
FINE-TUNING THE EVALUATION PROCEDURE:

R. Wayne Gibson,
Chair, Department of Music
and Performing Arts

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The purpose of music is to win.” This slogan emblazoned on tee shirts and bumper stickers reveals just how misguided performance competitions can get and sends us searching for a truer purpose. Longing for the elusive axiomatic quip, we end up simply being impressed by the complexity of the search. Similarly, one approaches the assessment of curriculum with a righteous urgency tempered by a pervading reverence for the scope of the challenge.

The following is a description of the assessment activity in place for the Bachelor of Music in Performance, the newest program in our department. (Of course, many of the assessment measures apply to other music programs as well.) The skills and bodies of knowledge which we want performance majors to master are: ear-training skills, keyboard skills, music history/literature competency, analytical skills, writing/research skills (these include not only written expression and effective use of the library, but also draw upon analytical skills and knowledge of music history and literature) and, finally, performance skills.

The first two competency areas, ear-training and keyboard skills, are evaluated through proficiency examinations administered by appropriate faculty committees. These exams must be passed prior to the student's admission to senior-level applied music. (Even earlier satisfaction of these proficiencies

is encouraged since these are not “exit” skills, but, rather, functional skills considered vital to successful handling of upper-division course work.)

The ear-training proficiency is something of a summary check of the first two years' work in theory classes. It determines, for example, that students can read and sing at sight simple melodic and rhythmic patterns and can hear melodies, rhythmic patterns and chord progressions, etc. accurately enough to write them down afterwards. Unless aural acuity and tonal memory can be developed at least to this level by the junior year, pursuit of a musical career seems ill-advised.

Functional piano skills are considered essential for all musicians (not just pianists), and a keyboard proficiency exam is administered to all music majors. It measures rudimentary ability to sight read, transpose and to execute scales and chord progressions, etc. at the keyboard, and it also requires an artistically acceptable performance of a composition selected from a list of easy keyboard literature. In addition, it measures the ability to play simple melodies with improvised accompaniments and to play songs like the national anthem and “America” in several keys. Records of students' progress toward completion of the ear-training and keyboard proficiencies are kept in advisement folders.

Knowledge of music history and literature, proficiency in musical analysis, competency in writing about music, and skill in use of the library are scrutinized in a senior course entitled “Research for Senior Recital.” This is an independent study directed by a music history faculty member. The literature under investigation is, as the course title implies, that which will be per-



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formed on the senior recital, which by requirement must cover a minimum of four different style periods (and, for singers, at least four languages). Anywhere from five to 10 composers are typically included. The course involves comparing scholarly and practical editions of scores; reading pertinent portions of the composers' published correspondence; surveying the appropriate secondary sources and compiling an annotated bibliography on each composer; assessing the composers' output and placing the recital literature within the context of the total repertoire; critical listening to professional recordings; and, for singers, translating texts of foreign-language songs and arias as well as investigating the texts, including the career and works of each poet, as well as his/her relationship to the composer who set the poems to music.

The main product of this course is the six to eight pages of program notes printed as part of the Senior Recital Program.

Also submitted as a permanent part of the student's file are photocopies of his/her note cards and research journal. It is assumed that for this two-hour course the student will spend about 60 hours in the library and meet weekly with the professor.

By far the most thorough and successful assessment program we have is in the area of applied music. First, students are auditioned by a faculty committee prior to or during their first quarter to formally accept them into the department and the performance degree program. Then, at the end of each quarter the student performs for all of the faculty in his/her area of concentration (piano, voice) and receives a grade as well as written com-

ments from each faculty member. After a minimum of three quarters of applied study at a given level, the student may petition this faculty jury for permission to advance to the next level of study (freshman to sophomore, etc.). Advancement is by no means automatic.

Further, special "permission" juries are convened to hear and consider approval of the student's junior and (a year later) senior recitals. These juries take place a full month prior to the projected recital date. Because of a conservative advancement policy at the lower levels, flat denials by the junior or senior-recital permission jury are rare. More common are final suggestions regarding style, stage presence, diction, etc., along with expressions of encouragement as the student approaches the final polishing stages of the performance.

Finally, the acceptability of the recital itself is determined by a faculty committee. Most often this is a time for congratulations and reinforcement from the faculty, and—at the senior recital, which is considered a professional debut—for welcoming the student into the profession.

Quarterly jury sheets along with signed recital permission sheets and recital approval sheets accompanied by copies of the programs become part of the student's permanent file. These performances are video-taped as well.

Assessment activities are being fine-tuned on a quarterly basis, and we are more and more confident that our graduates read music fluently, hear music accurately, realize music at the keyboard competently, analyze music coherently, write about music meaningfully and, most importantly, perform music artistically. ●

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