Graduate Music Theory Review: An On-Line Solution

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Introduction

Music students who wish to pursue graduate degrees are often required to take a music theory diagnostic examination as part of the admission process. At Appalachian State University (Boone, NC), the exam assesses an array of undergraduate topics and skills ranging from music fundamentals to form and analysis and twentieth-century techniques. The exam assesses written and analytical skills, not aural skills.[1] Students must attain a minimum score of 70% on the exam and complete all graduate coursework (including a required music theory course) in order to sit for the requisite comprehensive written[2] and oral examinations at the end of the program of study. The current music theory diagnostic examination was adopted in 2010, and the pass rate for prospective graduate students from that time until the present is approximately 70%.[3]

In past years, students who did not attain the minimum score on the music theory diagnostic examination had three options: (1) audit undergraduate theory courses, (2)

[1] A separate aural skills diagnostic examination is administered. On-line resources exist for the remediation of aural skills deficiencies. At this time, students are required to pursue aural skills remediation independently.

[2] Comprehensive examinations are required of all music graduate students. The review course helps students address undergraduate deficiencies before enrolling in a required graduate course in music theory. Content of the graduate music theory course is included in the comprehensive examination.

[3] In 2010, the test was evaluated and student responses from each question were entered into SPSS (a software package for statistical analysis). Those questions that students missed most often were carefully examined for clarity and revised when appropriate.

independently pursue a self-directed course of remediation, or (3) retake the diagnostic examination without remediation. For many students, none of these options proved effective. Students had isolated areas of weakness and required remediation in those areas only; thus, auditing a semester-long undergraduate course to remediate deficiencies on selected and varied topics was inefficient. Independently pursuing a self-directed course of remediation demands a mature and self-directed student; while many students began with the best of intentions, their progress was delayed by pressing priorities. Some students felt left to their own devices without direction, and that led to uneven results and frustration. A separate course for graduate students in the traditional lecture format was not feasible due to the diverse nature of their deficiencies and limited faculty resources. The solution was the development of a fully on-line Graduate Music Theory Review course delivered via a course management system.

The Graduate Music Theory Review Course

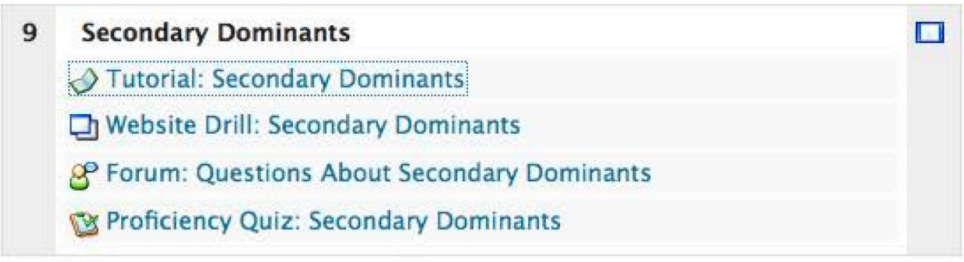
The Graduate Music Theory Review course offers the student a flexible, practical, academically sound, and convenient path to remediation. The course is composed of 18 units that correspond to the sections of the diagnostic examination: Rhythm and Meter; Pitch and Octave Designation; Scales and Modes; Intervals; Triads and Seventh Chords; Chord Function, Cadences, and Harmonic Progression; Voice-Leading; Non-Chord Tones; Secondary Dominants; Borrowed Chords and the Neapolitan; Augmented-Sixth Chords; Modulation; Instrumental Transposition and the Overtone Series; Phrase and Period Structure; Small Forms — Binary, Ternary, Theme and Variations; Large Forms — Sonata, Rondo, Sonata-Rondo; Fugue; and Twentieth-Century Harmonic Resources. The graduate

coordinator examines the student's performance on the diagnostic examination, discusses deficiencies with the student, and directs the student to demonstrate proficiency on designated units via the Graduate Music Theory Review course. The student is required to register for the course and works within the required units (or others if desired) at his/her own pace. The course is offered for two semester-hours credit. (A typical graduate seminar course is offered for three semester-hours credit at Appalachian.) Students are required to pay for the additional credit hours. The hours do not count toward the graduate degree as elective credit or theory credit. Once the student has successfully completed the proficiency quizzes in the designated units, the instructor reports the student's success to the graduate coordinator. A student who failed the initial diagnostic exam may not retake it until he or she has demonstrated proficiency with each assigned section of the online class.

Unit Structure

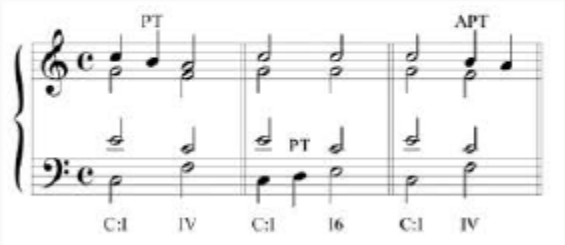
Each unit is composed of four sections: (1) a tutorial that offers a succinct review of the topic, (2) a drill section in the form of links to external websites or worksheets, (3) a forum for communication concerning the unit's content, and (4) a proficiency quiz on the unit's content. (Example 1)

Example 1: Unit Structure



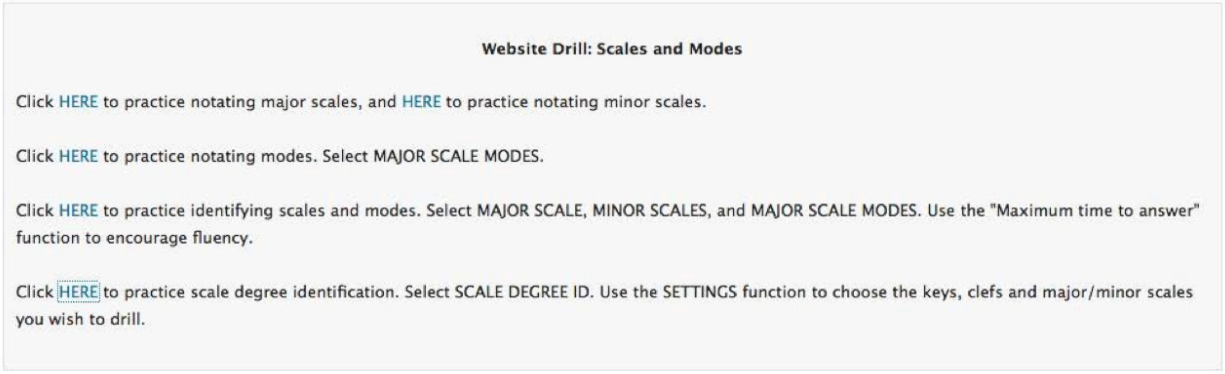
Tutorials offer a brief and basic review of the unit content. They do not provide comprehensive discussions of the topic as one might find in a conventional text; they are designed for the graduate student who has covered the subject matter previously but needs review. They include graphics and audio links as appropriate. (Example 2) Students are instructed to review the tutorial carefully and thoroughly before attempting the website or worksheet drills.

Example 2: Tutorial Excerpt

The **Passing Tone** (PT) is approached by step and left by step *in the same direction*, filling in the space of a melodic third. Passing tones most often appear in unaccented positions (UPT): i.e., between beats or on weak beats. They also may occur in accented positions (APT).

In units that address music fundamentals, links to external websites are provided for individual drill (e.g., Teoria.Com, SonicFit.Com, MusicTheory.Net, on-line resources for "Ear Training: A Technique for Listening," Benward and Kolosick). The websites allow the

student to customize the drill content, focus on specific deficiencies, and receive immediate assessment. (Example 3) Many of the websites allow the student to control the response time, thereby encouraging speed and fluency.

Example 3: Sample Drill Page



Website Drill: Scales and Modes

Click HERE to practice notating major scales, and HERE to practice notating minor scales.

Click HERE to practice notating modes. Select MAJOR SCALE MODES.

Click HERE to practice identifying scales and modes. Select MAJOR SCALE, MINOR SCALES, and MAJOR SCALE MODES. Use the "Maximum time to answer" function to encourage fluency.

Click HERE to practice scale degree identification. Select SCALE DEGREE ID. Use the SETTINGS function to choose the keys, clefs and major/minor scales you wish to drill.

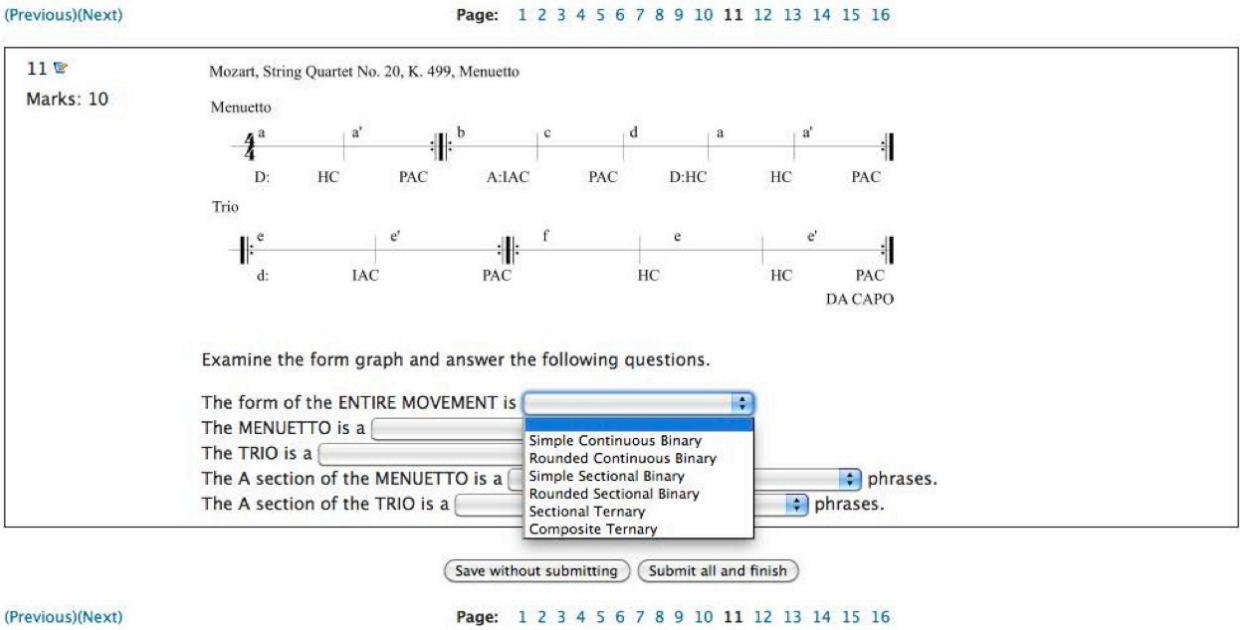
Website drills are not appropriate for all units, especially those that address more subjective and complex topics (e.g., Phrase and Period Structure, Large Forms). In these units, musical scores and worksheets are provided in PDF format. Upon completion of the worksheet, the student may compare his/her work to the completed worksheet that is provided for assessment.

Each unit includes a forum that features email syndication. Students may subscribe to any forum in the class. If a student posts a question in a unit's forum, the instructor and all students registered for that forum receive an email concerning the post. The instructor's

response is emailed to all students registered for that particular forum. The forum provides an efficient and effective mode of communication between the instructor and those students who have questions concerning a specific topic as well as those who are in the process of investigating the same topic.

Each unit concludes with a proficiency quiz. The quizzes are constructed and completed within the Moodle course management system. The student may take any proficiency quiz as many times as necessary to reach 90% accuracy, the minimum score to demonstrate proficiency. Quizzes are built from a bank of questions, so each individual student attempt is unique. The number of questions in each question bank varies from unit to unit. For example, there are 36 unique questions concerning the identification of augmented-sixth chords and 12 concerning the recognition of binary/ternary form. Question formats are True/False, Multiple Choice, Matching, and Cloze (embedded answers). (Example 4)

Example 4: Sample Quiz Question



While the software allows the instructor to display correct answers immediately following each response or upon completion of the quiz, we do not allow that option in order to limit the possibility that students will collect the correct answers after repeated attempts. Links to streaming audio are provided where appropriate. Time limits are established for each quiz to encourage fluency with the content.

The more subjective and complex topics require a different approach to the proficiency quiz. For example, in the Large Forms unit, the student creates an analysis of an assigned composition and then responds to questions related to that analysis via the proficiency quiz.

Challenges and Benefits

There are challenges that remain to be addressed. Universal limitations exist in any on-line format. More subjective and advanced topics deserve more communication between the instructor and the student. Given the limitations of on-line examinations, proficiency with these topics is not best assessed in an on-line format. In fact, the remediation of complex skill-based activities (e.g., composing counterpoint, realizing figured-bass) is beyond the scope of this course.

Students are given the principal responsibility for completing the coursework and demonstrating proficiency. While the population for this course is graduate students, accepting that responsibility and avoiding procrastination still can be a problem. To address this problem, the instructor is in regular contact with students enrolled in the course, checking their on-line activity reports, noting their progress, and offering assistance.

Security is a concern, given that the student could have another person take the proficiency quizzes. We limit that potentiality by requiring the student to retake the diagnostic examination on-site after demonstrating proficiency via the on-line course.

Finally, building a course of this size and scope demands a significant amount of faculty time and effort. The author built this graduate music theory review course over the course of four months. The work was very time intensive, but less than it would be for most faculty

because the author, during the last 15 years, had developed on-line materials for the complete undergraduate music theory sequence. Those materials served as the foundation of this course. Maintaining the course as software evolves and new versions are released will also be time consuming. The author received no load credit for the development of the course. He receives two credit hours teaching load each time the course is offered.

The Graduate Music Theory Review course, presented in a fully on-line environment, has many benefits for the student and the institution. The student has access to an organized, flexible, academically sound, and efficient method to remediate fundamental deficiencies that are identified via the diagnostic examination. The course is available at any location in the world where an Internet connection is available. The student may work at his/her own pace, focusing on areas of deficiency, visiting websites for drills, and completing on-line quizzes to demonstrate proficiency. The unit forums provide a convenient and effective mode of communication between the instructor and the student. The impact on faculty teaching loads is minimal with faculty involvement essentially limited to communication with the student via the forums.

The benefits of the on-line course outweigh the challenges. We are optimistic that students who take full advantage of the Graduate Music Theory Review course will achieve a significantly higher pass rate on their second attempt of the diagnostic examination.