

# Wheaton Conservatory of Music

## MUSIC THEORY & AURAL SKILLS FAQ

### *What am I going to be learning in my music theory courses?*

Simply put, music theory is the study of how music works. The core music theory sequence is designed to give you the tools you need not only to perform music well, but also to understand what music *means* and why it sounds the way that it does. During the first semester (MUTC 151 – Music Theory I), you will learn about music fundamentals such as pitch notation, rhythm, meter, intervals, scales, key signatures, and chords, as well as more advanced topics such as tonal harmony, voice leading, melodic organization, and tuning theory. In Music Theory II (MUTC 171), you will move on to an exploration of chromatic harmony and form, and in Music Theory III (MUTC 251), you will study the organization of twentieth-century music. If you are required to take another semester of theory for your degree program, you will have a choice as to which topic to study, since the fourth required semester of the sequence is a music theory elective (see below for more details).

### *What am I going to be learning in my aural skills courses?*

Of all the courses that you will be taking at the Conservatory, aural skills is perhaps the most mysterious. As you will find, aural skills classes are broken down into two distinct, though interrelated, components: sight singing and ear training. Sight singing is exactly what it sounds like – singing music at sight – and is used to teach you how to hear notated music in your mind’s “ear,” as well as strengthen your command of pitch and rhythm. Typical singing assignments include performing various scales and arpeggio patterns, singing short to moderate length melodies and rhythmic exercises, and improvising short melodies and/or rhythmic patterns based on specific instructions. Ear training is more or less the opposite of sight singing, since it involves interpreting or analyzing something that you hear. The activity most often associated with ear training is music dictation, which requires that you write out some portion of music while or after it is played for you. As you will discover, though, ear training activities can actually take a variety of forms, including verbal or physical responses, multiple choice questions, short answer questions, and numerous types of partial or full musical dictation. At this point I suspect that you might be thinking to yourself, “Well, that’s all very nice, but what on earth is the use of all this? What exactly is this random-sounding conglomeration of activities supposed to teach me?” Although it may at first seem like sight singing and ear training are only loosely-connected and marginally useful skills to develop (unless you are a vocal performance major or plan on making a living as a transcriber), they are actually closely related means to a very important and practical end: the ability to use your “inner ear” in analyzing music, whether it is heard or simply written on a page. The ultimate goal of the aural skills sequence is to teach you how to *understand* what you hear and to *hear* what you see in notated music, and sight singing and ear training are the methods by which this goal is achieved.

### *What if I have already taken some music theory courses and/or an AP music theory exam? Can I test out of some of the required theory and/or aural skills courses?*

For the most part, we do not allow incoming freshman to test out of the required theory courses. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, it has been our experience that the vast majority of incoming freshman, including those who have already studied music theory or aural skills in high school, have not yet developed the fluency (that is to say, the speed or accuracy) required to succeed in our higher-level music theory courses. The other reason for our current policy is that Music Theory I is a 3 credit-hour

course and therefore covers a large amount of material in a single semester. Even if you already have your music fundamentals down cold, you will probably still have a lot of new material to learn before you are ready for Theory II. Having said all of this, we do sometimes make exceptions to the policy. If you scored a 4 or higher on either of the sections of the AP music theory exam or are a transfer student with prior college-level music theory or aural skills experience, it may be possible to test out of one or more of the required courses. In order to determine whether or not you qualify, you will need to meet privately with a member of the theory faculty in order to discuss your situation and take a suitable placement exam. If you meet the criteria stated above and feel that you are qualified to bypass one or more of the required music theory and/or aural skills classes, please contact Professor David M. Gordon (David.M.Gordon@wheaton.edu) to arrange a meeting and test time.

### *What if I have little or no prior experience in music theory or aural skills? Will I fall behind? Is there some way to prepare for these courses over the summer?*

Technically, no experience with music theory or aural skills is required prior to taking Music Theory I and Aural Skills I. However, if you feel that you are especially weak in these areas (especially theory) and would like to do a bit of preparation before the semester begins, your best bet is to purchase the textbooks in advance and start working through the first few chapters. The required materials are as follows:

#### **Music Theory I**

Henry, Earl and Michael Rogers. *Tonality and Design in Music Theory*. Vol. 1. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005. Includes a workbook and CD set.

Baker, Theodore, ed. *Schirmer Pronouncing Pocket Manual of Musical Terms*. 5th ed. New York: Schirmer, 1995.

#### **Aural Skills I**

Berkowitz, Sol, Gabriel Fontrier, and Leo Kraft. *A New Approach to Sight Singing*. 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Kazez, Daniel. *Rhythm Reading: Elementary through Advanced Training*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

### *What does MUTC stand for?*

Music Theory and Composition.

If you have more specific questions or concerns about your abilities or level of experience, you are always welcome to contact one of the following members of the music theory faculty:

Professor David M. Gordon – David.M.Gordon@wheaton.edu  
Dr. Howard Whitaker – Howard.Whitaker@wheaton.edu