

Music
2006-2007 “One Question” Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Answer

Introduction:

In assessing our music student’s ability in the formal analysis of music, we have focused on the four course sequence of Musicianship(I-IV). The subjects for this study are the present sophomore class, those students who have just completed the sequence. The assessment begins with a review of their grades in all four courses and seeks to illuminate trends and/or groups of outcomes. Using this information, we next focused on the characteristics of four specific students drawn from representative groups of differing achievement. Thus, we have endeavored to relate generalized conclusions to actual cases.

Course Description:

Musicianship is a challenging core course subject that is actually a combination of different, but highly related, disciplines, requiring a mixture of different aptitudes to master. Its goals are to enable the student to develop compositional skills and an understanding of the structure and form of music from all historical musical periods. Its components are written, analytical, sight singing, and aural dictation (“ear training”) skills.

In the area of **written skills**, the student learns numerous rules which must be painstakingly applied to gradually advancing exercises in counterpoint and, to a more advanced degree in undergraduate studies, harmony (mostly via four-part, chorale style, exercises and short original compositions).

Analysis involves studying full scores or brief excerpts of scores by master composers from all eras and style periods with the goal of understanding phrase structure, overall form, and the ways in which the rules of counterpoint and harmony the student is learning is applied by these masters to their own music.

Sight singing involves the gradual process of being able to sing melodic lines of increasing difficulty at sight without the aid of a musical instrument (similar to knowing the sounds of words in reading without having to have someone sound them out for you). This enables a student to compose or study a piece of music more quickly and efficiently than if s/he had to sound everything out on an instrument.

Aural dictation involves writing down from hearing played by the instructor in the form of melodies, rhythmic exercises, harmonic progressions, and the like, in gradually increasing difficulty. Like sight singing, this speeds up the process of envisioning phrasing, melody, harmony, and form as it would appear on a score when music is heard rather than seen in score (similar to our being able to write down sentences when someone gives us verbal information).

The level of difficulty increases from one semester to the next as the skills demands and number of compositional rules accumulate and grow more complex. In many ways, Musicianship resembles an ongoing class from elementary through advanced geometry in which earlier basic

propositions cannot be forgotten while new ones are gradually built on all the previous ones. To succeed in either subject a student must be highly consistent in his/her work habits and not be adverse to steady daily drill, re-memorization of vital rules, and persistent and conscientious application of those rules to practical problems (in the case of Musicianship, the “problems” would be composition and analysis assignments). In most schools the course extends over four semesters and meets for five hours across the week, with three hours given to compositional and analytical practices and two to sight singing and aural dictation. At TCNJ there are four semesters, but, unfortunately, only four contact hours per week. This is modestly manageable but does seriously shorten the amount of time for much needed drill and review in the class, making it more difficult for students of moderate-to-low work habits and innate perception.

In music schools everywhere, many students have trouble with one facet or the other of this subject (as many do in other similarly technical subjects like math, language, and certain sciences). The general class average tends to be ca. 85.

Grade Data:

The following table is an account of grade averages and percentages of Musicianship students from roughly fall 2005 to spring 2007.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
A- TO A RANGE	20	12	16	7	55	47.3
B- TO B+ RANGE	5	12	7	15	39	33.54
C- TO C+ RANGE	3	7	6	4	20	17.2
D RANGE	0	0	0	1	1	0.86
F RANGE	0	0	1	1	2	1.72
TOTAL NO. OF STUDENTS	28	31	30	28	117	

Keep in mind the variable number of students in each level of Musicianship (due to various circumstances that sometimes involve advanced placement, skipped semesters, schedule irregularities due to transfers from other colleges, etc.) and that the nearly 50 percent of total A’s for all four semesters is due in part to the fact that Musicianship 1 is considerably easier than later levels and gives a somewhat false impression of total success in the final total and percentage of A’s. In general, there are more grades falling in the B- to B+ range than higher or lower, with a smattering of A’s and C’s on either side. This is particularly true of Musicianship 3, which, in this sampling, shows 16 A’s and only 7 B’s. Generally, the reverse tends to be the case.

General Description of Student Achievement:

The A student is usually one who really enjoys the subject and has considerable aptitude for the various differing skills involved (written/analytical, sight singing, aural dictation). S/he will tend to be well organized and tackle his/her weak areas on a daily basis. This student will also be on time with all written and aural weekly assignments (falling behind in this subject is deadly!) and will put in extra artistic effort on compositional assignments. It should also be mentioned that this kind of student often received good training in the subject during high school (often via AP

Music Theory courses). Some of these students earn advanced placement into the Musicianship program upon entering the College.

The B student may possess all the virtues of the A student, but have to struggle more with one or the other area of this multi-varied and highly demanding subject. For example, s/he may do well in written skills but not as well in sight singing and poorly in aural dictation (not an unusual pattern); or homework in these areas may be highly acceptable but test performance may not be as good. To counter this tendency, the B student will often follow the instructor's advice to get outside help, either from a tutor (TCNJ supplies one through the Tutorial Office) or the instructor during office hours. Nonetheless, the B student works at it to the best of his/her ability and leaves the subject with generally good, if somewhat limited, skills that can grow and improve throughout his/her professional career.

The C student is less diligent and organized than those above, and often misses assignments, or is late with them, and falls quickly behind in class. S/he often tries to find "shortcuts" around learning the rules of composition and analysis and avoids sight singing and aural dictation practices demanded in the syllabus. There is the hope of "beating the system" which invariably fails. His/her record of absences and lack of punctuality in getting to class meetings on time is often poor, if not very bad. In other cases s/he might give considerable effort to the work at hand but simply does not display the aptitudes or general musical or organizational skills needed to excel in the subject. Such a student should repeat the subject to gain better mastery before moving on to the next level of Musicianship. S/he should also seek outside tutorial help early in the course (though C students unfortunately tend not to do this as frequently as do B students).

The D student possesses the same problems as the C student, but to a greater degree. This is the student who tends to have trouble "getting it together" in all his/her subjects in general. Students receiving D's in any subject in the Music Major are required to repeat the course.

The F student is similar to the D student, but often displays a cavalier attitude of not caring. Missed assignments, tests, and appearances in class typify this student, who usually is performing in the same manner in all his/her other classes. S/he will usually have a poor or unacceptable GPA.

Student Profiles:

Below are profiles of actual TCNJ Musicianship students (provided names are fictional).

Good to High Quality Students (A and B range):

James excelled in AP Music Theory during his high school years, receiving a score of 5 (the highest possible score). The TCNJ Music Department automatically places such students into Musicianship 3, as do many other colleges; and so it was with James. His attendance was unbroken, all assignments were done on time and showed excellent artistry as well as technical competency, and he prepared thoroughly for all written and aural skills tests. He final grades were A in both Musicianship 3 and 4. This is an example of not only a talented and hard working student, but one of high responsibility and maturity. In addition, he is not a pianist, but

rather a “single-line” instrumental major, in this case a violinist. Vocalists, percussionists, and single-line instrumental majors tend to find theory more difficult than keyboard majors since the latter have wider, more “harmonic” reading abilities of multi-staff music than do the others, thus giving them an edge in harmonic composition and analysis of musical scores.

Jane was more of an average student with only a moderate work ethic. She was intelligent and generally well organized, however, with a good attendance record. She was on time with all assignments and did not miss tests. She earned an A in Musicianship 1, which is not normally too difficult to do; but her grade slipped to B in Musicianship 2 and 3, owing to her obvious lack of willingness to learn the increasing number of all-important rules of compositional writing (she kept up a reasonably good pace in her aural skills). The instructor reminded her of this problem at her Sophomore Review. She took heed of this advice and advanced to an A for Musicianship 4. Jane is an example of a student who is reasonably responsible, but needs a push in the right direction at some point in her Musicianship training. She will likely continue to view her Musicianship training in a positive light and put it to good use in her career.

Students of Concern (C to D range):

Mark was a C student from the start. He was intelligent, attended class fairly frequently, and even contributed well to class discussions, seeming to understand what was taught. His main difficulty was in doing assignments on a regular basis. He often handed them in weeks later. They were often done in obvious haste with multiple mistakes in the application of written rules to composition homework and, in the case of submitted aural dictation homework, many more mistakes. This lack of regular self-application to homework led to poor performance on all aural and written tests. Since each consecutive level of Musicianship is increasingly challenging and predicated on the knowledge, rules, and skills gained in the previous level, it is likely that the student will continue to function at a mediocre-to-poor level. In the case of Mark, this caught up with him in Musicianship 4 when a failing score on the final exam. resulted in a D for the semester. He will therefore be required to repeat the course since one must earn a C- or higher to pass any Music course. Somewhat to his credit, he retook Musicianship 2, in which he initially earned a C, and brought it up to B- (not much of an improvement). His grade unfortunately slipped back to a C in Musicianship 3, however, thus not building the needed foundation to succeed in Musicianship 4.

Martha had a more spotted grade record: C- in Musicianship 1, A- in Musicianship 2, C in Musicianship 3, and F in Musicianship 4. She was a gifted vocalist who nevertheless had trouble reading music fluently and thus was very slow in understanding and mastering Musicianship. She was easily discouraged by this lack of ability and often did not do the homework or seek tutorial help (though she curiously spurred ahead in Musicianship 2 before falling back again in the consequent semesters). She also had some health and other personal issues which always easily upset the balance in a tricky subject like Musicianship. This kind of student needs to “grab the bull by the horns” and give copious amounts of time to the subject. She also needs to seek tutorial help immediately and continue with it throughout the semester. Unfortunately, students of this sort often do just the opposite, and give up too easily.

Conclusions:

In addressing the question of whether or not our students “possess sufficient tools to formally analyze the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and structural components of the music of our culture,” we offer the following conclusions:

In theory, our students do in fact meet our expectations in achievement in music analysis; a reasonable majority earn grades in the A-B range. We find that diligence in completing assignments as well as regular preparation generally leads to good results. In some cases this diligence extends to occasionally seeking extra help in a timely fashion (in the form of tutoring or meeting with the professor). For those students that do not meet our expectations, as evidenced by C-D grades, we find that one of the major culprits is simply a lack of diligence. However, it should be noted that the cumulative nature of the course sequence places a high penalty on a temporary lack of diligence. A student can quickly find themselves “in a hole,” one that can be difficult to get out of. The last type of student is one that is simply challenged by the material. For these students, the pace of the course can be viewed as relentless. Although this is a small percentage of the student population overall, it behooves us to understand what programmatic and/or systemic factors may contribute to their difficulties.

One possible factor may be found in the fact that similar courses at most other institutions meet for five hours per week as opposed to four at TCNJ. Indeed, in light of the recent curricular transformation at the College, all of the ramifications concerning balance of course load and content are not yet fully understood. Another factor that presents itself is the availability of tutoring. Here it should be noted that this past year the College Tutorial Center was forced, in part through budget cuts, to reduce the number of available Musicianship tutors from three to one.