



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] Music Theory Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] Music Theory were written by the Chief Reader, Jo Anne Caputo of the Cleveland Institute of Music in Cleveland, 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.

PART A

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' melodic dictation in the context of the challenges posed by a major melody in bass clef. The melody was quite accessible, being written mostly in tonic triad outline and scalar motion; but it did have a few specific challenges, notably the eighth note skip of a third in measure 2 and the consecutive skips in measure 3. The melody featured very prominent tonic and dominant references at structural points.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.28 out of a possible nine points. Students found this question to be somewhat difficult.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors included confusing triadic and scalar motion in the first measure, missing the eighth note skip in measure 2, missing the dotted quarter rhythm, confusing bass and treble clefs (especially if students missed the middle of the melody), and reversing the quarter note skip in measure 3 (E-G became G-E).

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 have students:

- listen to and do drills on the difference between scalar and triadic motion;
- listen to see if melodies return to the tonic at cadences;

- remember that there are no rests in the melodies;
- start melodic and rhythmic dictation *early* in the school year;
- listen to scale degree function, especially at structural landmarks (cadences) and when leaps are encountered;
- develop strategies for dictation;
- write down familiar melodies from memory;
- copy scores to learn proper notation;
- conduct while writing down dictation; and
- learn common melodic patterns like 1–3–5, 1–2–3, 1–7–1, 1–5–1, and so on.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' dictation in the melodic minor mode and in compound meter. It was also intended to test recognition of the most common chromatic note, the leading tone to the dominant pitch. It tested various rhythmic combinations of eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and dotted rhythms.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.32 out of a possible nine points. Considering that this melody was intended to be more difficult than that in Question 1 and that students found Question 1 somewhat difficult, many students had trouble with the challenging aspects of the melody.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors included missing the chromatic note (F-sharp) and missing the altered tones in melodic minor (raised scale degree 7 in measure 1 and raised scale degrees 6 and 7 in the last measure). Many students also had difficulty with the complexity of the rhythms, especially the subdivision of compound meter.

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:

- careful notation,
- compound meter and the various rhythmic patterns at both division and subdivision levels,
- pitches in relation to the tonic triad;
- practice in outlining the tonic triad in its various melodic inversions,
- the use appropriate accidentals because enharmonic equivalents do not count,
- listening to the melody as a whole, and
- minor keys, especially melodic minor and the requisite chromatic alterations.

Students who have great difficulty with either pitch or rhythm are well advised to first complete what they do well. A small amount of credit is given to students who have all pitches or all rhythms correct.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to hear the melody, bass, and harmonies of a logical progression in a minor key. Specifically, it was to hear the cadential six-four chord, deceptive progressions (V–VI), melodic sequence, bass progression of scale degrees 4–5–1, fundamental melodic line of scale degrees 5–4–3–2–1, and the difference between iv and ii#.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 11.12 out of a possible 24 points. There was a wide range of scores for this question, with a large number falling in the 4- to 9-point range. In the Roman numeral analysis, the most common errors were missing the ii# and adding a seventh to the V. Many students seemed to listen to one melodic line more than the other. When students missed the skip from E to C in measure 2, they often had trouble working out of the problem.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors included missing the octave leap in the bass or misreading the clef, writing V to iv⁶ instead of V to VI, missing the soprano sequential skips of thirds, and having Roman numerals not match pitches in the melody and bass. Students who spent too much time on one melodic line lost all or many points on the other line.

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?

- Students should use pencil, not pen, to respond to the question.
- Teachers should emphasize good, careful manuscript. Sometimes stems were not used, and accidentals were observed on the wrong side of the notes they were supposed to alter.
- Teachers should be aware that the soprano line, the bass line, and the Roman numeral analysis are scored separately.
- Encourage students to try to write something. Encourage them to spend only one hearing on the soprano and the remaining hearings on the bass and harmonies or to *start* with the bass line.
- Be sure the soprano line, the bass line, and the Roman numeral analysis agree.
- Sight sing lots of bass clef melodies to avoid clef confusion; do dictation in bass clef.
- Drill on common cadence formulas.
- Emphasize that III does *not* occur often in harmonic progressions and virtually never in inversion.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to detect and notate outer voices of a four-part chorale texture correctly and to analyze the chords through Roman numeral analysis aurally. The question tested more advanced aural skill recognition, specifically, chromaticism in the bass and a secondary dominant.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 10.46 out of a possible 24 points. An overwhelming majority of the students taking the exam attempted this question. It is the more difficult of the two harmonic dictation questions and posed challenges for students. A full range of scores was demonstrated on the exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included not recognizing the chromatic passing motion in the bass and thus mislabeling the secondary dominant chord. Many students also incorrectly notated the bass line, especially in measures 3 and 4. Many heard chromatic motion in the bass in measure 3 but wrote the wrong accidental (such as A-sharp) for the altered pitch. Many others did not identify the final cadence as a deceptive cadence, usually labeling it as an authentic (V–I) cadence.

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:

- “common sense” chord progressions and address the issue of chord syntax;
- that the vii^o triad is rarely used in root position, thus the V# chord is a better answer;
- that an example of secondary dominants will be on the exam and prepare students accordingly; and
- that the exam only covers standard chord progressions and common syntax, knowledge of Roman numerals, and standard cadences.

In addition, teachers should de-emphasize the use of six-four chords and stress that the use of iii@ will always be incorrect.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students’ ability to analyze a figured bass line and then to write an appropriate four-voice harmonization of it. This question featured a minor bass with root and first inversion chords, two dominant chords that required raised leading tones, and successive root and first inversion chords. It tested students’ understanding of the rules of good voice leading, deceptive resolutions, and preparation and resolution of a suspension.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 19.53 out of a possible 31 points. Students were fairly successful with this question. They were more successful in chord construction than in good voice leading. Only approximately 1 percent earned a perfect score on this question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors included writing augmented seconds and tritones in the voice leading, forgetting to write the accidental necessary for the leading tone, failing to write the suspension, writing large leaps

in the soprano line, writing more than an octave between soprano and alto or alto and tenor, writing parallel fifths and eighths (especially V–VI), not moving in contrary motion when the chord roots moved by seconds, writing a tonic chord at the end even though the progression ends on V, adding sevenths when not instructed to do this, and adding non-chord tones which created voice-leading 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?

- Students should use pencil, not pen, to respond to the question.
- Clear notation and correct placement of accidentals are essential for students to be able to receive full credit for their work.
- Exercises *do not always* end on tonic.
- Smooth voice leading is a goal for success in this type of exercise. Students should practice singing chorale exercises and doing keyboard work in class to have a tactile experience with smooth voice leading. They should think linearly rather than vertically.
- Since the addition of nonharmonic tones frequently creates voice-leading errors that would not be present otherwise, teachers are encouraged to advise their students to keep their answers simple and not add extraneous information.
- Give more exercises in minor keys.
- Pay attention to the spacing of the given chord and continue in a similar manner.
- Think of what accidentals are most common to given key and drill on minor key signatures.
- Do *not* change the bass line.
- Read the instructions.
- Figured bass means intervals above the bass and frequently, but not always, chord inversion.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to determine students' ability to work with seventh chords, both in root position and inversion, to translate chord symbols into actual pitches; approach and resolve the seventh as a dissonance; and create good horizontal lines. The question also covered the strict resolution of the cadential six-four and the dominant seventh.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 12.33 out of a possible 24 points. Students scored slightly better this year than last, with 4.1 percent earning perfect scores, and there was no strong correlation between doing well at the beginning and continuing to a perfect score.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common mistakes were misspelling the first chord, nonresolution of the sevenths, misspelling of the ii#, misunderstanding of seventh chord inversions, and misunderstanding of spacing rules.

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?

- Spend more time spelling seventh chords and secondary dominants.
- Study the AP Music Theory materials that discuss terminology for secondary dominants.
- Emphasize the proper resolution of the leading tone and the seventh in the dominant seventh chord.
- Know that when there is a complete dominant seventh chord, frequently an incomplete tonic follows.
- Suggest to students that when chromatic tones or sevenths are involved students should make notes to themselves about the resolutions of those tones.
- Suggest also that moving voices to the closest chord tone of the next chord is often the best voice leading.
- The exam is not the time to add embellishments to harmony because they often cause voice-leading problems.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to creatively synthesize all the various components (aural, logical, melodic, harmonic, and contrapuntal) that have been studied in the AP Music Theory course into a short composition. The entire soprano line was provided with a given bass line and suggested harmonization for the first one-and-one-half phrases. Students were asked to continue, in a style characteristic with the given material, the bass line and suggested harmonic analysis through the remaining two-and-one-half phrases. Additionally, the question tested students' knowledge of cadences, secondary functions, and modulation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.1 out of a possible nine points. Responses exhibited a full range of scores. Some students achieved great success with this question, being able to produce a bass line and harmonization that nicely fulfilled the demands of the soprano line. Others, who successfully handled the second half of the second phrase, did less well with the third phrase (due to the secondary dominant) but usually recovered with an appropriate fourth phrase. Few students managed to create truly beautiful answers but many managed highly competent answers.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students used inappropriate second inversion triads; others wrote retrogressions or other incorrect chord progressions (V to IV or V/V to I). Many failed to recognize the significance of the last given bass note (V#) and the necessary resolution to I. Many failed to recognize the significance of the D-sharp to E in the melody of the third phrase and the requisite secondary dominant that results. Others misused seventh chords by either writing sevenths on uncommon chords (I⁷, iii⁷) or by resolving the seventh incorrectly. Fewer students than expected used a perfect authentic cadence at the conclusion of the exercise.

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 limited uses of second-inversion triads,
- that diminished triads are normally not in root position,
- that iii chords are uncommon,
- that students can keep their answers simple and receive the full score (adding inversions and nonharmonic tones, if they are not certain how to do so, is almost always disadvantageous), and
- that cadences are standard formulas that should be followed — they are not the place for “creativity.”

Teachers should also suggest that if students are overwhelmed, they should begin by writing the cadences.

PART B

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this first sight-singing question was to test students’ inner hearing and their ability to decode notation into sound. Specifically, the question tested student’s ability to sight sing a minor melody in simple quadruple meter. Mostly scalar in construction, the melody did have a few skips that outlined either the tonic or dominant chords. The rhythm was very accessible with only one dotted rhythm.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.33 out of a possible nine points. Students seemed to perform less well on this question than in previous years. Readers used the rhythmic alternative scoring guide more often than usual.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common mistakes included singing the melody in major, singing minor seconds in measure 1 instead of perfect fourths (scale degrees 1–7–1 rather than 1–5–1), incorrectly performing the dotted rhythms in measure 4, and missing the anacrusis to measure 5.

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:

- have students warm up their voices during the practice period and not merely go over the melody in their heads (begin by singing an appropriate scale up and down from the given pitch, then work your way through the melody);
- remind students to begin and end on the same pitch and to hold the final pitch its full length;
- encourage students to try to remember the sound of the tonic pitch throughout the melody so that it can be used as a reference point;

- emphasize that the first melody *might* be in minor;
- teach students to look for these three pairs: major/minor, treble clef/bass clef, and simple meter/compound meter (tell them to expect that each will come up once in the sight-singing questions, and get them used to the process by doing mock exams to check the timing, singing into a microphone, and so on);
- analyze triads in the melody and drill singing these triads; and
- have students do as much individual singing as possible from the beginning of the year.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this second sight-singing question was to test students' ability to sight sing a bass-clef major mode melody in compound meter. It featured contrasting segments of triadic outlines with major scalar passages. In addition, the rhythm of the melody introduced several rhythmic patterns that are common to compound meter. The third measure featured a secondary leading tone to the dominant.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.08 out of a possible nine points. In general, students did somewhat less well on this sight-singing question. Many sang the melody in minor.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students missed the tonic triad arpeggio in the first measure. A surprisingly large number tried to sing the melody in minor. There may have been some confusion with the bass clef (students thought in g minor). Many students missed the E-natural and the dotted rhythms. The sixth segment seemed particularly perplexing to many students.

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:

- encourage students to practice singing major and minor triad arpeggio drills, often starting from the same root but alternating between major and minor (major up and down, minor up and down, major up and minor down, minor up and major down);
- then practice similar patterns, alternating triad arpeggios with scale passages starting from the tonic;
- practice the different types of minor scales, emphasizing the differences among them;
- practice singing major and minor seconds above and below a given note;
- practice adding neighboring leading tones to different scale degrees, especially scale degree five;
- teach students to analyze a melody in advance and spot places to recover should they go astray; and
- discourage singing the *names* of pitches (A, B, C-sharp, and so on) as a sight-singing system.

Toward the end of the exam, many students seemed to be pushing (to avoid the deduction the exam's directions told them would occur if they started over) when a thoughtful restart might have yielded them more points.