



Student Performance Q&A: 2007 AP[®] Music Theory Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP[®] Music Theory were written by the Chief Reader, Ken Stephenson of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. 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 with which students frequently have the most problems, 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?

- To test students' ability to transcribe a melody in the minor mode.
- To test students' ability to distinguish the minor scale's variable scale degrees.
- To test students' ability to hear a mixture of rhythmic patterns.
- To test students' ability to hear a full cadential gesture in the final measure.

How well did students perform on this question?

This year's question 1 was easier than last year's rather difficult melody. Students received on average about half the available points on this question, the mean score being 4.38 out of 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing E# at the end of measure 2.
- Retaining E# in measure 3.
- Using enharmonic equivalents to E#.
- Writing quarter notes instead of eighth notes for the opening gesture.
- Ending on A instead of on F#.
- Missing the dotted rhythm in measure 2.
- Writing the incorrect rhythm for the final note.
- Forgetting to flag the eighth note at the end of measure 2.

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?

- Beware of the bias favoring major keys. Be sure to include sufficient practice with melodic dictation in minor.
- Advise students to listen to the entire melody before attempting to transcribe.
- Tell students to begin by writing only the portions of the melody about which they are most sure. Correctly transcribed portions provide good anchors on which students can build the remaining portions of the transcription. Conversely, students who are doubtful about what they write tend to anchor their entire transcriptions to that which has been committed to the page.
- Have students sing aloud in solfège what they hear before committing it to the page.
- Encourage students to keep track of where they are metrically within each measure.
- Remind students to read the instructions prior to attempting the question. Students who read the instructions to this question knew that the melody included no rests.
- Assure students that the melody for free-response question 1 will not modulate.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to transcribe a melody in the major mode.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate rhythms in compound meter.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate chromatically altered passing tones.
- To test students' ability to notate a melody in the bass clef.
- To test students' ability to hear skips to the dominant pitch.

How well did students perform on this question?

As expected on the harder of the two dictation melodies, student performance on question 2 was weaker than that on question 1. Students received on average only about one-third of the available points, the mean score being 3.02 out of 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing the chromatic note.
- Mishearing or misnotating the dotted rhythms.
- Mishearing or misnotating the sixteenth notes in measure 2.
- Misunderstanding the time signature.

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?

- Teach more melodic dictation using examples that contain compound meter, stepwise motion, triad arpeggiation, and chromatic nonharmonic tones.

- Give dictation from real instruments or keyboards using varied timbres.
- Develop students' understanding of the harmonic implications of melody.
- Do not wait until partway through the year to start dictating long melodies. Instead, ask at the beginning of the year for simpler responses. For instance, play an eight-measure melody but ask students to count only the number of measures. Or play a melody in two phrases and just ask students to sing DO, the cadence pitch of the first phrase, and the cadence pitch of the last phrase. Practicing this way from the beginning of the year will help keep students from being overwhelmed by the length of the task and also will train them to listen for easy anchor points from which to construct the rest of the melody.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' aural perception of harmony and the counterpoint of the outer voices (soprano and bass).
- To test students' perception and understanding of the function of common harmonic patterns and of inversions in harmonic motion.
- To test students' ability to hear harmonies in the minor mode.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate the leading tone and its motion to the tonic.
- To test students' ability to hear the V^7 chord with its seventh in an inner voice.
- To test students' ability to understand the valid use of the descending melodic diminished fifth moving back up by step to the tonic.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate the Phrygian half cadence (peculiar to the minor key).

How well did students perform on this question?

While question 3 is often easier than question 4, this year students found it more difficult, probably because of the difficulties associated with the minor mode. The mean score was 8.11 out of 24 possible points, about 34 percent of the maximum.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Mislabeled harmonies or misused Roman numerals.
- Notated unusual chords and unusual patterns, thus demonstrating a lack of knowledge of tonal clichés.
- Mistaking the Phrygian half cadence for an authentic or deceptive cadence.
- Missing the descending diminished fifth in the bass.
- Neglecting to apply the accidentals to the leading tones.
- Missing or misnotating the inversions of harmonies.

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?

- Point out to students that the three lines of answers, far from making the exercise harder, provide ways for students to double-check their work. They should make sure that the top and bottom voices make contrapuntal sense with each other (e.g., no parallel fifths, no successive dissonances); that the indicated chords contain the pitches notated; that the inversion symbol corresponds to the given bass note, and so on.
- Drill isolated harmonic cadence patterns frequently.
- Stress awareness of the raised leading tone and the necessity of including its accidental in the minor key.
- Teach students that the mediant is rarely used and not to automatically apply it to uncertain chords heard in dictation.
- Teach students the proper forms and uses of $\frac{4}{4}$ chords.
- Teach students correct use of figured-bass numbers and their connection to functional harmony.
- Teach and drill sequential harmonic patterns (e.g., by descending 5th or 3rd root motion).
- Teach the harmonic implications of bass lines. (The 3rd scale degree, for instance, usually supports a first-inversion tonic chord, not a mediant.)
- Give two-part dictation exercises to help in understanding harmonic implications of outer voices.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' aural perception of harmony and the counterpoint of the outer voices (soprano and bass).
- To test students' perception and understanding of the function of common harmonic patterns and of inversions in harmonic motion.
- To test students' ability to hear harmonies in the major mode.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate a cadential $\frac{4}{4}$ and its resolution.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate a deceptive cadence.
- To test students' ability to hear and notate a secondary dominant.

How well did students perform on this question?

In spite of the presence of the secondary dominant, students performed better on question 4 than on the similar question 3. The mean score was 10.61 out of 24 possible points, about 44 percent of the maximum.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Mislabeling harmonies or misusing Roman numerals, especially with regard to the secondary dominant.

- Notating unusual chords and unusual patterns, thus demonstrating a lack of knowledge of tonal clichés.
- Missing the A \flat in the bass.
- Missing or misnotating the inversions of harmonies.

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?

- Suggest to students that they begin with the easiest part: usually (and in this case) the soprano.
- Encourage students to fill in the end of a line and work backwards. (RE-DO-TI-DO at the end of the soprano should have been easy, even for many students who fell off the track in measure 2.)
- Be sure to include a variety of cadence types in your dictation practice.
- Teach students the proper forms and uses of $\frac{4}{4}$ chords.
- Teach students correct use of figured-bass numbers and their connection to functional harmony.
- Teach the harmonic implications of bass lines. (The leading tone, for instance, usually supports a V $^{\circ}$ chord, not a root-position vii $^{\circ}$.)
- Teach secondary dominants in all inversions.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to write proper voice leading in four-voice harmony.
- To test students' ability to provide accidentals and otherwise demonstrate understanding of harmonic function in the minor mode.
- To test students' ability to read and interpret a figured bass.
- To test students' ability to spell chords correctly.
- To test students' ability to double and resolve a $\frac{4}{4}$ chord correctly.
- To test students' ability to prepare and resolve the seventh of a chord correctly.

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned a little over half of the available points. The mean score was 14.13 out of 25.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Forgetting the accidental for the leading tone.
- Not resolving the sevenths of the two seventh chords correctly.
- Misinterpreting the figured bass.
- Not resolving the fourth above the bass in the cadential $\frac{4}{4}$ chord correctly.
- Doubling the two $\frac{4}{4}$ chords incorrectly.

- Leaving inverted chords incomplete.
- Adding sevenths when they were not called for.

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?

- Urge correct spelling of chords, as misspellings cause students to lose points.
- Teach all figured-bass symbols: not just the inversion symbols used in harmonic analysis but indications for alterations and for suspensions as well.
- Urge students to remind themselves about the leading tone in minor, to pay attention to the figures that call for adding the accidental, and then to double-check the figures and the appropriate chords again when the exercise is completed, to ensure that the leading tone always has the necessary accidental.
- Point out that leaps are almost never needed and are often wrong; the smallest horizontal interval possible is usually the one to use.
- Teach the pattern of a complete V^7 followed by a tonic with tripled root.
- Suggest that students write the soprano melody against the bass before adding other voices.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to write proper voice leading in four-voice harmony.
- To test students' ability to read and interpret a Roman-numeral sequence.
- To test students' ability to spell chords correctly.
- To test students' ability to prepare and resolve the seventh of a chord correctly.
- To test students' ability to resolve the leading tone.
- To test students' understanding of secondary dominants and the necessary accidentals.
- To test students' understanding of the half cadence.

How well did students perform on this question?

As usual with question 6, the secondary dominant kept scores lower than those of question 5. The mean score was 8.86 out of 18 possible points, just under 50 percent of the maximum.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing the accidental on the secondary dominant.
- Doubling the leading tone.
- Writing consecutive fifths by contrary motion.
- Making voice-leading errors through adding nonchord tones that were not called for.
- Adding sevenths to chords when this was not called for.
- Not understanding inversion symbols; writing all chords in root position.

- Leaving inverted chords incomplete.
- Writing parallel octaves that follow from nonstandard doublings.

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?

- Test yourself on these questions (and all of the free-response questions) using older versions of the AP Music Theory Exam (free-response questions from recent years are available on AP Central®).
- Stress the correct treatment of the leading tone: do not double it, and resolve it correctly.
- Point out the need for an accidental in a secondary dominant.
- Urge students to remind themselves to look for the chordal sevenths and double-check that they have resolved them correctly.
- Make sure to introduce more than just V/V; show that several scale degrees may be tonicized.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to harmonize a melody with successful bass-line counterpoint.
- To test students' ability to recognize tonicization.
- To test students' ability to write a variety of cadences including those with secondary dominants.
- To test students' ability to recognize implied harmonies.
- To test students' ability to demonstrate correct usage of both chord tones and nonharmonic tones.

How well did students perform on this question?

On average, students earned a little over half of the available points. The mean score was 4.96 out of 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Writing parallel fifths and octaves.
- Using $\frac{4}{4}$ and iii chords incorrectly and too often.
- Misunderstanding the differing functions of $B\flat$ and $B\sharp$.
- Misunderstanding implied harmonic function, especially in measures 5 and 7.
- Writing incorrect cadences.

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?

- Remember that although many textbooks stress harmony, it is important to incorporate some tonal counterpoint into the course.
- Work with students on harmonization of a melodic phrase.
- Stress the importance of the cadence; Common Practice tonality is a goal-directed style.
- Teach careful and frugal use of nonharmonic tones.
- Make clear the appropriate use of $\frac{4}{4}$ and iii chords.
- Encourage quarter-note harmonic rhythm.

Question S1

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to sing a diatonic melody in a major key.
- To test students' ability to sing from notation using bass clef.
- To test students' ability to recognize the tonic triad in the melody (even if presented in an inversion).
- To test students' ability to perform several basic rhythms, including a dotted rhythm.

How well did students perform on this question?

This year's first sight-singing question was easier than last year's rather difficult melody. Students received on average over half the available points, the mean score being 5.65 out of 9.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Singing *sol* instead of *ti* at the end of the second measure.
- Singing in the wrong clef.
- Singing in minor instead of major.
- Opening with a Perfect 4th instead of a Major 3rd.
- Raising G to G \sharp in the scalar ascent in measure 2.
- Misjudging a pitch by one step and then transposing the rest of the passage accordingly.
- Missing the dotted rhythm in measure 2.

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?

- Sight-sing often, daily if possible.
- Teach common melodic patterns.
- Make sure students practice singing individually, not just in groups.
- Encourage students to sing more slowly. Accuracy is valued over speed.
- Firmly establish the differences between major and minor.

- Sing triads and inversions in different combinations.
- Teach a system: numbers, solfège, fixed or movable *do*, etc.
- Remind the students that singing is preferred to whistling or humming.
- Give equal practice time to singing in bass and treble clef.
- Practice using the equipment for recording well ahead of time.

Question S2

What was the intent of this question?

- To test students' ability to sing in a minor key.
- To test students' ability to count in compound meter.
- To test students' ability to subdivide the beat in compound meter.
- To test students' ability to recognize the minor tonic triad.
- To test students' ability to sing altered pitches, including the secondary leading tone and the variable scale degrees belonging to melodic minor.

How well did students perform on this question?

As expected with the harder of the two sight-singing melodies, student performance was a little lower on this one than on S1. The mean score was 4.0 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing the tonic triad.
- Ignoring the changes of the variable scale degrees.
- Missing the chromatically altered F \sharp .
- Inverting the dotted rhythm in measure 1.
- Missing the final stepwise descent from *fa* to *do*.
- Inability to maintain a sense of tonic.
- Singing the entire melody in major.
- Truncating the final note.
- Giving up altogether before completing the 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?

- Have students practice singing in minor. Start at the beginning of the year with drills of major and minor triads.
- Have students practice compound meter, with particular concentration on $\frac{6}{8}$.
- If you use numbers, ensure that students know the difference between the major and minor forms of the scale degrees.
- Teach students to analyze the melody before singing.
- Have students practice recording themselves before they take the AP Exam.

- Always stress holding the last note for its full value: normally until the downbeat of the (unwritten) next measure.
- Tell students who get lost to find tonic by looking at the first note again: the visual connection often stimulates and reinforces the aural memory.
- Urge students who want to give up in the middle of a melody to relocate tonic and sing the ending.