



Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP[®] Music Theory Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] Music Theory were written by the Chief Reader, Jo Anne F. Caputo of the Cleveland Institute of Music in Ohio. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop, to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test various skills involved in single-line melodic dictation. This melody in E-flat major featured a pleasant contour, with no intervals larger than a major third. The motion of the entire second half of the melody was conjunct, perhaps contributing to the success that many students had on this portion of the melody. It featured familiar diatonic patterns that would help students remember and analyze the melody (e.g., arpeggiated tonic triad at the beginning, descending scalar passage in the sixth measure, do-ti-do at cadence, familiar rhythmic patterns).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.01 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included writing a whole-note or a half-note E-flat in the last measure; scalar rather than triadic ascent in the first measure; and problems with the dotted-quarter/eighth rhythm. The fourth and fifth measures seemed to be particularly problematic. Some students were careless with their notation, filling in much of the correct answer but losing credit because of missing stems, dots, and the like. A number of students notated this melody in common time.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Teachers should emphasize aural skills work in the AP Music Theory course. Readers encourage teachers to adopt the following approaches:

- Keep the written theory work linked at all times to dictation and sight-singing activities.
- Stress developing better notational skills (e.g., stems, noteheads, flags).
- Remind students to practice regularly and often in a variety of keys, meters, modes, clefs, and, if possible, using performances on different instruments.
- Give students practice dictation using paper with predetermined bar lines like those used on the exam, rather than always allowing them to place their own bar lines as they write.
- Emphasize scalar versus triadic patterns.
- Have students practice longer melodies (e.g., eight measures instead of only four).
- Emphasize constantly the development of strategies for doing ear training. Students should be able to notate familiar tunes from their internal memories.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to test the ability to hear and transcribe melodic dictation, and to hear compound meter, minor mode, and the raised fourth scale degree.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.45 out of a possible 9 points. The total mean score for melodic dictation (questions 1 and 2) was 6.46 out of a possible 18 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers reported that students made the following errors repeatedly: failing to raise the leading tone; not hearing the first leap of the fifth; not hearing “re-sol-do” at the end; and missing accidentals in general.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Teachers should emphasize the following with students:

- Practice compound meter and its correct notation.
- Think about the key signature before beginning the transcription.

- Listen for patterns of notes instead of note-to-note.
- Cancel accidentals when appropriate.
- Use the proper choice of accidental in accord with melodic direction.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to hear outer voices, diatonic harmonic functions, inversions of triads and dominant seventh chords, and cadences. In addition, it tested students on their ability to differentiate between the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass lines and to discriminate between the IV and ii⁶ predominant harmonies.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 12.3 out of a possible 24 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included incorrect or omitted figured bass numbers; incorrect or incorrectly notated bass lines; incorrect Roman numerals; correct cadence numerals (V-I) but incorrect supporting bass notes; correct hearing of the I and V chords in root position but failure to recognize them in inversions; failure to recognize the difference between ii and IV or V 4/3 and ii; failure to hear inverted chords or secondary harmonies; and failure to recognize that the bass line and the Roman numerals should agree.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Teachers should help students to develop good manuscript skills; often notes in students' exam responses were difficult to impossible to read.
- Teachers should spend more time on inversions.
- They should also drill students over and over on functional diatonic chords in a key and basic chord progressions (idiomatic progressions) until students can easily identify them in chordal passages.
- Most importantly, teachers should devote more class time to ear training—it must not be shortchanged!

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to measure the degree to which students could hear and transcribe soprano and bass lines; recognize chromatic pitches; distinguish the leading tone from the subtonic; recognize the Picardy third; recognize secondary functions; distinguish chord qualities; recognize melodic clues to harmony; hear and label the cadential six-four; and differentiate between bass and soprano voices.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 9.82 out of a possible 24 points. The total mean score for harmonic dictation (questions 3 and 4) was 22.12 out of a possible 48 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers noted the following common errors: missing accidentals; mislabeled secondary dominants; the final cadence incorrectly labeled as a deceptive cadence; the last chord labeled as a major III chord; writing the initial melodic gesture as G-A-Bb-Cb or G-A-Bb-C#, and writing C in place of B-natural, causing the entire remainder of the line to be written a step higher than the actual melody.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Teachers should remind their students to do the following:

- Raise the leading tone in minor melodies and progressions.
- Avoid iii (mediant) chords.
- Understand which chords are likely to appear and which are not.
- Understand scale degree function.
- Expect normative gestures on the exam.
- Practice hearing the bass and melodic lines (some students may have a particular need for extra practice with one or the other).
- Compare the intervallic relationship between lines (e.g., parallel sevenths are highly unlikely).
- Hear and read music in “chunks.”

Readers noted that teachers should be applauded for their students' general strong showing at cadences on this question. Teachers should continue their effective instruction of this concept.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to determine if the student could combine vertical and linear hearing and thinking; work with root position and inverted chords; deal with the leading tone in minor; understand figured bass symbols; write good outer voice counterpoint; deal with the cadential six-four chord; understand correct spacing for the top three voices; understand harmonic function; and understand the meaning of Roman numerals.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 16.47 out of a possible 25 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included not raising the leading tone; omitting sevenths on seventh chords; using poor spacing between the upper three voices; using parallel octaves; missing inversions; misspelling chords; thinking in the wrong key; placing the accidental on the wrong side of the note; using poor calligraphy; adding non-chord tones that caused other voice-leading errors; creating a Picardy third at the end when it was not requested; and using incomplete triads.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Readers felt that they saw good overall preparation for this question. Specific issues that need greater attention include:

- proper doubling in second inversion triads, which would help prevent other problems;
- proper resolution of the tritone;
- a careful approach to second inversion triads;
- step-wise voice leading and the use of common tones;
- awareness of common harmonic idioms;
- the case of Roman numerals;
- complete triads, except possibly at the end;
- the need for double stems for notes shared by two voices;
- inclusion of accidents when verbally spelling chords;
- proper handling of the leading tone in minor; and
- care in writing a dominant seventh chord (not a leading tone seventh chord).

Readers also saw a need for more accurate manuscript from students and advise them to use sharp pencils.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for the student to demonstrate the ability to spell a secondary dominant; resolve the seventh of a seventh chord; realize Roman numerals and figures; use proper voice-leading principles; and recognize and write a deceptive cadence.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 8.46 out of a possible 18 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Primary errors included misspelling the secondary dominant and losing 5 points; omitting the sharp in the spelling of the secondary dominant (thereby losing 5 points); not understanding the 8–7 figure and not being able to realize that chord; using parallel fifths by contrary motion between the given chord and the IV; using parallel octaves between the IV and the I6; exhibiting dyslexic reading of the final Roman numeral (e.g., IV instead of vi); failing to resolve the seventh of the chord; preparing the seventh in the secondary dominant; using improper spacing; writing chords without thirds; failing to resolve the leading tone up if it was in the soprano; exhibiting stem direction confusion (including not knowing how to put two stems on one note); exhibiting rhythmic problems in the second measure regarding the V 8–7; using nonharmonic tones incorrectly; using the wrong bass note; and adding the seventh to chords that should not have one.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Teachers may be putting off the teaching of secondary dominants for too long; students need to be given more time to digest this information.
- Teachers should emphasize that chromatic harmony requires accidentals most of the time.
- Given the rhythmic problems in the last measure, it is advisable to discuss rhythmic issues throughout the course.
- Teachers are encouraged to give more attention to students' writing the deceptive cadence. They should also teach students to look closely at their horizontal lines and try to sing them.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' understanding of harmonic function, cadential norms, relationships between soprano and bass voices, modulation and/or tonicization, and overall synthesis.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.45 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers reported the following common errors: failing to modulate or tonicize the key of C; exhibiting voice-leading errors (e.g., parallels, improper treatment of the leading tone); misappropriating the B-natural by analyzing it as a subdominant in F; writing exotic instead of normative cadences; and embellishing excessively.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Remind students to avoid:

- all seventh chords except for the dominant seventh and perhaps the supertonic seventh;
- using all six-four chords except for the cadential six-four; and
- random embellishments.

Teach students to:

- recognize cadential and harmonic patterns;
- master the most common types of progressions; and
- review test-taking techniques prior to attempting the exam. Teachers should emphasize writing in parallel tenths, using the voice exchange, and writing cadences.

Question 8 (Sight-singing melody S1)

What was the intent of this question?

This four-bar melody gave students the opportunity to sing correct pitches and rhythms in tempo. Students could sing or even whistle the melody, using any system or neutral syllable of their choosing.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 5.36 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included singing segment 1 in the Lydian mode; ignoring the dot in segment 2; singing three even eighth notes in segment 3; shortening segment 4 and landing on the tonic in that same segment; continuing the arpeggiation from segment 6 into segment 7; dropping a perfect fourth at the end of segment 6; and ascending through mi-sol-do for the final three pitches

of the melody. Most students found the first two bars easier because of the simple scalar ascent and descent. Segment 5 presented them with more difficulty because of the disjunct motion at the beginning, followed by a more difficult contour, particularly in segments 6 and 7.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Readers suggested the following ideas to help students improve:

- Develop an algorithm that takes students step by step through the administration of the exam.
- Have students use the entire 75-second practice period to sing the tune or parts of the tune multiple times. Students should not just stare at the melody but engage their voices as much as possible.
- Hold dress rehearsals for taking the sight-singing part of the exam, including the use of a tape recorder.
- Encourage students to make marks on their exam paper to help them during their performance.

Question 9 (Sight-singing melody S2)

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to evaluate “inner” hearing and the ability of students to sing the following accurately: intervals, scale degree function, and rhythm.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.45 out of a possible 9 points. The total mean score for sight-singing (questions 8 and 9) was 8.81 out of a possible 18 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors and omissions included returning to the tonic in segment 3; performing the melody in major instead of minor; missing the raised fourth scale degree in segment 6; exhibiting problems with compound meter; making an octave leap in segment 7; matching the initial pitch; and having vocal range problems.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Readers suggest that teachers use the following approaches:

- Start every class with aural skills (ear training or sight-singing) so that this component will not be shortchanged.
- Blend the written parts of theory with aural exercises throughout each period.
- Work regularly on the compound meter.
- Remind students to count the duration of the last note.
- Encourage students to sing at a moderate pace; singing too quickly or too slowly can make the performance more difficult for them.
- Conduct dress rehearsals under the conditions of the exam: timing, tape recorders, and the presence of a proctor.
- Help students develop skills of melodic analysis, looking for structural features of the melody before singing and during the practice session.
- Develop a vocabulary of common patterns through frequent drills; include cadence patterns, the establishment of scale and key, and so on.
- Practice both with and without solfege systems.
- Try to introduce a wide variety of musical examples for singing; do not get stuck in a rut with meters, modes, rhythmic patterns, and so on.