Notre Dame de Paris
| Trecento
| mensuration canon
| Lorenzo da Ponte
| Liber Usualis
| stile brisé
| The Beggar's Opera
| A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke
| Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen
| Der Ring des Nibelungen
| Eroica
| Das Lied von der Erde
| New Viennese School
| prepared piano
| character piece

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